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**SUFFERING
AND ASCETICISM**

Suffering Captured by Christ Jesus

Humility as Divine Passion
and the Passive Condition of Man Saved by Christ
in the Interpretation of Phil. 3:12
by St. Basil the Great (*HHum* [20])
and St. John Chrysostomus
(*Hom. XI in Epist. ad Philipp. and Exp. in Ps. 143*)

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Abstract: *Phil. 3:12* is a relatively rarely commented text in Eastern patristic exegesis. If sometimes its interpretation is given very little space (Theodoret of Cyrus), very often he is simply overlooked, to the detriment of the verses before or after him, which are interpreted in an eminently ascetic key. Not so much an exegesis as a moral reflection about him offers St. Basil the Great in *Homily XX* on humility as a theological virtue and human condition restored in Christ. Unlike him, St. John Chrysostom offers an anthropological-epistemological interpretation of the text, which finally leads to a moral reflection on the passivity of this human condition restored by the Savior.

Keywords: humility, anthropology, epistemology, justification by faith, *vita passiva*, *Phil. 3:12*, theological virtues, human condition, nobility of man, St. Basil the Great, St. John Chrysostomus

Humility as a Theological Virtue in St. Basil's *HHum* [20]

ONE OF THE MOST READ and appreciated works of St. Basil the Great in the Protestant world is *Homily XX on Humility*¹ (*HHum* [20]²). Protestant

¹ St. Basil, *Homilia K'. Peri tapeinophrosynēs/ Homilia XX. De humilitate*, PG 31, 525–540.

² In what follows, we use the abbreviations consecrated in the vol. Paul Jonathan Fedwick, ed., *Basil of Caesarea: Christian Humanist, Ascetic. A Sixteen-Hundredth Anniversary Symposium* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1981), XIX–XXXVIII (*Abbreviations*), especially XXVII–XXVIII.

theologians believe that they can identify in the great Cappadocian Father's treatment on humility one of the essential leitmotifs of their theological thinking, respectively the theme of justification *sola fide*.

Indeed, St. Basil expressly refers to the justification by faith in HHum [20] §3, where quoting Philip. 3,9-11, he shows that man should not boast of his own justification, but to know that he is devoid of any true justification and that his real justification is accomplished only through faith in Christ (gr. *pistei de monē tē eis Christon dedikaiōmenon* / lat. *verum sola in Christum fide justificatum esse*)³. According to him, Paul sought justification in Christ, obtained from God on the basis of faith (gr. *zētein de tēn dia Christou, tēn ek Theou dikaiosynēn epi tē pistei* / lat. *quaerat vero eam, quae per Christum est, quae ex Deo est, justitiam in fide*): he sought it in the knowledge of Christ, in the power of His resurrection (*tēn dynamin tēs anastaseōs autou* / *virtutem resurrectionis ejus*), in the participation in His passions (*tēn koinōnian tōn pathēmātōn autou* / *communione afflictionum ipsius*), in the resemblance to His death, in order to reach the resurrection from the dead⁴.

But although St. Basil resorts to the Pauline theme of justification by faith, it should not be overlooked that the main theme of HHum [20] is neither justification nor faith, but humility. Both justification and faith (or simply: justification by faith in Christ) lead ultimately to *tapeinophrosynē* or *atyphia* as something deeper and more fundamental, that he designates at the beginning of his homily as being man's "biggest salvation" (gr. *megistē sōtēria autō*, lat. *maxima salus*), "healing of illness" (gr. *tēs nosou therapeia* / lat. *morbi que medela*), "way of return to the beginning" (gr. *pros to ex archēs epanodos* / lat. *reditus ad primum statum*)⁵. Now, the reason why humility is all these: salvation (*sōtēria* / *salus*), therapy (*therapeia*), medicine (*medela*), restauration (and recapitulation – *epanodos*) by returning (*reditus*) to the state of inception (*archē*; *primus status*), i.e. to the holy commendment (gr. *pros tēn hieran entolēn* / lat. *ad praeceptum sacrum*) of God has with the fact to do, that it places man in an intimate relationship with God as the Source of all and of grace, making himself available to Him. In this way, man's life energy no longer comes from the smallness of his being, but from the discreet infinity of divine (active) omnipotence.

As such, humility means killing all of our own to make room for Christ to live in us. In this sense St. Basil quotes Philippians again, this time Phil. 2,13⁶: "for it is God who works in you (*Theos gar estin ho energōn en hymin*) both to will and to do (*kai to telein kai to energein*) for His good pleasure

³ PG 31, 529: "Autē gar dē hē teleia kai holoklēros kauchēsis en Theō, hote mēte epi dikaiosynē tis eparetai tē eautou, all'egnō men endeē onta heauton dikaiosynēs alēthous, pistei de monē tē eis Christon dedikaiōmenon" (lat. col. 530: "Haec est enim perfecta ac integra in Deo gloriatio, cum quis non ob suam justitiam extollitur, sed novit destitui se iudem vera justitia, verum sola in Christum fide justificatum esse").

⁴ PG 31, 529–530.

⁵ PG 31, 525–526.

⁶ PG 31, 531.

(*hyper tēs eudokias*)”. Therefore, St. Basil understands humility as being directly dependent on the active (*energein*) and intentional (*telein*) presence of God in man through His grace. As such he conceives it in the manner in which St. Paul understands faith, hope and charity (love), that is, what will later be called ‘the theological virtues’ (1Cor. 13; 1Thes. 1:3; 5:8).

It is a way of saying that humility itself is a kind of theological virtue, which springs directly from God’s grace. Actually, in order to be able to talk about the soteriological value of moral virtues, they must necessarily be placed in relation to God’s grace, because, in the Pauline theological logic (Eph. 2:8-9)⁷, salvation (*sōtēria*) cannot come from one’s own works (or: from the works of the law), but from grace (*chariti*) through faith (*dia pisteōs*).

This means that, in fact, the theological virtues are not limited to this number of three, but that they are definitely more, among which virtues such as humility can also be counted. From the same category can also be listed other virtues such as prayer (which, also according to St. Paul, is the Holy Spirit’s crying out in the human heart⁸) or patience - in particular, the patience of the holy martyrs in enduring in a superhuman manner what normally a simple man cannot bear. St. Basil pays special attention to this true theological virtue of patience in his homilies dedicated to martyrs such as Julitta⁹, Barlaam¹⁰, Gordius¹¹ and especially to the forty martyrs of Sebasteia¹², the last three immediately preceding HHum [20].

Furthermore, the understanding in a Pauline key of the Christian teaching about virtues led some Church Fathers to put in relation to God’s grace not only the three Pauline theological virtues or similar Christian virtues such as humility, prayer or patience, but even the main virtues of classical Greek philosophy. In this sense, St. Ambrose of Milan, taking an idea from the Jewish Neoplatonic philosopher Philo of Alexandria¹³,

⁷ Although *Ephesians* is an epistle considered by today’s exegesis to be deuteropauline, Eph. 2, 8-9 formulates a fundamental theological idea of St. Paul, present in various forms in the entire Pauline corpus. See Eph. 2,8-9: “For by grace you have been saved (*tē gar chariti este sesōmenoi*) through faith (*dia pisteōs*), and not of yourselves (*kai touto ouk ex hymōn*); it is the gift of God (*Theou to dōron*), not of works (*ouk ex ergōn*), lest anyone should boast (*hina mē tis kauchēsētai*)”.

⁸ Gal. 4,6: “And because you are sons, God has sent forth (*exapesteilen*) the Spirit of His Son (*to Pneuma tou Hyiou autou*) into your hearts (*eis tas kardias hēmōn*), crying out (*krazon*), ‘Abba, Father’”.

⁹ HIul [5], PG 31, 257–262.

¹⁰ HBar [17], PG 31, 483–489. Modern exegesis places this homily in the *Dubia* category. See Paul Jonathan Fedwick, ed., *Basil of Caesarea: Christian Humanist, Ascetic*, p. XXXI.

¹¹ HGord [18], PG 31, 489–508.

¹² HMart [19], PG 31, 508–525.

¹³ *Legum allegoriae* I, 19.63–27.87, in: Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis II, III (Legum Allegoria)*, in *Philo in ten volumes (and two supplementary volumes)*, with an english translation by F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker, (Cambridge, Massachusetts-London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd, 1981), 140-474 (here: 186-205). See also: Carl Joachim Classen, “Der platonisch-stoische Kanon der Kardinaltugenden bei Philon,

argues in his treatises *De paradiso*¹⁴ and *De officiis ministrorum*¹⁵ that the four rivers that flow from the garden of Eden are, in fact, the four virtues of the classical Greek culture called by him for the first time in the history “cardinal virtues”. But unlike Philo, St. Ambrose asserts that the common source of the four Edenic rivers which he identifies with the four cardinal virtues are Christ himself, the Savior and the Hypostatic Wisdom of God, and equally God the Father. He thus inaugurates, in a specific manner, but related to the approach of St. Basil from HHum [20], an entire aretiological tradition, received and amplified in the 14th century by the hesychast authors such as St. Callistus II., the Patriarch of Constantinople (1397)¹⁶, who still resorts to the gracious interpretation concerning the four Edenic rivers¹⁷.

Parousia vs. Aretē.

Humility as Passion of Divine Captivity in Phil. 3,12 according St. Basil’s HHum [20] §3-4

Actually St. Basil does not quote expressly Eph. 2,8-9 in HHum [20], but its main idea is present in the background of the entire homily. Instead, St. Basil continues his argumentation along the ideational thread of the Epistle to the Philippians, supported by references to texts with similar meaning from the two epistles to the Corinthians.

Thus, at the end of HHum [20] §3, he quotes 1Cor. 15:10¹⁸ to claim that, strictly speaking, not the personal efforts of the Apostle Paul, but the divine grace (*hē charis tou Theou*) present in him bore fruit in his apostolic activity

Clemens Alexandrinus und Origenes,” in *Aretai und Virtutes: Untersuchungen zu den Wertvorstellungen der Griechen und Römer*, ed. Adolf Martin Ritter (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 107-138; Roberto Radice, “Philo and Stoic Ethics. Reflections on the Idea of Freedom,” in *Philo of Alexandria and Post-Aristotelian Philosophy*, ed. Francesca Alesse (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008), 141-168.

¹⁴ *De paradiso* II,13-14; English ed.: Saint Ambrose, *Hexaameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, trans. John J. Savage (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1961), 294-296.

¹⁵ *De officiis ministrorum* I,25-50; II,1-14; see *Sancti Ambrosii Mediolanensis de officiis*, cura et studio M Testard, in: *Ambrosii Mediolanensis opera V* [=CCL 15], (Turnhout, 2000).

¹⁶ *Tou Agiōtatos kai Aoidymou Kallistou Patriarchou ta elliponta kephalaia oti ho eirēmenos paradeisos eikōn tou anthrōpou*, in der griechischen *Philokalia*, 3rd Edition, Vol. 4 (Athēnai, 1961), 299-367, here: §15; §17, 18. Romanian translation by Dumitru Stăniloae, in *Filocalia*, Bd. 8, 2. Auflage (București: Humanitas, 2002), 220-348.

¹⁷ See Picu Ocoleanu, “Începuturile divine ale virtuții. Virtuțile cardinale ca virtuți teologice secunde în cap. §15 din Capetele despre rugăciune (care au lipsit) ale Sf. Calist Patriarhul (sec. XIV),” in *Credință și viață bisericească – repere existențiale. Studii și evocări întru cinstirea părintelui prof. univ. dr. Constantin Pătuleanu la împlinirea vârstei de 60 de ani*, (București: Cuvântul Vieții, 2022).

¹⁸ 1Cor. 15,10: “... I worked harder than any of them – though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me (*ouk egō de hē charis tou Theou [hē] syn emoi*)”.

and resorts further to the Deutero-Pauline discourse from 2Cor. 1:9-10¹⁹, which rearticulates this idea, stating that we should consider ourselves condemned to death for not trusting in ourselves (*mē pepoithotes ōmen eph'heautois*), but in God.

With §4 the core of St. Basil's argumentation concerning the virtue of humility is reached. It opens with a new quote from 1 Cor., this time 1 Cor. 4:7, through which St. Basil emphasizes the passive meaning of our relationship with God. All that we have and all the good that we do is, in fact, not made by us, but received. The entire understanding of this relationship is now overturned and placed in its correct order, not from man to God, but vice versa, from God to man: "You did not come to know (*egnōs*) God through your own justice (*dia dikaiosynēs*); but God looked upon you of His own goodness (*alla Theos dia chrēstotēta egnō*)"²⁰.

To highlight this reversal in the paradigm of the authentic relationship between man and God, St. Basil quotes Gal. 4:9: "But now after you have known God (*gnontes Theon*), or rather are known by God (*gnōsthentes hypo Theou*)...". In this manner St. Paul described the passive specificity of the state of sonship (*hyiothesia* – Gal. 4:5) of man in relationship with God in Jesus Christ that constitutes the opposite of the (hyper)active state of slavery (*douleia*) of man fallen into the sin.

The son is known by his parent before he actually consciously knows this one. He learns to speak from him and discovers his environment through him. Moreover, he learns love from the parent, because the son feels his love and responds with love to this love. Filled with the spirit of love, he calls out to his parent, calling him "Father" (Gal. 4:6). He is not a slave (*doulos*), but an heir (*klēronomos* – Gal. 4:7). Being son implies therefore a certain passivity: the child *receives* its being from the parents, *inherits* the traits of his parents, *feels* their presence and absence of them, *learns* from them etc.

To outline this passivity even more clearly St. Basil changes the register of the Pauline discourse, passing from Gal. 4 to Phil. 3, respectively from the topic of divine filiation to that of being taken into holy captivity by Christ Jesus. In this sense, he contrasts *aretē* (*virtus*) and *parousia* (*adventum*), i.e. the self-sufficiency of virtue as purely human work and the personal coming of Christ as receiving of the communion with Him:

You have not apprehended (gr. *kateilēphas* / lat. *apprehendisti*)
Christ because of your virtue (gr. *dia tēs aretēs* / lat. *per virtutem*);
but it is Christ Who through His Coming (gr. *dia tēs parousias* /

¹⁹ 2Cor. 1,9–10: "Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death (*to apokrima tou thanatou*) so that we would rely not on ourselves (*hina mē pepoithotes ōmen eph'heautois*) but on God who raises the dead (*all' epi tō Teō tō egeironti tous nekrous*). He who rescued us (*errysato hēmas*) from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us (*rhysetai*); on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us (*rhysetai*) again".

²⁰ PG 31, 532. Transl. into the Lat. – col. 531: "Non tu Deum cognovisti per tuam justitiam; sed Deus cognovits te propter suam bonitatem".

lat. *per suum adventum*) has apprehended (gr. *kateilēphe* / lat. *apprehendit*) you²¹.

The statement of St. Basil is based in this case on Phil. 3:12: "I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus"²². The complete verse (KJV) reads: "Not as though I had already attained (*ēdē elabon*), either were already perfect (*ēdē teteleiōmai*): but I follow after (*diōkō*), if that I may apprehend (*katalabō*) that for which also I am apprehended (*katelēmphthēn*) of Christ Jesus." The core of Phil. 3:12 is the passive indicative aorist form of the verb *katalambanō* (1st, sing.), respectively *katelēmphthēn*, which has been translated into English in several ways, given its semantic nuance that is actually so difficult to render. If the classical translation KJV opt for the passive form of Vb. "to apprehend" ("I am apprehended of Christ Jesus"), many English translations use "to take hold (of)" / "to lay hold (on)" in passive, regarding the person of the apostle in relation to Christ: "Christ Jesus took hold of me" (NIV); "I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus" (CBS); "Christ Jesus took hold of me for" (NIRV); "I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus" (ASV). In other variants, the verb in passive is replaced by an active verb like "to make (his own)", "to reach out", "to win" or "to possess", with Christ as the subject acting on the speaker: "Christ Jesus has made me his own" (ESV); "Christ (...) reached out for me" (MSG); "Jesus Christ has already won for me" (GW); "Christ Jesus first possessed me". (NLT). In Latin, *katalabō* and *katelēmphthēn* are translated by "comprehendam" and "comprehensus sum"²³, semantically close to Eng. "to apprehend" used in the KJV.

Humility is therefore a state of being taken into possession, of being taken into captivity, but in a *divine* possession and captivity. It is a paradoxical formulation concerning the paradoxical state that is humility: the more humble we are, the more we give up our own initiative and the more we allow ourselves to be captured by Christ, the freer and more active we become in the race for obtaining the prize of divine justification.

Besides, St. Paul sends this epistle (according to some interpreters it could even be three short epistles combined into one) to his "favorite"²⁴ community in such a state of captivity, which makes him not only understand from his own experience the nature of humility as being taken into captivity/possession, but also the act of the Son of God emptying Himself of glory (Phil. 2:5-11), becoming flesh and humbling Himself and

²¹ PG 31, 532.

²² Greek: "Ouch hoti ēdē elabon ē ēdē teteleiōmai, diōkō de ei kai katalabō eph' hō kai katelēmphthēn hypo Christou Iēsou".

²³ *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*: "Non quod jam acceperim, aut jam perfectus sim; sequor autem, si quomodo comprehendam, in quo et comprehensus sum a Christo Jesu".

²⁴ See especially Rudolf Pesch, *Paulus und seine Lieblingsgemeinde. Drei Briefe an die Heiligen von Philippi – neu gesehen* (Freiburg u.a.: Herder Verlag, 1985).

becoming “obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). Finding in this epistle the perfect paradigm of humility, St. Basil places at the center of his reflection on this theological virtue from *Homily XX* the text of Phil. 3:12.

Hunted by Christ Jesus. The Interpretation of Phil. 3,12 by St. John Chrysostomus (*Hom. XI in Epist. ad Philipp.*), Theodoret of Cyrus (*Interpr. Epist. ad Philipp.*) and Theophilact of Ochrid (*Comm. in Epist. ad Philipp.*)

Phil. 3:12 is a relatively rarely interpreted text in Eastern patristic exegesis. From *Philipp.* was received, in general, the hymn of kenosis (chapter 2:5-11), and from chapter 3 the verses before or after v.12, but not so much this one.

For example, Theodoret of Cyrus dedicated only three or four lines of his Commentary to the Philippians²⁵ to this verse:

First, taking me, he caught me (gr. *katalabōn esagēneusen* / lat. *retibus illigavit* – literally: ‘he tied me up with nets’) in the race. For I was fleeing from Him (gr. *epheugon gar auton* / lat. *fugiebam enim illum*) and far away (*kai lian apestrephomēn* / lat. *valde aversabar*) from Him; But he caught me (gr. *katelabe* / lat. *apprehendit*) while I was running (gr. *pheugonta* / lat. *fugientem*). Therefore, I also follow (gr. *diōkō* / lat. *persequor*), wanting to catch Him (gr. *katalabein auton ephiemenos* / lat. *cupiens eum apprehendere*), so that I do not lose my salvation (gr. *ina mē diamartō tēs sōtērias* / lat. *ne a salute excidam*)²⁶.

The interpretation of Theodoret of Cyrus associates the Pauline imagery in this verse with the field of hunting: like a prey, sinful man flees from the Master, but He hunts him, capturing him, however, not to kill him, but to save him. Or, resorting to a leit-motif of Pauline theology, it could be said: to kill the old man in him and resurrect him to a new life, making him a new man in Christ (see Rom. 6:6; Coloss. 3:9; see also Eph. 4:22).

St. John Chrysostomus resorts to a similar interpretation, this time inspired by sports life in its Roman sense, i.e. linked to the bloody battles in the arena, in his much wider interpretation of Phil. 3:12 (than the one of Theodoret) from his *Homily XI to the Epistle to the Philippians*²⁷. In fact, St. John Chrysostomus (349-407) also associates Pauline imagery with hunting, but with hunting in the arena, organized as a sporting spectacle. Probably

²⁵ *Interpretatio epistolae ad Philippenses*, PG 82, 557–590, as part of *Commentarius in omnes sancti Pauli Epistolas*, PG 82, 31–878.

²⁶ PG 82, 581 (lat. 582).

²⁷ *Homiliae XV in Epistolam ad Philippenses*, PG 62, 177–299.

for him such images were much more familiar than for Theodoret of Cyrus (393–457), who lives later and is active as a bishop in a smaller city on the eastern border of the empire. The fact is that the image of Christ the Hunter, who hunts Paul despite the latter’s efforts to flee from Him, echoes throughout the ages being resumed in the later patristic literature even much later, for example in 11th century in the exegesis of Theophylact of Ochrid, in a form closer to Theodoret’s cynegetic version²⁸.

In his interpretation, St. John Chrysostomus insists that St. Paul does not use in Phil. 3:12 the verb “to run” (*trechō*), but the verb “to pursue” (*diōkō*), which indicates the apostle’s utmost concern for reaching his goal, which is the prize (*to brabeion*) of resurrection²⁹. Later, the already mentioned Theophylact of Ochrid will interpret this desire of St. Paul after the resurrection in Phil. 3:12 as an expression of his humility, piety (*eulabeia*)³⁰ and caution (*cautela*)³¹ because ultimately we will all be resurrected. At the same time, however, Theophylact shows that the Apostle must have understood by the resurrection he was looking for the “glorious resurrection (*exanastasin tēn endoxon*)”³², or, as it is said in John 5:29, the “resurrection of life (*anastasis zoēs*)” opposed to the “resurrection of damnation (*anastasis kriseōs*)”.

But this race of the apostle to capture Christ is occasioned by his previous capture by Him, Who in his turn pursued the apostle with great effort and captured him, notwithstanding man’s great error and aversion to Him:

Then to show that the thing is of debt, he said, “For which also I was apprehended by Christ Jesus”. I was, he said, of the number of the lost, I gasped for breath, I was nigh dead, God apprehended me (*katelabe me o Theos*). For He pursued us (*hēmas edīoke*), when we fled from Him (*pheugontas auton*), with all speed. So that he points out all those things; for the words, “I was apprehended (*katelēmphthēn*)” show the earnestness (*tēn spoudēn*) of Him who wishes to apprehend (*katalabein*) us, and our great aversion to Him (*hēmōn tēn apostrophēn tēn pollēn*), our wandering, our flight from Him³³.

²⁸ *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Philippenses*, PG. 124, 1139–1205, here: 1185: “...I was caught by Christ, that is: I was one of the lost and condemned (gr. *tōn apollymenōn hēmēn, tōn apegnōsmenōn* / lat. *ex pereuntibus et condemnatis*), but He hunted me (gr. *katediōxe me ho Christos* / lat. *persecutus est me Christus*) even when I was running away from Him (gr. *pheugonta ap’autou* / lat. *fugientem ab eo*)...”

²⁹ PG 62, 267–268: “And He said not, I run, but ‘I pursue’ (*kai ouk eipe Trechō, alla Diōkō*). For you know with what eagerness a man pursues. He sees no one (*ouden ora*), he thrusts aside with great violence (*meta pollēs tēs rhymēs*) all who would interrupt his pursuit. He collects together his mind (*dianoian*), and sight (*homma*), and strength (*ischyn*), and soul (*psychēn*), and body (*sōma*), looking to nothing else (*pros heteron ouden orōn*) than the prize (*pros de to brabeion monon*)”.

³⁰ PG. 124, 1185.

³¹ PG. 124, 1186.

³² PG. 124, 1185

³³ PG 62, 268.

It is not, of course, a flight in the topographical sense of the word, but a moral flight from God: “The sinner then flies (*ho toinyn hamartōlos pheugei*)”³⁴.
But, although

He saw us in such great guilt, he did not reject us (*ouk ebdelyxato*);
was not wroth (*ouk edyscheranen*), turned not away (*ouk apestraphē*),
hated us not (*ouk emisēse*), for He was a Master,
and could not hate His own creation (*kai to idion plasma ouk an emisēsen*)³⁵.

On the contrary, by capturing us, paradoxically, he restored our nature, gave us back our freedom, adopted us, and gave us a divine nobility, as Chrysostomus exclaims: “Alas! How great nobility did He confer on us! (*Oimoi, posēn eugeneian hēmin echarisato*)”³⁶.

The Divine Nobility (*eugeneia*) of Man Captured by Christ Jesus. Phil. 3.12 in *Exp. in Ps. 143* of St. John Chrysostomus

The attention that St. John Chrysostomus gives it to Phil. 3.12 ultimately has an anthropological basis. In this passivity of man’s capture by Christ Jesus resides according to him the restoration of fallen man, his liberation from sin, i.e. his resettlement in communion with God. The human condition can only be, definitively, a passive condition (*conditio passiva*), in which man suffers the work of God, without him remaining impassive. On the contrary, like St. Paul in Phil. 3:12, man responds with *pathos*, chasing and looking for his Savior in order to, in turn, capture him, to have fellowship with Him.

Therefore, it is no coincidence that St. John Chrysostomus returns to this Pauline verse in the context of commenting on a psalm with an anthropological content such as Ps. 143 (LXX)³⁷. Here, interpreting on the verse “3. Lord, what is man, that thou takest knowledge of him! Or the son of man, that thou makest account of him!”, he shows that the meaning of the first part of the verse refers not only to God’s act of reflection on man, but also to the fact that He makes Himself known to man. According to the Septuagint, the meaning of the text would be rather “3. Lord, what is man, that you have made yourself known to him? Or the son of man that you count him?”.

Consequently, the meaning of this verse refers to an epistemic passivity (but not an impassiveness) of man in relation to God in the sense of man’s

³⁴ PG 62, 268: “For we can flee from God, not in place, for He is everywhere, but with the deeds (*pheugein gar esti ton Theon, ou topō – pantachou gar esti –, alla tois ergois*)”.

³⁵ PG 62, 269.

³⁶ PG 62, 270.

³⁷ *Expositio in Psalmum CXLIII*, PG 55, 457–464.

capture by Him, expressed in Phil. 3:12, in other texts from the Pauline epistles (in particular, from 1 Cor.) and in John 15:16:

That is why Saint Paul does not stop saying: “But then shall I know fully, even as I also am known” [1 Cor. 13:12]. And Christ Himself: “You have not chosen Me (*ouch hymeis me exelexasthe*), but I have chosen you (*all’egō exelexamēn hymas*)” [John 15:16]. And elsewhere again Saint Paul: “But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him (*outos egnōsthai hyp’autou*)” [1 Cor. 8:3]. Therefore he continually and everywhere says that he was called (*klēton legei*) by God, showing that he himself did not run to Him, but was first called (*alla proteron eklēthē*). Thus he also says / in another place: “I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus” [Phil. 3:12]³⁸.

According to St. John Chrysostomus, the question about man is, after all, a question about knowledge. The mystery of anthropology is epistemological. As St. John Chrysostomus puts it:

It must be someone great who will know God, or rather he who is to be known by Him (*gnōrizesthai par’autou*). And not only that, but also the one to whom God makes Himself known (*hō mellei gnōrizein heauton ho Theos*). That is why the Septuagint translated it best, “that You made Yourself known to him (*egnōsthēs autō*)”, showing that we do not find Him (*ouch hēmeis auton euromen*), but He reveals Himself to us (*alla autos eurethē*). That he did not say, what is the man who knew You (*ho gnōrisas se*). But say “What is man, that You have made Yourself known to him (*oti egnōsthēs*)”?³⁹

The nobility (*eugeneia*) of man is manifested in the sublime of his knowledge (*gnōsis*) that transcends the limits of his nature (*physis*). This fact does not happen through human nature itself, but through the revelation of God because of His grace (*charis*), due to of His goodness (*chrēstotēta*) and love for people (*philantrōpia*). Man is not great by the virtue (*aretē*) obtained through the self-sufficiency of his own effort, nor only by his nature, although this was created by God directly in His own image (*kat’eikona Theou*), but by the knowledge he receives as a gift through the revelation of God, therefore, definitively, by the grace of God poured out upon him:

As then the psalmist says: What is man? And another wise man says: “Great is the man and worthy of honor is the merciful man” [*Mega anthrōpos kai timon anēr eleēmon / Magna res homo, et pretiosa res vir misericors* – Prov. 20:6LXX]. And elsewhere:

³⁸ *Exp. in Ps. CXLIII*, §2, PG 55, 458.

³⁹ PG 55, 458 (§1).

“In the image of God he made him” [Gen. 1:27]. At the same time, he gave him power over the whole creature. There are some that the world is not worthy of. But those are said in regard to the virtue (*peri aretēs*) they have shown. And that What is man? it is said about nature (*peri tēs physeōs*). But nature is also great (*hē physis megalē*). Great, yes, but if you consider the knowledge (*tēn gnōsin*) by which it was deserved, then nature is far inferior (*poly katadeestera*) to knowledge. Let the sons of heretics hear that they show such madness, exceeding all measure, being touched by the last ignorance and who claim to know things above them. (...) Think how many miracles have happened so that we can find God, not what His being is (*to ti tē ousian estin*), but that He exists (*hoti esti*)⁴⁰.

However great and noble (*eugenos*) man is in knowledge, he cannot know God in Himself, in His being, but according to His revelation to man either naturally, through His work (*oikonomia*) in the world, or above naturally, through supernatural revelation. This in no way means that man does not know God at all⁴¹, but that he knows Him only to the extent that He is revealed to him and not in His mysterious being. The knowledge of God is a gift received from God himself by creating us as beings capable of such knowledge and by revealing Him to us as His dialogue partners.

By this, St. John Chrysostomus resumes a topic intensively addressed by the great Cappadocian Fathers of the 4th century (in particular, by St. Basil the Great⁴² and St. Gregory of Nyssa⁴³) in their polemic against Eunomius. According to him, knowing God is an act of passivity on the part of man taken captive by God, who receives unconditionally what God reveals to him through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2.10: “But God has revealed them to us by His Spirit”) after the prior exclusion of any human thought of it or, rather, “bringing every thought into captivity (*aichmalōtizontes tan noēma*) to the obedience of Christ (*eis tēn hypakoēn tou Christou*)” (2 Cor. 10:5)⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ PG 55, 458–459.

⁴¹ PG 55, 459: “So you don't know God at all? – I will be told. Far from me this thought. But I know that he exists, that he loves people, that he is good and supportive and everything else that the Scripture says about him. But I don't know what nature is (*to de ti tēn ousian, ouk oida*). And Adam thought to seek more, being persuaded by the devil, and for this insatiable desire he lost also what he had. What also happens (*paschousin*) to heretics carried away by human thoughts and not hearing that the Lord gives wisdom (*hoti Kyrios didōsi sophian*) and that knowledge and understanding spring from his face”.

⁴² *Contra Eunomium*, libri quinque, PG 29, 468–774.

⁴³ *Contra Eunomium*, libri duodecim, PG 45, 243–1122.

⁴⁴ PG 55, 459: “They don't hear St. Paul, who says: ‘But God has revealed them to us by His Spirit’ [1 Cor. 2,10], excluding any human thoughts (*kai tous logismous ekballontos*). ‘And every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ’ [2 Cor. 10.5]”.

Therefore, the meaning he gives to this epistemological limitation of man as a creature of God is of a moral nature. Man knows as much as he knows because God gives him this possibility as a great gift. Instead, he cannot know God in himself, in his being, in order to have the saving experience of humility:

Therefore He made man humble and at the same time gave him great gifts (*megala echarisato*), so that he would not exalt himself, having to humble (*to metriazein*) himself, starting from the nothingness of his nature (*tēn apo tēs physeōs euteleian*)⁴⁵.

If for Chrysostomus the core of anthropology's meaning is epistemological, then the meaning of epistemology is to the highest degree moral in nature. Therefore, the treatment of St. John Chrysostomus related to Phil. 3:12 ultimately reaches the same moral approach as in the case of St. Basil the Great. For if for the latter this Pauline text was from the very beginning situated in a moral context, respectively linked to the theme of the virtue of humility as a theological virtue, springing from grace, at the Patriarch of Constantinople from the beginning of the 4th century, it was interpreted in anthropological context (and definitely, as we have seen, epistemological).

The Christian way of life begins with the capture of man by Christ and proceeds thereafter as a race for man to acquire the divine, to commune with God and to obtain the prize (*brabeion*) of the resurrection in glory (*exanastasis tēn endoxon*). Ultimately, the core of moral life takes shape in both Holy Fathers in the same dialectic of the passivity of taking man into divine captivity by Christ Jesus and the active involvement of man in order to achieve salvation as the perfect communion of man with God.

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The archetypal dimension of Job’s paradigm, reflected in the ascetic life of St. Sophrony and St. Joseph the Hesychast

A phenomenological look
at the reality of suffering

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Abstract: In this analysis we start from the paradigm of Righteous Job’s suffering, recapitulating the most important elements of the ordeal he went through: the loss of wealth, children and health. From the fact that suffering is an inescapable reality in human existence, the idea emerges that the suffering of the righteous Job is not an isolated case, but an archetypal one. For this reason, the assumption of Righteous Job becomes a guiding light. Since the focus of the research falls on the relationship between asceticism and suffering, we have further addressed this relationship in regard to two great ascetics, St. Sophrony of Essex and St. Joseph the Hesychast. To St. Sophrony, suffering comes in the second age of the spiritual life, when pedagogical abandonment on the part of God occurs. The suffering caused by abandoning grace is a preparatory stage for reaching the spiritual feeling of God. St. Joseph does not speak of abandonment, but of the withdrawal of God’s grace, which is in fact a reality similar to abandonment. Suffering is seen by St. Joseph as superior to asceticism, because it presupposes the acceptance of what is very uncomfortable for us, implies the martyric patience of temptations or diseases, with a greater cleansing effect on the needy. Patience involves the denial of one’s own will, the crucifixion of selfishness and passions. In the final part, I made a brief phenomenological assessment of the reality of suffering from the perspective of Jean Luc Marion’s thought.

Keywords: archetypal, suffering, paradigm, abandonment, withdrawal, phenomenon.

The archetypal paradigm of Righteous Job

OFTEN THE HUMAN BEING FACES moments of trial and suffering. In such situations, the person seeks support around him: from family members, friends or close ones. Paradoxically, it happens that when it is difficult for you and you are suffering, many around you move away from you, instead of supporting you with their presence, with a word, with advice. This often happens, not out of malice or indifference, but out of a reflex gesture of self-preservation or flight from suffering, specific to modern man. Many people notice that when everything is good and beautiful, in their personal lives, people are very present around, [and] whenever the suffering, the trial, the pain came, most of them disappear.

In such a situation, the wounded and grieving man is left with few options. Among these is the sorrowful cry to God and the appeal to the model of other people who have gone through similar situations, to find answers, to find comfort. The first tendency of man, taken out of his comfort zone, is that of revolt against God. In most cases, people close to Christian revelation resort to the model of the righteous Job. His life becomes a filter for understanding and evaluating his own situation. When a man is struck by a suffering comparable to that of Job, of varying intensities, everything that has happened in this manner is a reason for deep reflection and introspection. The suffering man travels a path from the vivid impression that everything that happens is absurd, to the assumption, in a spirit of humility, that everything that happens is towards the healing of some passions, towards a higher understanding of existence, towards a certain delimitation of the human within us. In other words, suffering reminds us that we do not have a standing city here, but that we are citizens of heaven.

The human being affected by original sin moves within a limiting framework of the pleasure-pain paradigm. He seeks pleasure in any situation and avoid pain at all costs. The idea of assuming the cross is difficult to understand, when our psychosomatic data moves in the direction of pleasure, avoiding pain. The assumption of the cross is asceticism, it is a movement in the opposite direction of the flow of the existence of the post-Adamic man.

The experience of the righteous Job is accessed by all people in various sufferings, of each generation. At a superficial glance at things, we could say that Job was a man, hard-tested, somehow a singular case, isolated, lost among the scriptures. If we look more closely, the framing of such a case of suffering, overcome by faith, acquires an archetypal significance. Job becomes an example of assuming suffering, a role model. He lost his fortune, then his children, finally his health, above all his wife advised him to curse God and die. Job reached the limits of the human ability to bear. What helped him go through all these crucifixions was his trust in God, the One

who had given him so much and who was now in retreat, in silence, the sky seemed closed, the dialogue interrupted.

The phenomenality of the relationship with the divinity seems dissipated, evaporated in such situations, man reaches the threshold of mourning and unbelief. However, suffering produces an opening within us through which the transcendent penetrates. We need to be wounded in order to retreat, to let the divinity inhabit us. The self-filled man leaves no room for God's kenosis, so that God becomes intimate to us through our wound. He is like a surgeon who needs to cut the epidermal tissue to draw us into an abyssal dialogue.

St. John Chrysostom, speaking about the experience of the righteous Job, says that after all the misfortunes fell like lightning on him, the question certainly arose in the mind of the righteous:

If war broke out, from where, tell me, and from whom? What struggle is this? How could he not be amazed to hear something new, who lived incessantly in well-being. How? This has never happened, nor has it ever been heard.¹

In such a situation, Job's reaction was to bow down, tear his clothes, cut the hair off his head, and reject everything [that is worldly]. We see this from the words spoken: "Naked I came out of my mother's womb, naked I will return to the earth" Job (1:21). The magnitude of the trial attracts in the soul of the right the desire to throw himself into battle², rejected by the world, by all attachment to transient things, by throwing himself before God, with nothing of this world, that is, naked, as he had entered the world. The struggle that stood before him was not with material things, but was of a spiritual nature. He needed to use his great virtues: patience in misfortune and abandonment, keeping piety towards God, without murmuring, blasphemy or rebellion and continuing his conversation with God with brokenness of heart. Who could help him in such a situation but the One who had blessed him, protected him, increased the work of his hands?

During the trial, through which the righteous Job passed, the feeling of God's abandonment persisted, as if heaven were closed to him: "But help is far from me, pity has rejected me, and the Lord's search has overlooked me." Job (6:14) Along with the lack of help from God, the forsaken person also feels abandoned by people, because

when someone is rejected and deprived of his help, everything is his enemy and adversary. No one has known me in my misfortune, (...) Those who honored me fell on me. This is far

¹ St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Job* [in Romanian], trans. and notes by Laura Enache, introductory study by Dragoș Mîrșanu (Iași: Doxologia, 2012), 47.

² *Ibid.*, 50.

more terrible: trampling on a man who is already lying on the ground. It seems to me that he is alluding to his friends.³

A crucial point in Job's dialogue with God is the moment when the right feels the presence of the Almighty and trembles: "Hitherto with the hearing of my ear I have heard of Thee, but now I have seen Thee with my own eyes. That is why I despise myself and melt. I count myself dust and ashes." Job (42, 5-6) St. John Chrysostom says that when Job condemned himself, then God did justice to him.⁴ Humility and self-emptying give way to the manifestation of grace. The denial of himself and the world, together with the hope that only God can save him from this overwhelming tribulation, brought the righteous Job to the position of being received by God as a true partner in dialogue, hearing the words: "Gird your thighs like a man: I will ask you, and you will give me an answer." Job (38, 3)

In our attempt to understand the archetypal dimension of Job's paradigm, we can draw as a stage conclusion the fact that there are present a series of elements that are repeated in the existence of every person who is born on this earth: tribulations, trials, sufferings, the feeling of abandonment on the part of God, when heaven seems closed to us, abandonment on the part of people, a feeling of absurdity or meaninglessness, the renunciation of everything in the world, which until then brought us satisfaction or joy and a prayer with unspeakable sighs, in which man knows his own limitation and nothingness, acquires true humility, because he understands that without God he can do nothing in such a situation.

Asceticism and suffering in the life of St. Sophrony of Essex

In St. Sophrony and Elder Joseph the Hesychast, we find a true x-ray of suffering, of the soul that changes and metamorphoses through assumption. Suffering and asceticism go hand in hand for the man who climbs Mount Tabor, for the man who denies his selfish self, for the man who, like the serpent who sheds his skin in order to renew himself, rejects his sensual part in order to gain the spiritual one. Renunciation involves the crucifixion of selfishness and the exit from the pleasure-pain labyrinth. Happiness is no longer synonymous with pleasure, but with the joys of grace, with the work of the Holy Spirit, with the deification of man. Pain is no longer the main source of unhappiness, but the greatest teacher for finding the self-affected by sin and death, the source of humility, the deepening of the feeling of nothingness, patience in illness is assimilated to martyrdom. The apostles and the generations that followed them did not avoid martyrdom, but embraced it as a chance for their union with God.

³ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

Christ is the Man who overcomes the pleasure-pain paradigm. He goes beyond suffering to show us that beyond this lies true life. Christ suffered on the cross to lead us all to the resurrection, so He did not suffer in vain. His suffering was not struck by absurdity, by nonsense, but it involves the deepest possible meaning for human nature.

From the writings of St. Sophrony and from the writings of his disciple, Father Zacharias Zaharou, we can learn that asceticism is closely related to suffering, especially in the second age of spiritual life. St. Sophrony speaks of three spiritual ages: the first in which man receives God's grace and blessing very easily, everything goes by itself, the Christian is light-hearted, with much joy and enthusiasm. In the second period of the spiritual age, the dynamics change. The soul is put to the test, sometimes to the point of despair. It seems to him that he is forsaken by God or cursed.⁵ Nothing works like before. Everything is accomplished with great effort and great difficulty. Why? Because it enters the paradigm of Job. Love for God is weighed in balance with the world.

If in the first stage God gave us everything with great ease in order to fall in love with His presence, in this stage fidelity, steadfastness and the ability to endure evils for the love of God are tested. There are moments of balance, in which the soul falters, would like to give up everything and everything. Sometimes he tends to murmur against God, not understanding this oppression and abandonment, which is why St. Sophrony says:

Every person who truly seeks salvation must necessarily go through the experience of abandonment by God, (...) This test of our faith can accompany us for many years in the second period of the Christian's spiritual life, that is, when providence allows him to suffer a weakening, even a departure from the first grace. This unavoidable abandonment has a profound meaning: to give man the opportunity to show his own freedom and faithfulness to God.⁶

Father Zacharias in the presentation of the spiritual ages of the theology of St. Sophrony says that in the moments of abandonment there are two possible paths: one of patience and assuming the pain of abandonment, the other of rebellion, as happened in the case of St. Silouan the Athonite, who had the feeling that it was impossible to persuade God. The consequence was that for an hour he was thrown into the depths of darkness. On the same day, at the Vespers service, for St. Silouan, the depth of despair was transformed into the immediate vision of Christ.⁷ Although it seems like a crucifixion,

⁵ Archimandrite Sophrony, *We will see God as He is* [in Romanian], Second Revised Edition (Suceava: Accent Print Publishing House, 2015), 122.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 128.

⁷ Archimandrite Zaharia Zaharou, *Remember the First Love, The Three Periods of the Spiritual Life in the Theology of Father Sophrony* [in Romanian] (Iasi: Doxologia, 2015), 155.

God's abandonment of man is a special grace, which the needy person does not feel, but which leads him to perfection. Forsaking is not a way of the divine presence, but even a gift of God's love, *Another pole of divine love*.⁸

The first grace is the talent received on loan,

it is a foreign treasure, an unmerited gift with which we have been endowed by God's own good will. If we do not prove faithful to this grace, how can we expect God to entrust it to us with unwavering good measure?⁹

Although abandonment seems to be a lack of grace, even at this stage the gift is not lacking, but God, in order to guide the soul of the needy through absence, "does not in any way deprive the soul of the divine light, but grace hides its presence from the mind".¹⁰

St. Sophrony considers that the withdrawal of grace is absolutely necessary for us, because it helps us mature spiritually, otherwise we could consider grace a simple energy that is available to us without effort, without asceticism, without perseverance, without patience in troubles, without assumption. Therefore,

in this period, every experience, every experience is accompanied by pain. We feel that God is moving further and further away from us, it seems to us that He has left us and that He is merciless. But he who will go through this period properly, like the Righteous Job and St. Silouan, will surely come to cherish it later.¹¹

The time of abandonment brings with it tears, burning lamentation at the memory of grace, repentance, the sight of one's own passions, and "God sometimes turns our hearts upside down to reveal the abomination hidden in its depths. For without realizing it, we carry within us sinful impulses and desires that are not in harmony with God's original thought"¹², with our goal of entering into His love and becoming sons and heirs.

The pedagogy of abandonment and the suffering that accompanies it will help the soul that is going through this time of trial to acquire the spiritual feeling of God. Father Zacharias says, in this regard, that in times of temptation and difficult trial, when despair overcomes us, we speak with God with all sincerity and an open heart, so that, by doing this exercise,

⁸ Nathanael Neacșu, *Dogmatic Conscience and Spiritual Life in the Thought of Father Sophrony Sakharov* [in Romanian] (Iași: Doxologia, 2015), 255.

⁹ Zaharou, *Remember your first love*, 158.

¹⁰ Neacșu, *Dogmatic Conscience*, 256.

¹¹ Zaharou, *Remember your first love*, 165.

¹² *Ibid.*, 166.

we will come in time to recognize His voice. We will learn the most important lesson that life can give us: how to talk to our Creator, how to pray. And as we learn the language of God and advance in the science of the spirit, the darkness in which we were blind until then will dissipate and the states of the soul will be transformed into spiritual states.¹³

Therefore, without trial, without abandonment, without suffering, man does not have access to the One who is crucified out of love for us. To the One in suffering, you can only enter through a similar state, without suffering being a state of normality, but the exceptional way in which spiritual feeling opens up to us.

The pedagogy of abandonment has levels of understanding because St. Sophrony says that man must reach a complete desertion of himself, because:

He rebukes all those whom He wants to make His children, so that He can give them all His own. However, such moments of divine silence are frightening: man feels as if crucified on an invisible cross, because (...) the self-desertion of every servant of God must be complete, so that grace can perfectly pass within him.¹⁴

To St. Sophrony, the time of abandonment is a time in which we walk in the footsteps of Christ, because He was not received by His own, He was forsaken, the disciples denied Him. When a person has the support, even just the social support, of his peers: relatives, friends, co-workers, there is support through solidarity, sympathy, friendship, collegiality. But when man loses this support and the one above, then despair sets in and the feeling of absurdity is present at every step. In this context,

if we endure trials and are not afraid of being rejected by men, we will prove that we are children of the Heavenly Father. Fleeing from hardships and tribulations is not only a sign of our imperfection, but also of unbelief.¹⁵

To take a step further in the understanding of abandonment, St. Sophrony speaks of the necessity of the crucifixion of the mind in order to receive the grace of theology. This grace is received by all those who walk in the footsteps of Christ. It is not possible to do theology from the armchair, with coffee next to it and ambient music. It is necessary to go through, step by step, the Passion of Christ. In a state of crucifixion, Tabor and the light of the Resurrection are revealed to us. Father Zacharias says that now, knowing

¹³ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

“from trial the power of the Passion and of the Lord’s Cross, man receives the renewal of life in Christ and now thirsts for even greater trials”.¹⁶

The Way of the Cross reveals to man the tragic destiny of human existence, therefore, as happened with St. Silouan, as in all those who follow Christ, “naturally generates prayer for the whole world”.¹⁷

We can rightly ask: does suffering have an end? For the one who looks from the outside, this spiritual journey seems like an endless torment. The answer can be found in Father Zacharias, from the teaching of St. Sophrony: Yes, suffering has an end, the pedagogy of abandonment has a purpose, that’s why it’s pedagogy, to teach us something, without letting us fall prey to despair, absurdity, meaninglessness. Therefore, suffering “is necessary to us until the heart is purified, until it is pierced, that is, wounded, and begins to take part with feeling in the communion with God”.¹⁸

The role of tribulations and trials in the ascetic life of St. Joseph the Hesychast

The teaching on the stages of perfection of St. Joseph the Hesychast is found in his correspondence with people of the world, monks, nuns and laymen, as well as in the works of the disciples written as a testimony of what they lived with their abbot. Of these works, perhaps the most complete would be the work *My Elder Joseph*, written by Ven. Ephraim the Philotheite, who founded about 18 monasteries in America, the best known being the monastery of St. Anthony the Great in Arizona. After the passing of Ven. Ephraim, this monastery has become a place of pilgrimage for Orthodox Christians arriving in the USA.

St. Joseph speaks, in accordance with the patristic teaching, of three degrees of grace: the cleansing grace that brings cleansing from the passions, through the bath of tears, the illuminating grace and the perfecting grace. If we were to speak in agreement with St. Sophrony of Essex, we can understand that St. Joseph speaks of the multiplication of temptations and trials also in the second stage of the spiritual life, when the needy person asks for grace from God, but with grace he receives temptations and difficult trials. Grace no longer comes as an unconditional gift, as in the first stage of the spiritual life, but is doubled by many tribulations. In this regard, St. Joseph says, in a letter, to the nun Vrieni, his niece, that:

God, like a good Father, gives [man] Grace, but he also gives him temptations. If he endures temptations without murmuring, he receives the addition of Grace. And the more he receives,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 205.

the greater the addition of temptations he receives. (...) Do you ask for Grace from God? Instead of Grace, it leaves you with temptation. Can't cope with the war and fall? It does not give you the addition of Grace. Do you ask again? Temptation again! Are you defeated again? Again, you are deprived. And that's for life. You have to come out victorious. Resist temptation until death. To fall in battle dead.¹⁹

The passage continues, however, with great encouragement for the needy, even fallen and infirm, it is appropriate even in that state for the needy to affirm his fidelity and the desire not to abandon Christ. Such a call makes Christ enter into battle for the wounded, fallen, weakened by the pressure of trial:

And suddenly He appears in the arena and cries out with a stormy voice: I'm here! Gird your thighs like a man and follow Me! And You, in all light and joy, say: Woe to me, a bastard! Woe to me, cunning and worthless! With my hearing I heard You before, and now my eyes have seen You. I hate myself and repent in dust and ashes.²⁰

From the description above we can see that God puts us to trials in order to give us His grace. Illuminating grace brings a deep understanding that for the love of Christ the soul must endure crucifixions and many trials. Even if the battles lead the one who has been tried many times to the brink of despair, he must endure and resist to the end, in order to emerge victorious. God cannot entrust the grace of the wavering soul, without hope in Him, which turns back from the road when the time of the Cross comes. He who endures, acquires grace. If there is no patience, there is no spiritual progress.

Elder Joseph speaks of a withdrawal of grace, not of abandonment, which he considers one of the greatest possible trials for the needy:

The withdrawal of Grace is something so frightening, that when I tell, I tremble, because I have been tried very severely, (...) And if you are to find Divine Grace and then lose it, I pray that it is better never to find it. That's how tough the fight is. That's why I want God to give you experience rather than grace. For experience brings many graces and is a gift that God does not take back.²¹

¹⁹ Venerable Joseph the Hesychast, *The feeling of divine love. Letters and poems* [in Romanian], trans. Fr. Prof. Constantin Coman and Teodor Coman, trans. of poems by Sabin Preda (Bucharest: Byzantine Publishing House, 2020), 268–269.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 269.

²¹ Archbishop Ephraim the Philotheite, *My Elder Joseph* [in Romanian], trans. from Greek by Hieromonk Ștefan Nuțescu (Bucharest: Evangelismos Publishing House, 2010), 318.

St. Joseph the Hesychast says, according to the word of Scripture, Ephesus (6:12) and Hebrews (12:4), that the struggle is to the point of blood, against the powers of darkness. This is not fought

against them with pretzels, but with rivers of tears, with pain unto the death of the soul, with perfect humility and with the greatest patience. May blood flow and from exhaustion through prayer you fall for weeks, as if you were seriously ill.²²

We cannot fight against the spirits of darkness without true self-knowledge, without knowledge of the weaknesses of our city. This self-knowledge helps us to anticipate where we will be hit by the evil one, because he is looking for the vulnerable points of the city of our soul. That is why Elder Joseph says in a letter to a monk:

Who overcame the devil? The one who really knew his illness, his passions and the shortcomings he has. He who is afraid to know himself, he remains far from true knowledge, and likes nothing but to see the mistakes of others and to judge them. He does not see the qualities in others, but only the defects, just as he does not see the defects in himself, but only the qualities. And this is truly the disease from which we, the people of this age, suffer, that we do not recognize each other's gift.²³

As long as man is attentive to the weaknesses of others, he loses sight of self-knowledge, which is the source of humility. And humility is a great lucidity in which man understands that without God, unclean spirits can crush and destroy him. Then, through humility and tears, the soul is cleansed of passions, and grace takes the place of darkness, man becomes inhabited by God.

Regarding the relationship between asceticism and suffering, St. Joseph says in another letter to the nun Vrieni:

I do not want anything else, and I love nothing more, than to hear that you are patient in temptations. Since God, (...) does not need man's work. But He rejoices and loves when, for His love, we suffer martyrdom and endure. Therefore, as warriors, He crowns us and gives us His abundant grace.²⁴

Therefore, the patience in time of tribulations is seen by Elder Joseph as superior even to asceticism, because this patience implies the renunciation of one's own will, the crucifixion of selfishness and passions, it is like a

²² Joseph the Hesychast, *Feeling Divine Love*, 274.

²³ Elder Joseph, *Testimonies from monastic life* [in Romanian], trans. Fr. Prof. Constantin Coman, PhD (Bucharest: Byzantine Publishing House, 2003), 33.

²⁴ Joseph the Hesychast, *Feeling Divine Love*, 326.

martyrdom, with a very great cleansing power. Asceticism is an assumption of the cross, according to the strength of man, the patience of tribulations is a delimitation of man, through which the temple of the Holy Spirit, the body of man, is purified and this makes man inhabited by grace in great power.

Trials and tribulations, says St. Joseph, places the needy in a state of deep humility, so that

prayer with pain gives birth to mourning. Mourning gives birth to tears. Tears, again, give birth to the purest prayer, because the tear, like the fragrant ointment, washes away the dirt and cleanses the breath of God, which is like a dove enclosed between the four walls, as from the four sticks taken.²⁵

In another place, St. Joseph speaks of the necessity of walking a path of dispassion, in which the needy, in order to be helped to wage war with the passions, is taught humility in a painful way. This happens when God sees the passions at work in the needy and

hides His grace still more and leaves him in temptations, until he humbles himself perfectly, and until he teaches him well how to think, since he still has pride. (...), therefore he is left in the hands of the smallness of soul, of discouragement, of anger, of blasphemy and of the wickedness of the enemy. And he tastes every moment of the suffocation of the soul and drinks from the waters of hell.²⁶

This spiritual suffocation is left on the striving until he sees his own nothingness, until he understands that he can do nothing on his own, and when he already knows well the weakness of human nature and reaches the depths of humility, then the Lord will say to him: The struggle of soul suffocation is enough. So let's help this wounded man." Because God "brings temptations to cleansing and healing, and when the time comes to lift them up, again, in His own way and with His wisdom, He brings about the outcome".²⁷

The experience of grace brings to the needy experiences that are not of this world, cannot be compared with any state of happiness in this world. Therefore, in order for man not to climb into such experiences, mystical experiences, the war of unclean spirits is very great. These experiences are the treasure of great value, sometimes it is enough for a man to have only one such experience, in a human life, to feed on it incessantly and to be stimulated to seek the eternal without tiring. Ecstasy is nourishing oneself

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 445.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 493.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 495.

with God's love directly. The one who is kidnapped by God's grace goes out of himself towards a reality superior to him, from which he would like to feed himself unceasingly. Therefore, all those who are preparing to become citizens of heaven will be tested like gold in fire. Why is this? Because man must reach spiritual maturity, to remain steadfast in the path of temptations, not to leave heaven in a Luciferic manner, through pride. That is why the great emphasis is placed on humility, as a spiritual settlement through which man can preserve grace. He who endures temptations with deep humility is filled with grace. Ultimately, it is filled with God's endless love.

A phenomenological look at the reality of suffering

If asceticism is an assumed spiritual discipline, suffering is a crucifixion that came unexpectedly, necessary to understand the crucifixion of Christ. Loving God, we assume the cross given to us, because He first loved us²⁸ and He was crucified for us. In the cross is the mystery of the resurrection.

However we look at suffering, it implies, from the perspective of Jean Luc Marion's phenomenology, a suspension of reciprocity. We have Christ's model of the crucifixion and assumption of the cross, we have Christ's invitation: „Whoever wants to come after me should take up his cross and follow me” Matthew (16:24). Then we have the resurrection of Christ from the dead. All this is an encouragement and support to follow the Christian path. However, when sufferings, crucifixions, trials come upon our lives, as was the case with the righteous Job, we feel as if abandoned by God, abandoned in the limitations of our finitude. The suspension of reciprocity is the test of love. God wants to test our love, to see if we really love Him, when He is in retreat, when grace searches us and sustains us almost imperceptibly. He does not want extraordinary deeds from us, but to endure everything that comes upon us with thanksgiving. No matter how wounded we are, He expects us to keep our thoughts of Him through our last strength: Glory to Thee, our God, glory to Thee, for good and for bad.

The hedonism of the world has made us beings of pleasure, self-centered. Asceticism and suffering take us out of this paradigm. We cannot be like God, that is, love, while loving ourselves exclusively. Love implies otherness. Therefore, suspending reciprocity is an exercise in love. Such was the case in Job's suffering, in God's request to Abraham to sacrifice his only son, in the widow's two pennies given to the temple, in the love of enemies.

We identify in suffering another element of Marion's phenomenology, namely that the subject in suffering stops from everything that constituted

²⁸ Jean Luc Marion, *The Phenomenon of Eros, Six Meditations* [in Romanian], trans. Maria-Cornelia Ică jr., presentation by Ioan Ică jr. (Sibiu: Deisis, 2004), 119.

the dynamics of his life, in which he was at the helm of things, did things with the power of words and deeds, and places himself in a state of receptivity to God's questioning. The person who has entered into suffering has the reflex to ask: why was this happening to me? Then they wait for an answer, they are in a state of receptivity. There is also the alternative to receptivity, revolt. But in such an attitude man only consumes himself uselessly, without solving anything. Accepting and searching for the meaning of suffering is the solution. Why did he come? What can I do differently from what I've done so far? Because most of the time suffering is an impulse towards spiritual progress, without which man stays in his comfort zone, unwavering, satisfied, maybe even ankylosed in the project.

Marion is deeply indebted to the vision of Augustine of Hippo from "Confessions" on the receptive subject, called *Aware*. The French philosopher says that, in the "Confessions", Augustine does nothing but operate a decentralization of the ego in God.²⁹ This is how suffering in man's existence can be understood in a higher sense, as an ultimate or limiting way in which man's decentering from self-centeredness can be achieved, through his re-centering in God-love.

Marion's phenomenology operates with the method of erotic reduction. The receptive subject uses love as a filter, asking himself: Does anyone love me? By asking ourselves such a question we manifest a vulnerable openness of our being. Waiting for someone's love humanizes us. Why? Because you can't generate it and be assured about it. It is precisely its degree of uncertainty that makes me remain human, awakens the human in me, places me in a relationship. Therefore, for erotic reduction to be achieved, it is necessary not a "self-certainty, but an assurance from elsewhere".³⁰

At the same time we see in man an infinite thirst for love, so that this elsewhere is potentiated by the fact that

one's own finitude nevertheless becomes a limit that indicates to us that we cannot love ourselves infinitely. I find the same finitude in the world and in the other, from which I understand that neither the world nor the other can infinitely secure me in the horizon of love. That is why I feel impelled to turn to Revelation and to find out to what extent there is an Other who can assure me infinitely in love.³¹

Why does man seek infinite assurance in love? The French philosopher answers this question by saying that "man, before being a rational or

²⁹ Jean Luc Marion, *In the Self's Place, The approach of Saint Augustine*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (California: Stanford University Press, 2012), 44.

³⁰ Marion, *The phenomenon of Eros*, 52.

³¹ Daniel Isai, *Consciousness and intentionality. The Ontological and Phenomenological Dimension of Consciousness in Dumitru Stăniloae and Jean-Luc Marion* [in Romanian] (Iași: "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University Publishing House, 2020), 216.

thinking, political or smiling being, is love”.³² God is love and created man in His image and likeness, He created him out of love, to be faithfully love. All human potentialities are fulfilled and perfected around this gravitational center.

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³² Jean Luc Marion, *On the Rationality of Revelation and the Irrationality of the Faithful* [in Romanian], translated by Maria-Cornelia Ică jr. (Sibiu: Deisis, 2014), 188.

Between Asceticism and Theodicy

A Synthetic Sketch of Patristic Suffering¹

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Abstract: Christ recreates all creation that follows Him. Personally embracing His Salvation is the transcendent and central Christian duty, realized as a certain act of taking responsibility. This embracement turns the fact of suffering into a weapon against the devil and the appearance that natural biological death is a misfortune into the insight that it is the opening of the Gate of the Kingdom. This paper outlines the Holy and Living Tradition's *essential* message on the topic at hand: The message about the fact that suffering is, in itself, neither good nor bad and about the way in which the Cross of Christ offers the rectifying Justification of the human being and, through man, of the whole of the fallen creation. Consequently, rather than a philological approach, it offers a synthetic dogmatical insight into this, based on the premise that the Holy Tradition is alive since the first centuries and until the more recent Saint Theologians of the Church.

Keywords: Cross, repentance, participation, Larchet, St. Maximus, St. Irenaeus.

IN THE AFTERMATH OF SERIOUS and massive available studies, to which many references will be made in the following, such as the ones undertaken by Jean-Claude Larchet and, within the Romanian theological scene, such as the ones made by Patrologist Liviu Petcu, the following question arises:

¹ This text is a truncated version of a subchapter from my yet unpublished doctoral thesis. The fact that it is truncated does not mean only that it is simplified and reduced to its essential message, but that several relevant themes, treated in the course of many chapters, have been scraped here. For example, the theme of the christian responsibility for the sin of the ancestors and for universal evil has been rather marginalized here, because its serious treatment would have needed much more space. Another important aspect is that this text is a translation of a scientific work done in the Romanian language. Therefore, the references concern mostly Romanian translations of different theological works. They were left un-adapted, but in this form they offer an insight in some of the theological literature available in Romanian on this topic.

Can anything be added on the topic of suffering in the works of the Holy Fathers? Hardly. And should it be possible – as this topic is, indeed, a strong point of the patristic Orthodox theology – this article not only could not propose to offer a completion of the indicated works, it cannot even dare to summarize them. Rather, its purpose will be to merely outline the Holy and Living Tradition's *essential* witness on the topic of suffering.

On the 14th of September the Church celebrates the Elevation of the Holy Cross, commemorating primarily the finding and uplifting of the Savior's cross. During the cultic offering of the cross, before the beginning of the Mass, the sacrifice of the Savior is praised by the hymn "Thy Cross we worship, O Lord, and Holy Resurrection we praise and glorify". By saying this, on the one side we commemorate the finding and the ascension of the wooden cross of our Savior. On the other side, however – as indicated by the Resurrection mentioned in the same phrase, which is not an object, but an Act – we also refer to the Cross as the Passion (Suffering) and Crucifixion of the Lord. In this sense, "Cross" needs to be spelled with a capital, since it denotes the mysterious Act of Christ's self-chosen, suffering Sacrifice through which Peace was made between us and the heavenly Father. Thirdly, when saying the very same hymn – aloud or inwardly – what we also mean is that we celebrate and thank for Christ's Sacrifice because it also crucified our sins and passions, i.e. irrational and unnatural soul-movements, which once enthroned in our heart² shape our nature. We praise Christ because by His Sacrifice He gave us victory over them, and we praise His Resurrection, through which He also opened to us the eschatological victory over death (and suffering).

That which all man (in the sense of the enlightened πάντα ἄνθρωπον, John 1,9) can find and lift up within the soul is the following truth: Through the Sacrifice of the Saviour, *suffering* – though real and not removed from the world by Christ – *has ceased to be able to offer the devil an instrument to dominate mankind*. This is an important aspect of what the Cross means to us, an aspect rounded up by the following truth: Henceforth, rectification and straightening (in the sense of δικαίωσις, Romans 5,18) is being given to each person who partakes of the victory of Christ, of the godly Life which streams from Him. We are talking about one's personal salvation, which is linked to the constant endorsement of our Baptism. *My* salvation requires that *I* endorse the cross of *my* life, in Christ – that is, it requires that *I* participate, to a certain degree, in the mystery of His Cross. And *my* straightening mysteriously contributes to the one of the whole fallen world. The cross of *my* life means suffering. But not all suffering is Cross-like, not every form of it partakes to the Suffering of Christ. *I* have to *find* and *uplift* *my* cross *in* the Cross of Christ. With other words, *I* have to find His Cross

² Cf. Paul Andrei Mucichescu, "Intellect or Heart, Reason or Faith? Some instances of *crede ut intellegas* in Damascene and Maximian reflections," *Diakrisis Yearbook of Theology and Philosophy* 3 (2020): 138–139.

within my own suffering, so humble and sparse when compared to that which the truly innocent human has felt when taking upon His conscience *all* the past present and future sins of the humanity He centered, and when therefor He was being thanked with contempt and gibe by His own. To start with, for the discovery of one's own cross *in* the Cross of Christ, it is necessary to know *what suffering is not*:

1. Suffering is not to be seen as a (legal) punishment given by God to us as "culprits" of the original sin (as affirmed by the Augustinian thought and by Augustinianism³). There are two subordinate aspects here, which should be taken under scrutiny.

First, already losing the grace of the Adamic incorruption – caused by Adam's estrangement – has meant *suffering*. This fact has been confirmed by Jean-Claude Larchet's analysis of the theology of Saints Athanasius the Great and Gregory of Nyssa⁴. Choosing estrangement from the Source of Life is one and the same with choosing suffering, choosing to irrationally sacrifice sanity. Yes, on the one side God established and kept this Order of things, in His Righteousness. But on the other side, in His last recorded dialogue with Adam God merely spelled out the details of the state endorsed by Adam through his illicit act of eating. The human concept of "punishment" does not fit here. Sickness and suffering are a *privation of the good* – the self-inflicted deprivation of the highest natural good, the loss of the *spiritual health*⁵. Here, again, two interconnected aspects should be observed. The first one is that this deprivation does not *imply*-, even if *it can lead to*- total depravation. After the fall, the human being still retains the image of the Maker, i.e. reason and freedom and, also, enjoys the Creator's Care, this being therefore keeps receiving a certain degree of Grace. The second aspect becomes clear in a relevant remark by St. Paulinus of Nola, Gaul's very own St. Nicholas, whose only child was taken by the Lord: Even before the Incarnation the Providence was taking care of the wounds of the human race, caused by the loss of Adam's grace; but when the spreading infection of the vices reached the peak (of what humanity could bear on its own, aided by this form of godly care), the Master Potter Himself had to come

³ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Dumnezeu nu vrea suferința omului [Dieu ne veut pas la souffrance des hommes]*, trans. Marinela Bojin (București: Sophia, 2008), 5. Larchet adds that suffering should not be attributed the central role which it enjoys in the Catholic soteriology. This role has serious consequences for the whole of Western culture – a fact which, unfortunately, cannot be treated in this study (cf. *ibid*, 6, et seq; cf. Nectarius Antonopoulos, *Dincolo de dreptate [Πέρα από τη Δικαιοσύνη]*, trans. Ilie Stănuș (Galați: Egumenița, 2021), 81 et seq. Also on this subject, it can be indicated that Larchet and other Orthodox theologians believe that Job's accusers mislead his confession of the weakness and corruption of fallen human nature. They have reshaped and refitted it as statement that, without exception, suffering would always constitute a punishment given for a certain guilt (cf. Larchet, *Dumnezeu nu vrea suferința omului*, 71).

⁴ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Creștinul în fața bolii, suferinței și morții [Le Chrétien devant la maladie, la souffrance et la mort]*, trans. Marinela Bojin (București: Sophia, 2015), 46.

⁵ Cf. Larchet, *Creștinul în fața bolii, suferinței și morții*, 173 et seq.

down and *make us anew*, through His Own Sacrifice⁶. Being forgiven through His Sacrifice we have received the gift of the Salvation. Instead of an actual punishment for our ways, we have received the Mercy which exceeds all sin. Since then, the Church has been led to the full restoration of man's spiritual health by the asceticism of the Holy Tradition⁷. Hers is the way to avoid the folly of original sin, to avoid the folly of idolatry, of heresy, and of the wisdom of the (secular) world⁸. Christ is our chance not to turn away from the "way of righteousness", not to be like the dog who "returns to its vomit" (2 Peter 2,21-22). The asceticism of the Church perpetually calls to mind the thought of biological death, the thought of one's own particular Judgment (on which our access to Heaven after our biological death depends), and the thought of the Last Judgment, the threshold of entering eternal Union with God, of the complete immersion into the Kingdom of God⁹.

The second aspect related to the fact that suffering cannot be seen as plain punishment, is the following¹⁰: Although the Holy Fathers warn that suffering can be related to the personal sins of those who endure it (and thus can atone them, at least in part), the very same Fathers also warn that suffering is not always caused by these sins. However, "not in vain" come upon us diseases and misfortunes, as St. John Chrysostom testifies¹¹. Sometimes this situation is horrifying. Sometimes, suffering goes beyond imagination, beyond the human rational capacity. Factually, it is proven by too many testimonies from the past and from the present (one only needs a closer look upon the deeds of the self-entitled "world's most moral" state or army). Will we avoid the risk of malice? May God stand with us in avoiding it – even by ending our biological life! Thus reads the patristic bottom line.

2. Suffering is not a *punishment* given to Christ for our sins. Being God and human, Christ *consciously chose* all His suffering for us at every moment, also taking upon Him all the dispassionate human needs and natural weaknesses. He has done all of this for the atonement of our sins, as perhaps most coherently articulated by the Maximian theology. Through the miracle

⁶ Saint Paulinus of Nola, "Har și mântuire" ["Grace and Salvation" – text selections made by the translator; original source: Letter 23], in: *Antologie din Scrierile Părinților Latini*, ed. and trans. Vasile Goraș (București: Anastasia, 2000), 131. (For Paulinus' stance on salvation, see also Letters 12, 18, 24, 30, 34, 38 and Poems 19 and 31.)

⁷ Cf. Larchet, *Creștinul în fața bolii, suferinței și morții*, 177 et seq.

⁸ Cf. Larchet, *Creștinul în fața bolii, suferinței și morții*, 190 et seq.

⁹ *Ibid.* 234.

¹⁰ Cf. Jean-Claude Larchet, *Teologia bolii [Théologie de la maladie]* trans. Vasile Mihoc (București: Sophia, 2020), 54; cf. Liviu Petcu, *Suferința și creșterea spirituală [Suffering and Spiritual Development]* (Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2012), 20; cf. Liviu Petcu, *Hristos, Prietenul nostru în suferință: florilegiu patristic [Christ, Our Friend in Suffering: a patristical repertory]* (Iași: Doxologia, 2012), 41-53.

¹¹ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Hannah 1.2*, apud Larchet, *Teologia bolii*, 63.

of His Incarnation, *in* Christ the need and suffering ceased to represent a conditioning of the fallen human nature. This is the miracle that made possible the promised blessed state to all those united to Him¹², a state of being revealed 1. through the miracles wrought *by* Christ, and *in* Christ, by His disciples and 2. through the Mysteries of the Church. In this way God shows His Will that all people be healed of suffering in the coming Kingdom. Nevertheless, God also wants us all to face the worldly suffering in one form or another. He wants us to mysteriously resume certain aspects of Christ's defeat of suffering, and to forebode its eternal suppression, in Parusia, within those who will be saved.

Indeed, in the realm of history, neither sin nor suffering has been abolished by the recapitulative Salvation. Due to the solidarity of all humanity and of the whole world, of everything created, *all* people – including those which are the members of the Church – are still exposed to corruption, i.e. to disease, to suffering and to biological death¹³. But while previously suffering was primarily an instrument of the devil to subdue man, the recapitulative Salvation opened the possibility of transforming each instance of suffering into an occasion to overcome any situation that separated man from God. Henceforth, for Christians it is an occasion to prevail through an endurance that participates to God's Longsuffering. Saints come to accept such instances even with joy, as St. Maximus the Confessor has shown (*cf. Ad Thalassius* 47) – prophetically, one could say, in the light of his own later life. Their joy, however, is not human. It is a divine, theandric Joy. So is their endurance. Fr. Valer Bel indicates the distinction between Martyrs and Confessors, already present at Eusebius of Caesarea: Eusebius describes the former as (perfect) imitators of Christ, enjoying the Baptism of blood¹⁴. Indeed, as has been showed through word and deed by St. Ignatius Theophorus, also evoked by Fr. Bel: The Martyrs are nailed “to the cross of the Lord”¹⁵; they are venerated from the beginning in the Church¹⁶; and it is them that St. Ap. John sees “under the altar” (Ap 6,9). Thus, the celebration of the Eucharist has been based on Holy Tables containing the relics of Martyrs. The Altar and its antimension are nothing else than their luminous, upon which the Sacrifice takes place. But full martyrdom is not the single orthodox way, and it could not be, because the ways of the world do not depend only on our decisions. Since human history is not predetermined,

¹² Cf. Larchet, *Dumnezeu nu vrea suferința omului*, 95 et seq.

¹³ Cf. Larchet, *Teologia bolii*, 48.

¹⁴ Valer Bel, “Sensul creștin al martiriului” [“The Christian Meaning of Martyrdom”], *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai – Theologia Orthodoxa* 57, no. 1 (2012): 111.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Among the relevant texts in this regard, Bel („The Christian Meaning of Martyrdom”, 110-111) recalls first of all *The Acts of the Apostles* 7, *The Martyrdom Acts*, the *Epistle to the Romans* and *The Epistle to Smyrnians* by St. Ignatius, *The Letter of the Church of Smyrna* about the martyrdom of Bishop Polycarp, *The Epistle to Diognetus* and the Martyrologies (Synaxarions).

until history's end chance also plays a role in the "imitation" of the Savior, in partaking of His Cross and of His passing to the Lord during torture. The essential aspect in this partaking (through one's *self-denial and taking up the Cross*) is the theandric Act also shared by the Confessors. It is the Act of relinquishing the control over one's own life and of bearing "witness" (ἡ μαρτυρία, Ap 6,9).

So then what *is* suffering, as seen by the Church?

Providing references to the writings of Saints Varsanufios and John of Gaza, Isaac the Syrian, John Chrysostom, John of the Ladder, St. Gregory Palamas and others Jean-Claude Larchet observes¹⁷ – in times of hardship Saints give thanks for the healing and improvement opportunities which the Providence has provided them with. (In his turn, Fr. Petcu adds the example of Saint Porphyrios to this list¹⁸.) The same mentioned Saints, together with others such as Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazians and Mark the Ascetic, have shown in detail the good that can be attained through suffering when suffering is transfigured into the cleansing furnace, which wells forth the Grace of God's Mercy – this good consists of the gifts of *patience, humility, prayer, faith, hope, holiness*¹⁹. In essence, exemplifying forms of innocent suffering, the Saints suffering illnesses and misfortunes²⁰ are subjected to adversity. The Holy Tradition testifies two things: On the one hand, adversities occur even in the lives of Saints so as not to allow any encouragement of the expectation of rewards or of pride by their absence; instead, by suffering them the Saints become tried in virtue and worthy. On the other hand, they occur so that in the people influenced by the Saints in question no false impressions arise²¹ when their own sufferings provoke them to compare themselves with others, including with the Saints. By

¹⁷ Cf. Larchet, *Teologia bolii*, 66 et seq.

¹⁸ This great contemporary Saint, struck by diseases of the heart, stomach, kidneys and skin, as well as a cancer of the pituitary, testified, in a longer shattering revelation: "I hurt a lot, I, I am suffering, but my disease is very beautiful. I feel it as the love of Christ. I pierce my heart and thank God." St. Porphyrios, quoted in: Evloghie Munteanu, *Ne vorbește Părintele Porfirie* (Galați: Cartea Ortodoxă, 2003), 367 apud Petcu, *Suferința și creșterea spirituală* [*Suffering and Spiritual Development*], 173.

¹⁹ Cf. Larchet, *Dumnezeu nu vrea suferința omului*, 124-137; cf. Larchet, *Teologia bolii*, 70-86; cf. Larchet, *Creștinul...*, 64-74, 147-168; cf. Petcu, *Hristos, Prietenul nostru în suferință* [*Christ, Our Friend in Suffering*], 58 et seq.; cf. Petcu, *Suferința și creșterea spirituală* [*Suffering and Spiritual Development*] 179 et seq. V Cf. Larchet, *Dumnezeu nu vrea suferința omului*, 124-137; cf. Larchet, *Theology of Disease*, 70-86; cf. Larchet, *the Christian...*, 64-74, 147-168; cf. Petcu, *Hristos, Prietenul nostru în suferință* [*Christ, Our Friend in Suffering*], 58 et seq.; cf. Petcu, *Suferința și creșterea spirituală* [*Suffering and Spiritual Development*], 179 et seq.

²⁰ Cf. Larchet, *Teologia bolii*, 51; cf. Petcu, *Suferința și creșterea spirituală* [*Suffering and Spiritual Development*], 30 et seq.

²¹ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Statues 1*, apud Petcu, *Hristos, Prietenul nostru în suferință* [*Christ, Our Friend in Suffering*], 54-55; St. John Chrysostom *Three Homilies on the Devil 1.7-8* and Saint Cyril of Alexandria, *Glaphyra on the Pentateuch 5.1*, apud Liviu Petcu, *Hristos, Prietenul nostru în suferință* [*Christ, Our Friend in Suffering*], 54.

allowing themselves to be comforted by the thought of approaching the likeness of the suffering Saints (in whom Christ's Passion is reflected), they do not feel abandoned by God. In the suffering Saints, people see that God's power is shown especially in weakness (2 Cor 12,9). They see that suffering does not hinder human sanctification. Through the suffering Saints, the onlooking world does not forget God, it does not forget that true happiness is only the union with God and that the only true misfortune is the separation from Him. The world does not forget that we must relate to Christ as the repentant thief did.

All of this shows that suffering is not evil in itself. But suffering is not good in itself, either. Also, it does not necessarily *cause* any good. For example, suffering is not a *sine qua non* for perfection, in like manner to how the original sin was not necessary for freedom²². Therefore, just as death was not willed by God, neither was suffering willed by Him in the Eternal Plan, and is not *willed* by Him as an eschatological finality (but chosen by the sons of perdition, as the "better" option). Pain is only an *opportunity* that can serve man for good and for perfection, although both can also be attained otherwise²³. In this sense, Larchet depicts how the patristic heritage testifies both to the disturbance that suffering can bring upon the conscious and reverent humility and to the need to accept suffering exclusively when it cannot be removed²⁴. As St. Maximus underlined throughout his writings, the unnatural, evil passions, to which the devils invite, "are based both on pleasure and on pain"²⁵. (This *base* generates all sins, distorting the moral conscience and tyrannizing the man who obeys the sins²⁶.) The fact that the Church does not regard suffering as constituting a good in itself, but rather shows it as a possible occasion of straying away

²² Showing the latter was one of the principal goals of my PhD Thesis, from which this article has been adapted.

²³ Orthodoxy includes different accents: "According to Elder Sophrony, pain [...] is a necessary means to know Christ, to follow Him, and so on, to identify with Him and be saved by Him", according to Larchet – Jean-Claude Larchet, "The place of pain in the spiritual life and in the teaching of the abbot Sophrony", in *Părintele Sofronie – teologul luminii necreate: actele simpozionului științific interortodox, Atena, 19-21 octombrie, 2007*, ed. Georgios Mantzaridis, trans. Elena Dinu (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2018), 410. And yet, even though "Saint Sophrony gave his spiritual life and teaching the form of a personal martyrdom more than that of a general teaching", this form is also the „the expression of one of his greatest virtues, felt by all those who knew him: boundless compassion for all those in suffering" (*ibid*, 414). The variety of accents – from the claim that pain is not necessary to the affirmation of the opposite – proves not an internal contradiction, but the catholicity of Orthodoxy, the manifold of possible contexts and its unity in diversity. In the case of the necessity of pain, this unity comes in the form of the following solution: *When pain occurs that cannot be removed, it is necessary for Salvation*.

²⁴ Cf. Larchet, *Dumnezeu nu vrea suferința omului*, 89.

²⁵ *Ibid*. 49; cf. 55 et seq.

²⁶ Larchet, *Dumnezeu nu vrea suferința omului*, 47 et seq. Larchet also recalls in this context the testimony brought by St. Peter Damascene.

from God, explains the existence of a remarkable series of personal and liturgical prayers in which the healing of the physically and spiritually sick is supplicated. Remarkable first of all, in this context, is the Mystery of the Holy Unction. Its essential message, from the dogmatical point of view, is that healing those who are suffering now mysteriously mirrors the eschatological healing of all those who will be saved²⁷. For this reason, the visible acts of mercy undertaken by the Church in the fallen world are comprised in the synergistic Act of extending the inner victory of Christians over suffering. In the charitable activity of the members of the Church the Kingdom is reflected, in a way that is mysterious in itself, but symbolic and suggestive to any receptive nature.

But neither is biological health a good in itself. According to the Holy Fathers, biological death counts among the things that are neither good nor evil in themselves²⁸. Since the Christian is, in the essential sense, *permanently free*, any well-being can serve both to bring him closer to God and to distance him from God. For this reason, the Saints of the Church invite us to supplicate God so that He may give us in our lives anything that He knows is of spiritual use to each of us²⁹. Only God knows what is best for *me*. May His Will be done. Asking *me* to find *my* cross in His Cross, God asks *me* for what He has always asked of us, after the fall – He wants our *metanoia*, our turning towards Him from all that which is not to His liking. Repentance – that is, participatory suffering – can only really begin when *my* soul opens up and finds the testimony of the Cross of Christ, i.e. of His Redemptive Passion. St. Gregory Palamas points out that Salvation was brought by the Cross of Christ, by His Passion, even before the Incarnation, in an anticipated way – within the sufferings of the Righteous Ones who have crucified the (temptations of the) world in their hearts³⁰. This is yet another proof of the miraculous way in which taking up one's cross actualizes the possibility of one's personal Salvation.

²⁷ This may be yet clearer expressed during the service of the Unction within the Romanian Orthodox Church the Lord, which offers God praise through a beloved troparion dedicated to the Holy Cross, founded e.g. on 1 Corinthians 1,18 and Matthew 22,44.

²⁸ Cf. Larchet, *Creștinul în fața bolii, suferinței și morții*, 61; cf. Larchet, *Teologia bolii*, 59.

²⁹ Cf. Larchet, *Teologia bolii*, 62.

³⁰ The Cross of Christ “even if it did not yet happen, was within our ancestors [...]. What was the first voice that God addressed [to Abraham]? «Get out of thy land, out of thy people, and out of thy father's house, and come into the land which I will show thee» (Fc 12,1). So this very word carries within itself the mystery of the Cross; for this is like what Paul says, boasting in the Cross: «the world is crucified for me» (Ga 6,14). [...] The cross also means if we speak like Paul, crucifying your body along with your passions and desires (Ga 5,24). [...] The Lord Himself [...] said before [suffering] the Cross «he who does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Mine» (Mt 10,38). See how even before the Crucifixion it was the Cross that offered Salvation?” – Saint Gregory Palamas, Omilia a 9-a despre cinstita și de-viață-făcătoarea Cruce [Homily 11 on the Precious and Life-Giving Cross], în *Patruzeci și una de omilii*, (Ierusalim, 1857), 53-62 apud Ioannis Romanidis, *The ancestral Sin* (București: Sophia, 2017), 127, note 2.

That Christ „became a curse for us” (Ga 3,13) means that, while having an impassible godly Person, as man Christ nevertheless took upon Himself – upon His human body and mind and soul – all of our sins and our suffering and our death, thus “making” Himself the suffering and death of each and all of the Adamic humans. In this way, He gave us all the recapitulative („objective”) Salvation, i.e. the possibility of the restoration of each one of us³¹, of our liberation from the evil that had been mingled in humanity through „the suffering feature” of our fallen nature (cf. *Ad Thalasius* 21). But this Salvation can commence its working, can become a personal („subjective”) one, only through our agreement and resolve. As the theology of Saint Maximus clarifies, the personal Salvation has a precondition – the *real* intention of the human person to receive, in Christ, the Power to consistently choose the good and always fulfill the Will of God³². Accordingly, the Power to resist evil, one „given before the coming of Christ wonderfully only to a few righteous people, like Job, for example, is now the dowry of every Christian”³³. Why? Because Christ abolished the devilish bondage by which man was made to desire (at almost any cost) the pleasure of the senses and to flee from pain (at almost any cost)³⁴. In times of suffering, to the “old man”, to the man whose steadfastness for the better could only be precarious, the coup of grace could have been given by the demonic advice defeated by the Righteous Job: „Do you always keep in your steadiness? Curse God and die!” (Job 2:9; cf. 1.11; 2.5). The devil portrays to the old, Adamic man biological death as salvation by aneantization. In this way, the devil tries to achieve the death of his soul. Larchet discovers in the quoted verse from the Book of Job four temptations encountered by anyone facing the limits of suffering – “to lose the virtue of patience; to fall into the passions that the fear of pain arouses; to blame and curse God; [and] to take his life”³⁵. By allowing the Grace (which indeed has been preserved even in the descendants of fallen Adam) to increase in his life, Job defeated these devilish words and came to embody, in an anticipating manner, the Victory of Christ. Job defeated his entire temptation synergetically (not without the Lord's intervention), namely *by recognizing in his own pain the pain of the whole Adamic man*, who suffered from the fall onwards and who thirsted for a Mediator between man and God (cf. Job 9; 19; 23-24³⁶). Similarly, from the testimonies of Saints such as John Chrysostom, John the Ladder, Seraphim of Sarov³⁷ one can discover that in the case of the Christian, the disease of the body reminds him or her of that of the whole fallen creature,

³¹ Cf. Larchet, *Dumnezeu nu vrea suferința omului*, 95-112.

³² Cf. *ibid.* 89.

³³ Cf. *ibid.* 121.

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.* 121.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 72.

³⁶ Cf. Larchet, *Dumnezeu nu vrea suferința omului*, 74-75.

³⁷ Larchet, *Teologia bolii*, 64-65.

of that of his fellow humans, of the illusory character of self-sufficiency and of the ontological void. This allows one to come to one's rational senses and to one's real Self. In all of this there is not a trace either of idolatry of nature, or of the love of "humans in general" (a disguised form of humanistic φιλαυτία), or of the sinful turnaround *from* God and *towards* the ego. Instead, the presented attitude describes our μετάνοια in our profound Self. Who is this Self? The One Who holds us into being and into His care – Jesus Christ. In the case of all and each of one's fellow humans, with one's own enemies topping the list, each Christian soul will turn to God and say, together with Saint Paisios the Hagiorite "My God, make him well and give his sickness to me!"³⁸.

But participatory suffering begins in humbler forms before reaching such an apex of the christian conscience. It does not necessarily involve exceptional opportunities. Even the essential repentance expected from all of us constitutes participatory suffering. Actually, this is its basic form. First and foremost, repentance means sorrow for the personal sins, it means taking the blame for the disaster of our sins and our lack of self-control, which affects the whole world and demonstrably blames us for the mistakes of many in our vicinity and in our posterity. In the Holy Tradition the expression of repentance is *the willing suffering* through hunger, thirst and sleeplessness during Lent, in order to master one's own body, to facilitate prayer, obedience, patience and ego-denial. After all, the fact that requires understanding from all of us, *the fact for which we must all repent and which we must renounce, is precisely the spiritual state of human weakness, the state into which the devil desperately tries to bring back, at all costs, primarily the baptized.* By admitting our unworthiness, our self-inflicted weakness, we tacitly accept the bodily weakness which Christ took upon Himself and we open ourself to receiving the spiritual power offered to us by Him, for He has turned corruption into incorruption.

The teachings of St. Ephrem the Syrian also fit this context, but let us remain with Saint Paisios the Hagiorite and with the invitation he describes as being issued for us: We should not to wait for the harshness of life, but we should strive to do without the confort we are used to and to gradually renounce worldly things, especially when fasting. *Today "only the need [i.e. striving, asceticism] has value"*³⁹ he proclaims. And he points out to the universal christian apex: *The purpose of man is "to also ascend spiritually, not only to abstain from sin"*⁴⁰. Of course, the struggle (which must

³⁸ Then, confesses St. Paisios further, „God, seeing our inability to bear the disease, cures that [man] and neither gives him, nor us the disease” – *The Little Philokalia [Μικρή Φιλοκαλία]*, trans. Victor Manolache (Galați: Cartea ortodoxă, 2009), 32, *apud* Petcu, *Suferința și creșterea spirituală [Suffering and Spiritual Development]*, 279. On disease and solidarity cf. 1 Co 12,26 and 2 Co 11,29.

³⁹ Saint Paisios the Hagiorite, *Cuvinte duhovnicești [Πολύτιμες πνευματικές συμβουλές]*, vol. 1, trans. Ștefan Nuțescu (Evanghelismos, 2003), 46.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

be done and with measure, otherwise risking effects opposite to those desired⁴¹) cannot be compared “to the torments endured by the person fallen into diseases and infirmities”⁴². But the struggle, the spiritual (not psychological) drama, *can* very well be compared to them, and can even overcome them in terms of harshness. The blood sweat of the Savior in Gethsemane (Lk 22,44) is sufficient proof of both the total interpenetration between the biological and the spiritual domain, as also of the fact that any pain through which the human person may be allowed to pass is a sharing of the sufferings of the crucified Savior. Because in Christ the relationship between asceticism and suffering is close to identity, during the Bridegroom Service for Holy and Great Monday, the Church calls us to “walk with Him and be crucified with Him and die for Him to the pleasures of this life, so that we may also live with Him”⁴³. Thus, the Orthodox theology of suffering constantly moves between the topics of theodicy and of asceticism.

The inner need of repentance is demanded first of all by the Christian moral law itself, for “every man, as the bearer of human nature, becomes partly responsible, insofar as he sins, from the evils that happen not only to him, but also to others”⁴⁴. But this struggle to do without, also called the „sorrow for repentance” (2 Co 7,9) neither constitutes depression, nor the sin of sadness (ἡ λύπη). On the contrary it is even accompanied by a spiritual joy, by *gracious Love*. Necessity is realized as ego-denial – stomping the ego, the seat of pride – by way of fighting “the good fight”, by repenting⁴⁵, by practicing piety⁴⁶ and by an increase of “the size of soul”⁴⁷, i.e. of the force to be generous and to serve God and fellow men. These are inner processes that lead to humility, to the defeat of the devil through becoming “akin with God”⁴⁸. They also correspond to observable behaviors:

Is something happening to us? Have we been wronged? Have they reproached us? Let us inquire whether we have done wrong [to the Lord, in anything]. If we have not done wrong, we have [a heavenly] reward. There is no need to continue. [...They who] continue to argue with the shrewd one, [i.e. with

⁴¹ Cf. Larchet, *Dumnezeu nu vrea suferința omului*, 144.

⁴² *Ibid.* Larchet provides multiple patristic references related to the theme of penance, indicating Holy Fathers such as Abba Dorothy, St. Nichita Stithatul, St. Maximus, St. John Chrysostom *et. al.* (*ibid.*, 140-145).

⁴³ *Triodion*, “The Praises” in the Bridegroom Service for the *Holy and Great Monday*.

⁴⁴ Larchet, *Teologia bolii*, 39.

⁴⁵ Saint Paisios the Haghiorite, *Cuvinte duhovnicești* [Πολύτιμες πνευματικές συμβουλές], vol. 3, trans. Ștefan Nuțescu (București: Evanghelismos, 2003), 123 *et seq.*

⁴⁶ Saint Paisios the Haghiorite, *Cuvinte duhovnicești* [Πολύτιμες πνευματικές συμβουλές], vol. 2, trans. Ștefan Nuțescu (București: Evanghelismos, 2003), 141 *et seq.*

⁴⁷ Saint Paisios the Haghiorite, *Cuvinte duhovnicești*, vol. 2, 97 *et seq.*; cf. 17-74.

⁴⁸ Saint Paisios the Haghiorite, *Cuvinte duhovnicești*, vol. 1, 59.

the devil], are determined to analyze everything with his devilish legislation and are turned savage⁴⁹.

In the promoted way of acting humility transpires, as does the right answer to the call not to resist evil (Mt 5,39), and also the kinship with the spiritual sorrow of the Saints. Such is the complex and yet simple spiritual state which the baptized should arrive to, through their repentance for eventual later sins. And sometimes when they repent, an almost miraculous possibility opens up, described by the essence of Dostoyevskian novels – the realization that each one of us is guilty for the lamentable state of everyone else and for everything, simply, and *I am* guilty, more than anyone else. This awareness accepted by us from God, through Grace, allows us to serve one another and cherish the rest of creation, as we were supposed to.

But as St. Maximus has pointed out, all of this depends on our decision, committal and aspiration – i.e. on our freedom. Consciously living *in* Christ the painful creaturely condition, or at least striving to, takes the human person into an intimate dialog with Jesus Christ and widens one's heart. Instead, the refusal and conscious denial of the described awareness resembles man to the blaspheming robber: The Holy Tradition shows that *the Cross of Christ is the "balance of righteousness" (Job 31,6)*, as is also seen in the Service of the Ninth Hour during times of Lent: "In the midst of two thieves, Thy Cross was revealed as the balance-beam of righteousness; for while the one was led down to Hell by the burden of his blaspheming, the other was lightened of his sins, unto the knowledge of things divine". And this very same message is conveyed by the traditional Russian orthodox Crosses. Through her dogmatic conscience, the Church has observed and is constantly observing the prefiguration of the moment of the Last Judgment in the moment of the Savior's self-sacrifice (*cf.* Jn 12,31), a moment whose participatory reverberations are macroanthropic (*cf.* Mt 19,28; 1 Cor 12,27: "the saints will judge the world"). It is only in this absolute tension of the Holy Cross, of Salvation by Sacrifice and of the crushing of evil, that one can begin to understand the defining apophatic characteristic of Christianity – the belief that the Last Judgment is an expression God's Love.

To conclude with the help of the Fathers and foremost with the help of a much too undiscovered giant among them, *be it through adversities, be it through asceticism, this is the way in which God makes us fit for the Body of Christ*, the way He "forms [plasmata] us and prepares us for Life, and is present with His formation, and perfects it after His image and likeness" (AH 5.16.¹⁵⁰). Usually,

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁰ The abbreviation refers to the work of St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses*. The full title of this work is Ἐλεγχου καὶ ἀνατροπῆς τῆς ψευδώνυμου ψευδύμου γνώσεως, i.e. *Refutation and overthrow of the false so-called "knowledge"*, as its author states in the preface to the 4th book, but the tradition of posterity has been to refer to this writing by *Adversus Haereses*. The three numbers separated by dots added after the abbreviation will indicate in turn the volume (book), the chapter and the subdivision of the chapter. In Romanian, the

the formation described “formation” means suffering in a participatory and confessing way (AH 5.28.4-5.29.1; 3.12.13), for – as a Syrian Father once observed – “no one has ever ascended to heaven in peace”⁵¹. The Christian life is God's way of perfecting His power in human weakness. This weakness is our “flesh” (AH 5.3.3) that we must acknowledge and stand for, in order to receive our subjective Salvation (cf. AH 5.2-3). In AH 5.2.3 St. Irenaeus makes it clear that, even though it is contained by this worldly existence, with its inevitable downfalls, our flesh receives immortality as God's eternal gift. This (transfiguration, in the final afterlife) happens by living the Eucharist in the Church, and in exchange for accepting a cultivation that *can* be painful⁵² – but *always* “rightfully” so, as St. John Chrysostom adds⁵³. This “cultivation” makes us (parts of the) limbs of Christ (Ef 5,30). Upon the gathering of the cross-bearers shines the Cross of Christ. Through them, His Mystical Body is constituted: This is shown by the peace and comfort brought by the “glory-praise” offered when sincerely declaring “God's judgment is just in my regard”, of seeing and declaring that *I am worthy of it, and more so that* translation of this writing remains incomplete, being provided only in the first three of its five books: St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Împotriva ereziilor: combatere și răsturnare a gnozei cu nume mincinos*, vol. 1-3, trans. Petru Molodeț (București: IBMBOR, 2016-2019). In the following, the orientation of the analysis will be provided by the most widely used English translation, next to the critical edition of 1965 – Irenaeus of Lyon, “Adversus haereses”, in: *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff and Cleveland Coxe, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); Irenaeus of Lyon, *Libros quinque adversus haereses, textu graeco in locis nonnullis locupletato, versione latina cum codicibus Claromontano ac Arundeliano denuo collata, praemissa de placitis gnosticorum prolusione, fragmenta necnon graece, syriace, armeniace*, vol. 1 și 2, ed. William Wigan HARVEY (Cantabrigiae: Typis academicis Gregg Press, 1965).

⁵¹ “The way of God is the daily cross, for no one has gone up to heaven with pampering [with ease]. The way of leisure we know where it ends, and he who immerses himself in God, God never wants him to be careless, but he must treat the Truth with care. But from this also it is known that he is under God's Providence: From the fact that God always sends him sufferings.” – St. Isaac the Syrian, “Cuvinte despre sfintele nevoițe” [Ascetical Homilies] 4, in *Filocalia* (București: IBMOR, 1981).

⁵² Cf. AH 5.3.1: From Adam onward we die like wheat grains do, so that we may not become haughty, ungrateful and rebellious, but that, having been instructed in the knowledge of the godly and the shortcomings of the (corruptible) human nature, we may be resurrected by the Word to the Glory of God the Father. God gives us the human immortality which passes through death and the human incorruption which passes through corruption – ever cultivating and increasing the love of God and His Power within us.

⁵³ Cf. Saint John Chrysostom, *Comentariu la Iov [Commentary to Job]*, trans. Dragoș Gabriel Mîrșanu (Iași: Doxologia 2012) section 110.4, about Ps 110,3 (“His righteousness endures forever”): It seems to me that here the prophet is speaking about those who are confused because of the misfortunes that befall some beyond all hope, and he exhorts them saying: Do not be troubled when you see men mocked, reviled, afflicted by evil through no fault of their own. For there remains for them an unbribable judgment seat, and there remains for them a righteous judgment which gives to every man what he deserves. If you seek this judgment already in this world, see to it lest God will first bring it on you. If He would bring immediate punishment for every sin, and just judgment for every transgression, the human race would have been lost long ago”.

I need it (cf. 1 Cor 11,32) – as St. Ignatius Brianchaninov adds⁵⁴. The awareness gained through Grace when truly stating this, along all adversities, reveals to me “the [human and cosmic] fall exactly and in detail” and gives me “the knowledge [of the fall,] without which [man] cannot recognize and receive the Redeemer as he ought to”⁵⁵. This is the aid given to *me* in order to “shoulder my cross”, to understand that when compared to God, *my* righteousness (*my* “worthiness”) is “the most grievous unrighteousness”. It is given to *me* in order that *I* choose to confess Christ with *my* mind, with *my* heart, with *my* work, “with my very life”⁵⁶. If *I* do this, *my* burdensome cross is secretly transformed into the relieving Cross of Christ⁵⁷. As for those who are on the way to becoming deified, that is, the meek, who know that they are powerless without the help of the Grace⁵⁸ (which they have become able to receive⁵⁹), formation in the Lord’s “likeness” not only *can be*, but *is* painful. Once more, St. Irenaeus states the reason in the most concise way: As prophesied, all those on whom the Spirit hovers shall be persecuted, stoned, killed – all those who obey the Father’s Word and who according to their powers (AH 4.33.10) serve Him in humble self-knowledge⁶⁰ and in moral discipline (AH 3.20.2).

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⁵⁴ Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, “Judecățile lui Dumnezeu” [The Judgments of God], in *Experiențe ascetice* [Ascetical Experiences], trans. Adrian Tănăsescu-Vlas and Xenia Tănăsescu (București: Sophia, 2008), 544. Paradoxically, God’s peace comes through tribulation (In 16:33).

⁵⁵ Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, “Cuvânt despre felurile stări ale firii omenești în privința binelui și a răului” [A word on the various states of human nature in regard to good and evil], in *Experiențe ascetice* [Ascetical Experiences], trans. Adrian Tănăsescu-Vlas and Xenia Tănăsescu (București: Sophia, 2008), 758

⁵⁶ Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov, “Crucea proprie și crucea lui Hristos” [One’s own cross and the Cross of Christ], in *Experiențe ascetice* [Ascetical Experiences], trans. Adrian Tănăsescu-Vlas and Xenia Tănăsescu (București: Sophia, 2008), 293.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁵⁸ Saint Sophrony Sakharov, *Nevoiața cunoașterii lui Dumnezeu* [Подвиг богопознания. Письма с Афона, к Д. Бальфуру], trans. Rafail Noica (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2006), 45.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 240. In another place, St. Sophrony puts the reception of grace in an indissoluble connection with the fear of God (in the sense of the gospel): Saint Sophrony Sakharov, *From Life and Spirit* [De vie et d’esprit], trans. Rafail Noica (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2011), 59.

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Women, Philosophy, and Violence

St. Catherine and Hypatia from Alexandria or Being Women Philosophers in Alexandrian Late Antiquity

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Abstract: What does it mean to be a female philosopher in late antiquity? This is the question that concerns us in this study and which I try to solve by referring to two personalities from Alexandria (IV-V century): St. Catherine and Hypatia. Although they are very well known, both in the Christian environment and in the world of profane sciences and the arts, the two philosophers from Alexandria share a common destiny: their works have not been preserved, although their fame has reached today; they were rather seen as exceptions of the female gender, with implicit misogyny, and had a violent end. Being a female philosopher, even in the emancipated Alexandria of late antiquity, was a risky undertaking.

Keywords: women philosopher, St. Catherine, Hypatia from Alexandria, Christianity, Hellenism, Platonism, martyrdom, violence.

Hypatia from Alexandria (335-415). Being a Pagan Female Philosopher in Alexandria in Late Antiquity

THE PRESENT STUDY AIMS TO lean on two exemplary female figures from the Late Antiquity period, two educated women from Alexandria, one Christian and one pagan: the Holy Great Martyr Catherine and the pagan philosopher Hypatia.

The city of Alexandria in late antiquity was the place where, in addition to men, a few women also had the opportunity to enjoy learning. Some of them even taught philosophy, such as the famous Hypatia (335-415)¹, who,

¹ See Vasile Adrian Carabă, "Hypatia of Alexandria (c. 370–415) or the Twilight of a Pagan Tradition: The Museion" [in Romanian], *Studii Teologice*, no. 4 (2008): 101–148; see

wearing the simple cloak of a philosopher², initiated the students gathered around her, pagans or Christians.

Hypatia of Alexandria was the daughter of a mathematician named Theon, who was the head of Alexandria's prestigious university, the *Mouseion*. From the *Ecclesiastical History* of Socrates the Scholastic we learn that Hypatia „reached such a high level of erudition that she surpassed all the philosophers of her time”³.

As far as is known, no philosophical or scientific writing signed by Hypatia has survived, and whether Saint Catherine wrote or not is completely unknown to us. If there are testimonies about Saint Catherine only from the 8th-9th centuries, some of the sources that have been preserved for us about Hypatia are even contemporary with her, such as the letters of her former student, Synesius of Cyrene (ca. 370-after 412). In an extensive study on Hypatia, the Romanian theologian Vasile-Adrian Carabă refers to three other important sources from which we learn details about Hypatia: the *Ecclesiastical History* by Socrates the Scholastic (ca. 380-439), contemporary with her, the chronicle of the Coptic bishop John of Nikiou, who lived in the 7th century and, the last important source, the *Suida* (*Suda*) Lexicon from the 10th century.

From the writings of Socrates the Scholastic we find out that „all those who wanted to study philosophy came from all over the world”⁴ to study with the Alexandrian woman philosopher. But more about the circle of brilliant young people in Hypatia's entourage and how Hypatia's courses were conducted, as well as about the nature of her teachings, emerges from the correspondence of Synesius of Cyrene that he had both with his former teacher, whom he called „my august teacher” and also „mother and sister and teacher, and thereby, benefactor”⁵, as well as with other colleagues. Unfortunately, Hypatia's letters sent to her former Christian student, who became later bishop of Cyrene, have not been preserved.

As Henri-Irénée Marrou shows, the education Synesius received from Hypatia was based on two main disciplines: Aristotelian logic, as it had been articulated by Porphyrios in his famous *Isagoge* on the Aristotelian *Categories*, and mathematics, in which Hypatia continued the tradition inaugurated by her father, Theon, the commentator on Aratos, Euclid, and Ptolemy⁶.

also Maria Dzileska, *Hypatia of Alexandria. Historical figure and modern legend* [in Romanian], translated by Ana-Lorina Iacob, edition by Dragoș Mîrșanu (Iași: Doxologia, 2021).

² Damascius, *Vita Isidori* 102 (*Suda* IV 644, 1-645, 19, s.v. Hypathi), *apud* Maria Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria*, 147.

³ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* [in Romanian], trans. Metropolitan Iosif Gheorghian, revised and edited by Fr. Lecturer Dr. Petru Pantiș. Sibiu: Ecclesiast, 2016, §7: 14-15, 254.

⁴ Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, §7:14-15, 254.

⁵ Synesius of Cyrene, Ep. XVI (to Hypatia), *apud* Maria Dzileska, *Hypatia*, 151.

⁶ Henri-Irénée Marrou, “Synesius of Cyrene and Alexandrian Neoplatonism,” in *Patris-*

But above all, Synesius learned from Hypatia to love the contemplative life, pursuing

the ideal of the philosophical life, a life in which he was his own master, free to devote himself to study – study of course directed to the highest knowledge, contemplation, which in the end must lead to God – his study, his own search for truth and personal perfection⁷.

Another testimony about Hypatia comes from the pagan philosopher Damascius⁸, who shows that Hypatia also had great influence in the political world of Alexandria at that time, because the archon officials sought her out and asked for her advice, as was also the case with the Athenian philosophers of the classical period of philosophy. Damascius also asserted that Hypatia, being familiar with Aristotle's philosophy, reached the first, ethical or practical level of the moral virtues, embodying both the two virtues *dikayosyne* (temperance) and *sophrosyne* (temperance)⁹.

St. Catherine from Alexandria (the end of the century III – the beginning of the century IV). Being a Christian Female Philosopher in Alexandria in Late Antiquity

Long before the period of late antiquity, since the time of Pythagoras, there were women initiated into philosophy¹⁰, Plato himself being heard by two women, Axiothea and Lastheneia, whom Diogenes Laertius mentions in his work *On the Lives and Doctrines of the Philosophers*¹¹.

And the circle of the neoplatonic pagan philosopher Plotinera frequented by several women such as Gemina and her daughter, Marcella, wife of Porphyry, and his daughter-in-law, Amphiclea, daughter of Plutarch;

tics and Humanism: A Collection of Studies, trans. Cristina and Costin Popescu (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1996), 381.

⁷ Henri-Irénée Marrou, “Synesius din Cirene...”, 383.

⁸ Damascius, *Vita Isidori* 102 (*Suda* IV 644, 1-645, 19, s.v. Hypathi), *apud* Maria Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandrien*, 147-148.

⁹ Damascius: *Vita Isidori* 102 (*Suda* IV 644, 1-645, 19, s.v. Hypathi), *apud* Maria Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandrien*, 147-148.

¹⁰ See Ana Ocoleanu, “Measure as Number, Harmony, and Moderation: Pythagorean Feminine Philosophy – Specificity, Representation, and Periodization” [in Romanian], *Mitropolia Olteniei* 76, no. 1–4 (2024): 151–161.

¹¹ Diogenes Laertius, *On the Lives and Doctrines of Philosophers* [in Romanian], trans. C.I. Balmuş, comments by Aram M. Frenkian, edition by Ion Acsan and Adelina Piatkowski (Bucharest: Minerva, 1997). See also Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* [in Romanian], trans. George Bondor and Claudiu Tipuriță, foreword by Cristian Bădiliță (Iași: Polirom Publishing House, 1999), 88.

philosophers were also Areta, Asclepigenia or another well-known philosopher, named Sosipatra¹².

Not only pagan women had access to education in Antiquity, but also Christian women. There are thus testimonies regarding the wisdom of the ascetic Theodora, the martyr Eugenia, Saint Mary of Egypt or Saint Macrina the Younger, sister of St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nyssa. As Father Professor I. G. Coman said in his work *The Christian Miracle*, the Christian principle of the equality of all people generated the possibility for many women to broaden their spiritual and cultural horizons: "A Macrina, an Emilia, an Anthuza, a Monica, a Gorgonia, the correspondents of a Blessed Hieronymus were not only pious women and with the care of their sons or of the places of worship, but also with a great spiritual formation"¹³.

One of the learned saints from the period of late antiquity is the Holy Great Martyr Catherine, venerated both in the East and in the West. Saint Catherine probably lived at the end of the 3rd century and the beginning of the 4th century, but we do not find the first testimonies about her life before the 7th century.

The first to spread the story of the saint's life and martyrdom are the monks from Mount Sinai, later it was also received in the West, probably through the Eastern monks who took refuge here in the context of iconoclasm. For their part, the crusader knights would later show devotion to the Saint, calling her „Invittissima Heroina“ as thanks for the help and protection they enjoyed from her. In her doctoral thesis in which she researches the spread of the cult of Saint Catherine in early medieval Europe, Christine Walsch¹⁴ mentions that the earliest reference to Saint Catherine she found in a Syriac litany written after 620 and published alongside a Latin translation by A. Baumstark in 1906. Here the name of Saint Catherine appears alongside other names of saints such as Tecla, Barbara, Juliana, Eupraxia, Melania, Maria, Samunith. In the Byzantine world, around the year 1000, Saint Simeon Metaphrastus compiled a collection of saints' lives that also included that of Saint Catherine.

In the Greek *Menologie* of Emperor Basil II (976-1025), written in Constantinople around the year 1000, whose manuscript is in the Vatican, the oldest representation of the Saint can be found. In Asia Minor, the cult of Saint Catherine spread through Saint Paul the New of Latros (955-956),

¹² In detail about women philosophers from antiquity, see: Gilles Ménage, *Historia mulierum philosopharum*, 1st ed. (Lyon, 1690); 2nd ed. (Amsterdam, 1692); 3rd ed. (London/Leipzig, 1833). See also: Mary Anne Waith (ed.), *A History of Women Philosophers, Vol. I: Ancient Women Philosophers, 600 B.C.–500 A.D.* (Dordrecht-Boston-Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987); Maria Nühlen, *Philosophinnen der griechischen Antike: Eine Spurensuche (Frauen in Philosophie und Wissenschaft: Women Philosophers and Scientists)* (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2021).

¹³ Ioan G. Coman, *The Classical Miracle* [in Romanian] (Sibiu: Ecclesiast, 2011), 276.

¹⁴ Christine Walsch, *The Cult of St. Katharine of Alexandria in Early Medieval Europe* (Altershot, 2007).

who spent a long time on Mount Latros, located between the cities of Ephesus and Miletus in present-day Turkey, where a monastery was probably located. From a work on his life, compiled after his death, we learn that the memorials of the other saints were also reasons for joy for St. Pavel, but the memory of the Holy Martyr Catherine filled the pious man with joy.

The great popularity enjoyed by St. Catherine in the West throughout the medieval period is largely due to the collection of lives of saints entitled *Legenda aurea*, compiled by the Dominican monk Jacques de Voragine starting in 1263. In chapter 160 of this work it is found the text of the life of the Saint Catherine. Her fame would spread so much in art and popular culture that even if the authenticity of the saint's existence was questioned in the 15th century, and she was subsequently excluded from the Roman synaxar, the honor of her name did not suffer. There were still churches and parishes under the saint's patronage, dramatizations of her martyrdom, numerous sculptures, paintings and icons depicting the saint, individually or with other saints. Therefore, we will find Saint Catherine represented in painting, from Giotto to Simone Martini and Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the 14th century and then in the painting of the 16th and 17th centuries, to Van Dyck, Caravaggio, or Artemisia Gentileschi.

Starting with the end of the 19th century, several monographic writings appeared or by some authors who tried to shed light on the life and martyrdom of Saint Catherine. We remember first of all J. Viteau, who in 1897 in the work „Passions de Saints Ecaterine et Pierre d'Alexandrie, Barbara et Anysia”, collected three of the oldest manuscripts of the Martyrdom of Saint Catherine, grouping them according to their contents: some did not include the actual speech of Saint Catherine, while others contained her speeches and her dispute with the pagan philosophers. In PG 116 there is another manuscript, the one written by St Simeon Metaphrastus, which was edited in 1864.

In the German space, professor Hermann Knust published in Halle in 1890 a work entitled „Geschichte der Legende der Heiligen Katharina von Alexandrien und der heiligen Maria Aegyptiaca” in which he also addresses the complex yet unsolved problem of the true name of the saint, which presents numerous changes. Although in the *Historia ecclesiastica* of Eusebius of Caesarea the name of the saint does not appear when he talks about the exile of a young woman taught by the emperor Maxentius, Rufus is of the opinion that her name would have been Dorothea¹⁵. Hermann Knust also believes that a very important version of the martyrdom of Saint Catherine would be that of „Athanasius, the slave and scribe of the saint”, who was apparently an eyewitness of the martyrdom. Some researchers believe that

¹⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History* [in Romanian]. In *Writings*, Part I [PSB 13], translation, study, notes, and commentary by Fr. Prof. T. Bodgeae, Bucharest: IBMBOR, 1987, VIII;14, 334.

this could be Saint Athanasius the Great himself, who wrote a treatise entitled „On Virginité”.

Another German professor, Hermann Varnhagen, publishes in Erlangen in 1881 a work with the title „Zur Geschichte der Legende der Katarina von Alexandrien”. He claims at the beginning of his book that since ancient times, two poems in Latin were circulating in the German space that recounted the life of the saint.

In the English space, the author A. B. Jameson wrote a work entitled „Sacred and Legendary Art” (1848) in which she claims that the tradition of Saint Catherine merged with that of Hypatia of Alexandria, bringing as arguments the similarity between their lives, Alexandrian provenance, erudition, chastity, as well as their violent deaths. Also in the English space, Einkenel wrote in 1884 a work entitled „The life of Saint Catherine”, which also identifies Saint Catherine with the philosopher Hypatia, arguing that in the transition from paganism to Christianity the two traditions could be easily identified.

The most recent studies that have Saint Catherine as their theme are two dissertations, one in German by Peter Schill entitled „Ikonographie und Kult der heiligen Katharina von Alexandrien im Mittelalter. Studien zu den szenischen Darstellungen aus der Katharinenlegende” held in 2005 at the University of Munich and another, in English by researcher Christine Walsch entitled „The Cult of Sainte Catherine of Alexandria in Early Medieval Europe” (2007).

It has generally been noted that the name by which Saint Catherine is generally known is an Arabic name meaning “the wise”¹⁶. It seems that before the Saint was called Dorothea or Damiana.

It was also noticed that we have information about the saint and her life starting from the 7th century¹⁷. There are many similarities between the life and profile of Saint Catherine and that of the late 4th century Alexandrian philosopher Hypatia. All this has prompted some researchers to be skeptical about the reality of Saint Catherine and to argue more or less that it was a kind of acculturation through which the story of Hypatia was assimilated. All this led the Roman Catholic hagiography at the Second Vatican Council to exclude the saint from the synaxar. However, subsequent research did not confirm such a conclusion, and in 2002 the saint’s name was reintroduced into these Western synaxars.

Without contesting the fact that the name by which the saint is known is an Arabic one and the fact that she becomes well known starting from the same century, newer exegesis has tended to identify the saint with some

¹⁶ Note 1, in *The Martyrdom of Saint Catherine the Great* [in Romanian], trans. Laura Enache (Iasi: Doxologia, 2018), 7.

¹⁷ Tanguy Donnet, ed., *Katharina von Alexandrien: Verselegende VIII. Nach dem Codex Donaueschingen 116 der Badischen Landesbibliothek (Altdeutsche Textbibliothek 125)* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2022), IX.

personalities, especially with the martyr Dorothea, about whom reports Eusebius of Caesarea in *Church History*, although he does not name her. It is much more plausible that the name Ecaterina or Aikaterini meaning “wise” is a nickname, given by the Arab population that arrived later in Egypt, and that this nickname became better known than the name itself, ending up replacing it. Even if the similarity between the Holy Great Martyr Catherine and Hypatia are major, they are not of such a nature as to attest without a doubt the identity of the two historical persons. Rather, it is about two different people, one pagan and one Christian, both of great scientific and philosophical training, a fact that attests to the cultural importance of the city of Alexandria in the era and the emancipation of women in this cultural space.

St. Catherine and Hypatia from Alexandria. The Condition of the Woman Philosopher in Late Antiquity Alexandria

Both Saint Catherine and Hypatia are representatives of the cultural life of Alexandria. Both are inhabitants of the same city with a cultural dynamic unprecedented and unmatched in the ancient world that allows such female personalities not only to attend high schools and be educated at the highest level, but to become exponential personalities of Alexandrian culture. It is paradigmatic that 1600-1700 years after the period in which they lived, Saint Catherine and Hypatia are currently the best-known names, or at least among the best-known names of Alexandrian culture.

Secondly, both St. Catherine and Hypatia were great personalities of Alexandria, who noted the society in which they lived and in the collective imaginary until today, although their works have not been preserved. What is known about one and the other, much more about their doctrines is known through intermediaries. Their legendary personalities have overshadowed the work, which has not even been preserved. However, accounts have been preserved about the content of these women’s thoughts, which allow us to approximate their inner universe. However, both Saint Catherine and Hypatia are mute to us today, unable to speak to us directly, their direct address has been suspended. What mattered in their reception was rather their personality involving their wisdom as well as their physical beauty. Of course, we cannot attribute this fact exclusively to their femininity and the condition of women in antiquity, but it is still symptomatic that the more these women philosophers are admired, the more they are silenced.

Third, both Saint Catherine and Hypatia met a violent end. The Christian Dorothea/Catherine is martyred by the violent pagans; the pagan Hypatia is killed by Christians unworthy of their name. Being a female philosopher even in the emancipated Alexandria of late antiquity is a very risky fact. If

female beauty is accepted and tolerated without reserve, a woman's intelligence is even in this above-average context an unforgivable thing. It is paradigmatic that if these accounts of the martyrdom of women philosophers have been preserved, the same does not happen to the learned men of the time in this brilliant city.

Last but not least, both Saint Catherine and Hypatia of Alexandria, despite the fact that their right to address the readers was amputated, over time became symbols of faith and science, their mental and artistic representations being hyperbolized either in academic circles, either in ecclesiastical environments to this day.

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Weakening Otherworldliness

Vattimo, Hermeneutics, and the Question of *Contemptus Mundi*

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Abstract: The lineage of philosophical hermeneutics is indelibly marked by the discourse of asceticism and otherworldliness. This influence springs most immediately from Nietzsche but finds itself provocatively manifest in the recent and ongoing return of philosophical hermeneutics to religious patterns of thought. This work will consider the hermeneutic encounter with and appropriation of asceticism in the work of Gianni Vattimo. In one sense, this engagement would appear an unlikely one, as Vattimo (following Nietzsche) is openly suspicious of the voluntary assumption of and salvific role for suffering in the quest for human flourishing. However, upon closer inspection, we see that a reconfigured asceticism, focused on the turning of power against itself and the reconfiguration of our relationship with the world, is alive and well in Vattimo's "weak thought." More radically, Vattimo's thought represents a purification—even a mortification—of asceticism by cleansing it of its untenable and burdensome metaphysical baggage and allowing for a renewed and authentic approach to religiosity.

Keywords: Gianni Vattimo, *contemptus mundi*, otherworldliness, weak thought, asceticism.

SINCE NIETZSCHE, THOSE ENGAGED IN critical reflections on otherworldliness in general and asceticism in particular have been mindful of certain internal tensions particular to those orientations. *Contemptus mundi*, in its various forms, represents a rejection of the world of lived experience in favor of some otherworldly object of focus and yet, paradoxical though it might seem, this disposition in turn produces a renewed confrontation with the rejected world of lived experience both through the establishment of discursive, ascetic practices and the gradual dissolution of the residue of this-worldliness contained within the metaphysical formulations by which

strictly orthodox, supernaturalist systems of meaning are created and sustained. The tension represented by the “return to the world” embodied in *contemptus mundi* in turn calls into question the very possibility of religious thought, forcing us to consider whether religion itself has reached a point of completion understood as self-destruction; a concern famously elaborated upon by Gauchet who, in a reversal of centuries of Christian exceptionalist narratives, argues that Christianity is the “religion of the departure from religion,” the religion embodying most fully the self-destructive internal logic of (Western) religiosity writ large.¹ The internal tensions at issue above are, in turn, made still more complex and explicit by the increasing intersection between ascetic thought and various sorts of antiessentialist philosophical, critical, and theological speculation; an intersection that raises the possibility that critical activity could, in fact, constitute an expression of, and not merely a means of interrogating, *contemptus mundi*.

Confronted with these varied concerns, it seems like the last place in which we might find insight would be Vattimo’s autobiographical/philosophical work *Belief*. What possible benefit could this text, which (directly) mentions otherworldliness only briefly and asceticism not at all, written by this author, who neither seems to engage in otherworldly practices nor to consider them at any length in his theoretical writings, have to our inquiry? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to consider generally Vattimo’s status as both a theorist of otherworldliness and as a subject constituted by a certain tradition of otherworldliness who, in fact, continues that tradition through engaging in theorizing as a kind of ascetic praxis.

If we are looking for a figure in whose person and work we might find certain insights into the tensions within and continued importance of the otherworldliness, we might be puzzled that our inquiry leads us to Gianni Vattimo. Firstly, we in the Anglophone world are accustomed to dealing with Vattimo (if, indeed, we do so at all) primarily as a theorist and secondarily as a politician and activist. Insofar as we regard Vattimo as a theorist, we tend to categorize him as separate from the models of asceticism and counter-asceticism with which inquiries into *contemptus mundi* tend to concern themselves. He might well comment upon the intertextual points of intersection (dis)embodied in figures like St. Anthony the Great, St. Kevin of Glendalough, or St. Mary of Egypt, but surely his doing so intellectualizes these figures rather than following their lived example by way of the pursuit of *askesis*. Similarly, Vattimo the politician and activist seems, if anything, to offer even bleaker prospects of providing us with a model by which to consider otherworldly orientations. If such considerations as these seem to call into question Vattimo’s utility as a model of ascetic practice, however, it is merely because they disregard the interrelatedness of Vattimo’s constitution as a subject (indeed, as an intertextual subject) with his theoretical

¹ Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, trans. Oscar Burge, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 200.

enterprises and, in turn, the interrelatedness of those enterprises with his political, ethical, and social activities. Indeed, a great part of what makes Vattimo interesting is precisely the degree to which he blends the theoretical, practical, and personal in writing, statements, and activities that, as we shall see, have profound implications for an inquiry into otherworldliness.

Having dispensed with our initial consideration of the relationship between the figure of Vattimo and his theoretical and political activities, we are now confronted with the question of how, if at all, Vattimo's philosophy engages with the orientation of otherworldliness. The intersection of Vattimo's thought with the orientation of *contemptus mundi* and the broader challenges to religious thought revealed by the tensions within that orientation is a complex one. On the surface, Vattimo does not seem terribly concerned with *contemptus mundi* as an orientation. Certainly, his writings incorporate only brief mentions of otherworldliness and ascetic practice and even these are often in the contexts of his own exegetical efforts. Minimal though these references might be, however, it is important that we consider what utility, if any, they might have in our consideration of Vattimo's encounter with otherworldliness.

Let us begin with Vattimo's brief considerations of asceticism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we find several references to this topic in Vattimo's writings on Nietzsche. While we might be tempted to dismiss these early references as merely exegetical, here already we find Vattimo's association of the asceticism criticized by Nietzsche with a metaphysical desire for stability, a focus on otherworldliness that denies not only Nietzsche's conception of the pre-Judaic order governing the relationship between strength and weakness, but also the impermanence and interrelated complexity of day to day existence.² This faith in an essentially metaphysical world-to-come keeps us from confronting (through hermeneutics) the historically-conditioned, contingent, world in which we find ourselves.³ In a similarly Nietzschean move, Vattimo observes that this metaphysical approach to asceticism is not limited to religious modes of expression but is, in fact, alive and well in approaches, both religious and secular, to psychotherapy and rehabilitation:

The standpoint of the partisans of psychoanalysis, however disguised, is always conditioned by a metaphysical ascetic prejudice: only the painful (and long and costly) process that matures in a relationship with an analyst really sets you free, goes to the root causes, promises a lasting "cure." When applied to the treatment of drug addiction, often by religiously motivated caregivers, this attitude leads to the construction of new psychological forms of dependence that do no more than

² Gianni Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press 2000), 170.

³ Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, 177.

substitute for the former dependence on drugs (and corroborate the old adage about religion and opium...)⁴

The dependence to which Vattimo alludes is not the mere production of “psychological facts”, the, so to speak, clinical efficacy of these faith-based clinicians. Rather, the dysfunction to which Vattimo refers is precisely the instantiation of an inability to confront the world, the substitution of a fundamentally metaphysical focus on either the promise of eternal salvation or a “lasting cure” (both of which, in this case, function as metaphysical Other worlds grounding the long and painful rehabilitative efforts of the therapist) for the far more difficult and nuanced project of recognizing and confronting one’s situatedness in this world (which, for Vattimo, can take the simple but distinctly this-worldly form of confronting one’s situatedness in a physical body which might benefit from substituting painful ascetic discipline for the judicious employment of the fruits of psychopharmacology).

Vattimo’s discussion of asceticism, however, owes more to Nietzsche than a modified form of his criticism of the Judeo-Christian approach to otherworldly asceticism. On the contrary, Vattimo, with Nietzsche, likewise recognizes that asceticism is so seductive and appealing precisely it contains within itself something of value. For Nietzsche, this kernel of value consisted precisely of a means of enhancing one’s own power through a sort of self-overcoming:

As [Nietzsche’s] own text shows, asceticism conjoins ideality and praxis, coupling in resistance the “beyond” with such instrumentalities as “mechanical activity” and such transgressions as “orgies of feeling.” So when Nietzsche asks near the end, “What is the meaning of the power of this ideal, the monstrous nature of its power? Why has it been allowed to flourish to this extent? Why has it not rather been resisted?”, the answer emerges without coaxing: it resists itself and thus coopts external resistance.⁵

For Nietzsche, in a certain sense, asceticism allows a turning of power inward such as to allow one to control the mechanisms of conflict and engage, as it were, in perpetual struggle. While this perpetual struggle can be wasted by being engaged in for religious ends (as Vattimo would have it, for the sake of metaphysical prejudices) or merely for the sake of reveling in the exercise of power, when it is turned towards productive ends (as, for Nietzsche, occurs in the case of truly great thinkers) it can enhance the power with which one can confront the world:

⁴ Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation* Ed. Santiago Zabala, Trans. William McCuaig, (New York: Columbia University Press 2004), 73.

⁵ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993), 218.

Asceticism provides [the philosopher] with the condition most favorable to the exercise of his intelligence. Far from denying "existence," he affirms *his* existence... It is clear, these philosophers are by no means unprejudiced witnesses and judges of the value of the ascetic ideal. They think only of themselves; what are saints to them? They think of the things they cannot do without: freedom from constraint, interference, noise, business, duties, worries... In short, theirs is the serene asceticism of a winged animal that soars above life but does not alight on it. We all know the three might slogans of the ascetic ideal: poverty, humility, chastity, and when we examine the lives of the great productive spirits closely, we are bound to find all three present in some degree. Not, to be sure, as their "virtues"- what have such men to do with virtue?-but as the most natural conditions of their optimum existence, their strongest productivity.⁶

Thus we find that, for Nietzsche, self-overcoming, understood as a reappropriated asceticism, provides a condition for the possibility of a productive intellectual cum social relationship with the world, not only by repurposing the very asceticism that once proved a barrier to such a relationship, but also as a means of preventing that relationship from becoming dysfunctional. Asceticism, understood in this way, provides us with a means of rejecting the metaphysical prejudices of an asceticism that would cut us off from the world in which we find ourselves thrown and a system of discipline by which to avoid getting drawn into social conformity or drowning in the particulars constitutive of our day-to-day experiences ("soaring above life without alighting on it").

If Vattimo shares Nietzsche's concern with repurposing asceticism as both a means of deconstructing the metaphysical asceticism to which both thinkers oppose themselves and as a means of engaging in a renewed and productive encounter with the world, it is here that these two thinkers part ways (albeit, as is often the case with Vattimo's exegetical works, not by means of an overt disagreement but rather through a sort of twisting from within).⁷ Vattimo, with Heidegger, recognizes that Nietzsche's emphasis on power has the potential to collapse into a new (and, potentially, dangerously arbitrary) metaphysics of its own and, further recognizes that even the renewed confrontation with the world offered by Nietzsche does not, in any case provide us with a means of emancipation. We are, after all, not in a world of individuals or even, of individuals interspersed with Nietzsche's "herds" but, rather, enframed (to use the language of late

⁶ Friederich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* as found in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals* trans. Francis Gollfing, (New York: Anchor Books 1957), 3: VIII.

⁷ Vattimo makes a distinction between *Überwindung*, the radical overcoming marked by discontinuity, and *Verwindung*, the overcoming marked by reappropriation, reimagination, and creativity.

Heidegger) in diffuse and (re)productive systems of power relations all too capable of turning our efforts to overthrow or undermine them back upon themselves. Indeed, as Foucault is wont to remind us, “resistance never occupies a position of exteriority in relation to power”: Even armed with a renewed ability to confront the world and the discipline to do so productively, we are not capable of overpowering power structures and, on the contrary, our efforts to do so are precisely a necessary part of how those structures function.⁸

For Vattimo, the suspicion of using power against power certainly finds itself expressed along the lines of the Foucauldian (or, perhaps, late Heideggerian) concerns outlined above. Indeed, throughout his political works Vattimo decries the status of the Left in Western democracies, where Leftist political parties, trade unions, and political platforms find themselves subsumed into the very systems of power to which they would otherwise oppose themselves. Vattimo recognizes that efforts at armed opposition to prevailing systems (for instance, Capitalist democracies) in turn serve as grounds for the most repressive excesses of those systems, facilitating their consolidation of power rather than the reverse. The omnipresent threat (real or imagined) of communist adversaries during the Cold War in fact fueled the establishment of the military-industrial complexes that now resides as the very heart of many Western economies, causing Capitalism to emerge from that period of history not only intact but so strong as to occasion dramatic outbursts of triumphalism (exemplified by Fukuyama’s claim that history ended with the close of the Cold War) which eventually ossified into the so-called “Washington Consensus” that Capitalism and Democracy are the only sane, effective organizational models open to a society. Vattimo notes that today a similar role is played by postcolonial terrorism, with the threat of terrorist attacks not only justifying state surveillance and repression of potential troublemakers within a given society but also the military suppression of difference and the enforcement of the Washington Consensus in other countries as well.⁹

Of course, we should not be too quick to ascribe to Vattimo a thoroughlygoingly Foucauldian attitude towards power and resistance. Vattimo maintains a suspicion of certain kinds of resistance as being susceptible to re-absorption into and buttressing of the networks of power being opposed, but this concern does not extend to all conceivable forms of resistance (as it seems to at least for the early Foucault). At the same time, certain prevailing power structures cannot be opposed by power simply because said structures are too powerful to be overcome in this manner. As Vattimo puts it, “It is useless to think of revolution as the

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 2001), 95-96.

⁹ Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 136.

immediate and violent taking of power-capitalism is infinitely stronger than that."¹⁰ The extant, dominant power structures that shape the world in which we live are, for Vattimo, history's victors, if only by virtue of the contingent circumstances surrounding their triumph (rather than by virtue of the inevitable movement of "progress" as described by a certain species of triumphalism), and, as a result, they are both too powerful (or, to frame the matter in more Foucauldian networks, too prominent as constituted by power) and too capable of reappropriating failed efforts at resistance to be overcome through the direct exercise of power prompted by a certain interpretation of Nietzsche's thought.

It is here that we return to Vattimo's status as a theorist and exemplar of otherworldliness as exemplified most especially in his work *Belief*. In that work, Vattimo likens the return to religion embodied in both the renewed consideration of religion by philosophers and critical theorist and the recent popularization and politicization of religious groups to the turning of one's mind to spiritual matters as one grows old:

[T]he return of religion and of the problem of faith is not unrelated to world history, and is not merely reducible to a transition between life-stages always conceived according to the same pattern (whenever people get old, they all begin to think more about the beyond, therefore, about God). Yet even the historical circumstances bringing back the problem of faith share a trait in common with the physiology of aging: in both cases the problem of God is posed in relation to the encounter of a limit as the occurrence of a defeat: we believed that we could realize justice on earth, but now reckon that it is no longer possible and turn our hopes to God. Death hovers over us as an ineluctable event, we escape from despair by turning to God and His promise to welcome us into His eternal kingdom.¹¹

The return to religion, while not reducible to the process of aging (whether literal, in the form of aging populations in Europe, or figurative, in the form of a "decline of the West") is, at least, analogous with it insofar as both concern limits. Far from treating this as a diffuse phenomenon, Vattimo regards his own renewed engagement with otherworldliness "as the decisive consequence of a historical process in which projects, dreams of renewal, hopes even for (political) redemption, to which [he] had been committed were shattered in a wholly contingent way."¹² The very futility of various

¹⁰ Gianni Vattimo, "Weak Communism" in *The Idea of Communism*, Ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, (London: Verso, 2010), 206.

¹¹ Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 24.

¹² Vattimo, *Belief*, 24.

emancipatory political projects, manifest dramatically in their historical failure, occasions our renewed confrontation with the question of faith in general and otherworldliness in particular.

It is important to note Vattimo's emphasis on the contingency associated both with the return to religion and with the particular forms that return takes. Vattimo regards the return to religion and the increasing emphasis on questions of faith and otherworldliness as produced by contingent historical circumstances. As we have seen, these circumstances can take the form of the failure of various emancipatory projects but also, lest we suppose that the confrontation with limits is a purely leftist phenomenon, of the collapse of such modernist projects as "enlightened" imperialism and the increasingly visible tensions (high unemployment, social and income inequality, spiraling debt, etc.) arising within the many societies that have adopted the capitalism/democracy doublet. Similarly important is the increasing crisis of confidence in the broader Reason narrative of which the West has long been a steward, with rationality showing an increasing inability to confront increasingly serious global problems such as genocide and ecological destruction.¹³ These various issues, taken together, offer us, by Vattimo's lights, a circumstance in which the return to religion, in its various forms, is able to arise and attain the widespread appeal and diversity of expression that seem to characterize it.

Before moving on to consider the different modes of expression which Vattimo associates with the return to religion and otherworldliness, it is necessary to take a moment to consider just how historically specific that return actually is. After all, as Karen Armstrong is wont to remind us, otherworldliness often arises in the context of great social and intellectual instability.¹⁴ It seems possible, then, that the contingent historical circumstances that Vattimo describes are, in fact, demonstrative of some necessary or essential human reaction to social and intellectual stresses. Rather than succumb to the temptation to essentialize this reaction, however, it is important that we recognize that the apparent similarities between the contemporary return to religion with which Vattimo is concerned, and the ancient examples of otherworldliness studied by many scholars of *contemptus mundi* can be accounted for precisely by the role played by said ancient examples in the constitution of our contemporary situation. If certain sorts of social and intellectual upheaval are, at present, occasioning renewed confrontations with *contemptus mundi*, then surely this is possible precisely because of the extent to which that orientation has played a central role in the continuing traditions of which those confrontations remain a part. Furthermore, any effort we might be tempted to make to regard otherworldliness as

¹³ Vattimo, *Belief*, 83-84.

¹⁴ Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation*, (New York: Random House, 2006), 35.

a universal human reaction to certain conditions is necessarily called into question by our own situatedness within particular historical, cultural, and political contexts; we lack the sort of objective “view from nowhere” necessary to identify this supposed universality.

Efforts to universalize the concept of otherworldliness are likewise hampered by the various forms that otherworldliness can take even within a broadly shared context. Vattimo observes that, in addition to his own confrontation with religiosity, there are a number of other possible reactions to the return to religion. It might seem that the most obvious such reaction would simply be a return to conventional forms of religiosity, in which one might indulge in otherworldliness in much the way that various religious groups have permitted and encouraged for centuries. This option, however, is not so unproblematic as it might first appear. Indeed, for Vattimo, the transformation of various religions into fundamentalist forms occurs precisely as a consequence of the perceived insufficiency of traditional (read: metaphysical) approaches to otherworldliness. Indeed, if the Western narrative (capital “R”) Reason has fallen into disrepute by virtue of its scandalous failure to engage productively with the world, its fall has (as we consider more fully later) likewise called into question the metaphysical principles underlying traditional approaches to religiosity. For millions of self-identified religious believers (and here we observe again the influence of Catholicism on Vattimo) particular items of dogma have become impossible to take seriously, thereby forcing religious authorities to seek refuge, not in a discredited metaphysics, but in the identitarian politics occasioned by the postmodern emphasis on difference:

In this climate, it seems that the proclamation of the Catholic Church, planted squarely in defense of a family and sexual morality that even practicing Catholics no longer take seriously, appears to seek justification less in doctrinal principles (which are often simply laughable; for example when they seem to identify masturbation with genocide) than in the need to defend the image of the “true believer.” And the latter is to be distinguished from tepid Christianity precisely through a practice of virtue that no reasonable morality demands, but which serves to strengthen the unity of the Church conceived almost like an army where soldiers who are not entirely resolute are not admitted. What I am trying to say is that [John Paul II’s] insistence on indefensible aspects of Catholic sexual morality (just think of the prohibition on using condoms in the epoch of AIDS) seems to be motivated less by fundamental principles (even if one takes up the naturalistic and essentialist metaphysics preferred by the Pope) than by the desire to avoid the impression that Christian morality and doctrine may be weakening. In

short, Christianity must beware of looking too kindly on humanity, on its passions (even those lived legitimately) and on the very demands of life on this planet (I am thinking of the prohibition on setting any limit to birth control at a time of demographic explosion).¹⁵

While Vattimo uses the example of the Catholic Church, this return to a sort of dogmatic focus on identity certainly seems to find parallel expressions in other Christian denominations and, indeed, in non-Christian religions (Vattimo explicitly mentions how this sort of thinking, combined with the experience of postcolonial life, are at least partially constitutive of Islamic fundamentalisms).¹⁶ Identity here, becomes that for which one undergoes suffering (voluntarily or otherwise) in the name of righteousness, an ascetic denial of the world that, paradoxically, manifests itself in the most coercive expressions of this-worldly power: the religious legislation and enforcement of moral and behavior norms for the alleged spiritual benefit of a subject population.

As we have already observed, otherworldliness need not take an explicitly religious form. On the contrary, metaphysical otherworldliness, having been called into question in its various religious formulations, lives on in other areas of intellectual life, if usually in a concealed manner. We are called by the secular world to discipline ourselves and endure suffering for the sake of personal betterment (however conceived) or to mortify ourselves before forces greater than ourselves (political, ideological, even scientific or intellectual). If a “metaphysical ascetic prejudice” lives on in psychoanalysis, and, for that matter, modern scientism (of the reductionist variety espoused by many of the so-called New Atheists), it is able to do so not only by virtue of being deeply ingrained in the culture through a sort of self-concealing. Metaphysics of the classical variety, where God, Nature, Platonic Forms, or some other monolithic structure serves to ground the very existence of things, certainly bears scant resemblance to psychoanalysis with its emphasis on individual psychological constitution and modern scientific fallibilism. In spite of this, both scientism and psychoanalysis are grounded on certain metaphysical presuppositions (the comprehensibility of the world or the patient’s psyche, the existence of literal or psychological “facts,” etc.) which in turn allow them to ground ascetic practice (particularly, as we have already noted, in the case of psychoanalytic psychotherapy) and function as a means of having recourse to an abstract, stable, metaphysical world that functions as a barrier to (and, perhaps, protection from) our confrontation with the world of lived experience.

For Vattimo, the process of weakening of strong structures is tied up in a certain interpretation of the Christian concept of kenosis, and the logic

¹⁵ Vattimo, *Belief*, 56-57.

¹⁶ Vattimo, *Belief*, 26.

of reversals so prevalent in the Gospels. Indeed, for Vattimo himself, his conceptualization of weak thought and his renewed concern with religion can be said to be mutually constitutive (if still possessed of utility for those theorizing within the contexts of Christianity in general and Roman Catholicism in particular): "I confess that I experience the clarification of this notion of weak ontology as the 'transcription' of the Christian message, as a great event, as a kind of decisive discovery... I believe this is because it has allowed me to establish continuity with my own personal religious origin."¹⁷ For Vattimo, kenosis expresses the truth of Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, representing the end of the totalizing God of metaphysics and the dissolution of the divine in the world and in humanity: Christ's kenosis makes possible our entry into the process of actively interpreting and productively engage with the contexts in which we find ourselves. Far from leading to an empowerment of humanity as the new bestowers of some sort of absolute meaning however, kenosis functions instead as occasioning an *imitatio Dei* in which weakness becomes that to which theorists and activists can and should aspire as a means of liberation through the breaking down of oppressive structures and the corresponding creation of space for communitarian activity. Vattimo writes,

We are able to recognize that the history of being has a 'reductive,' nihilistic meaning, a tendency to assert the truth of Being by reducing the compelling nature of entities (whether they be the political authority, the threatening and bizarre God of natural religion, or the preemptory finality of the modern subject understood as the guarantor of truth), only because we have been educated by the Christian tradition to think of God not as a master but as a friend, to proclaim that essential things are revealed not to the wise but to the little ones, to believe that whoever does not lose his soul will not gain it and so on. If I say now that, in thinking of the history of Being as guided by the common guiding thread of the reduction of strong structures, I am not seeking to legitimize 'objectively' certain maxims of action on the basis of the fact that Being is structured in a certain way; I am merely reformulating, in a different way, the appeal, the call addressed to me by the tradition in which I am placed, and of which weak ontology is only a risky interpretation.¹⁸

Vattimo's is not the asceticism of traditional, metaphysical religiosity, in which suffering is endured (as an imposition) for the sake of spiritual edification. Rather, asceticism manifests as a refusal to impose (violently) upon others and functions instead as a basis for charity and hospitality.¹⁹

¹⁷ Vattimo, *Belief*, 40.

¹⁸ Vattimo, *Belief*, 44.

¹⁹ See Armstrong's discussion of the Hebrew notion of hospitality as a kenotic restraint

We restrain ourselves, turn our power inward as self-discipline, not to forestall our flourishing for the sake of some heavenly flourishing still-to-come but to allow for the flourishing of the never-entirely-Other through whom God becomes present to us.

For Vattimo, the dissolution of metaphysics occasioned by Christian thought is linked, paradoxical though it may seem, to the process of secularization. Indeed, like Gauchet, Vattimo, at times, treats secularization as the gradual bearing out of impulses that exist within Christianity itself. Unlike Gauchet, Vattimo views this bearing out as contingent and risky.²⁰ Secularism is not something to simply be observed as it proceeds towards a predetermined, historical end but rather a process in which we participate and through which, odd though it may seem, we in fact maintain a continuity with and pietas towards the Christian tradition:

We must keep in mind that it is the dissolution of metaphysics that frees us for pietas... Once we discover that all the systems of values are nothing but human, all too human productions, what is left for us to do? Do we dismiss them as lies and errors? No, we hold them even dearer because they are all we have in the world, they are the only destiny, thickness, richness of our experiences, they are the only "Being."²¹

Secularization, then, is not the end of religion but, more accurately, a particular variety of one of the forms in which religion is able to continue and, as we shall see, a form in which certain of the aspirations of the Christian tradition seemingly banished by the destruction of metaphysics might yet be resurrected.

It is important to note that the process of the dissolution of strong metaphysical structures is both an autonomous cultural and intellectual force to which institutions are called to respond (as we have already observed with the case of the Catholic Church) and an activity in which theorists can, and, by Vattimo's lights, should participate. The account of the process of weakening, and the intellectual activity by which theorists help this process along are collectively termed *pensiero debole* or "Weak thought" by Vattimo.²² Indeed, as we shall see, for Vattimo the process of weakening

of one's power. Armstrong, *The Great Transformation*, 53.

²⁰ Gauchet, for his part, regards the dissolution of the social function of religion as an accomplished fact, but cautions that a religious residue yet remains that is capable of producing discursive content (including, presumably, content with political, social, and ethical implications). See Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, trans. Oscar Burge, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 200.

²¹ Vattimo, Gianni, "Etica dell'interpretazione", Quoted in Marta Frascati-Lochhead, *Kenosis and Feminist Theology: The Challenge of Gianni Vattimo*, (Albany: State University of New York Press: 1998), 82, Translation Frascati-Lochhead's.

²² Kearney has proposed the alternate translation of "fragile thought" but, in addition to being less true to the original Italian, this translation seems less useful insofar as it locks

has a distinct ethical and political dimension which establishes it not as a fait accompli but rather a risky project concerned with opening the way to certain ethical and political possibilities. Theorists involved in this project become engaged in the tireless and recursive process of calling into question metaphysical structures wherever and whenever they arise, as “the wellsprings of metaphysical authoritarianism never run dry, so the task of secularization—that is the unmasking of the sacrality of all absolute, ultimate truths—is an ongoing one.”²³ This unmasking, of course, is inaugurated by the kenotic gesture of Christ and has a double meaning, entailing the exposure of the contingency of supposedly absolute metaphysical structures (which, in any case, has long been the concern of the antiessentialist philosophical, theological, and critical theoretical projects grouped popularly if somewhat unhelpfully under the rubric of “postmodernism”) and the revelation of the hidden, totalizing, metaphysical kernel of modes of thought that fail to live up to their antiessentialist pretensions (we have already considered scientific fallibilism and psychoanalytic thought as exemplars of this type of metaphysical crypto-essentialism).²⁴

Nor is weak thought merely content to engage in an outward-looking critique of metaphysical structures. On the contrary, weak thought entails a turning of power back upon itself that seems to be of a decidedly ascetic character: the theorist is constantly in danger of herself reconstituting metaphysical structures of an especially dangerous variety. Indeed, as we have already considered, the pretense of antiessentialism, when unrealized, provides a means by which metaphysics can conceal itself, thereby making it impossible to interact with productively. Worse still, antiessentialism itself can, in certain forms, smack of a sort of completion productive of an uncontested absolutism of its own, with the end of metaphysics serving as a foundation for the forceful “liberation” of others: “The constructive nihilism of hermeneutics certainly has to guard against the neurotic return of authoritarianism—but antifoundationalism itself is at risk of hardening into a metaphysics, and when it does it fits very nicely with the imposition of liberty and democracy by way of armed intervention against what President Bush has called ‘rogue states.’” Thus, in addition to guarding against the return of authoritarianism (which, in the aftermath of the weakening of metaphysics, becomes “neurotic” insofar as it is accomplished by an irrational leap into an identitarian acceptance of principles no longer

Vattimo into a single metaphor (that of brittleness, which, admittedly, places an appropriate emphasis on Vattimo’s affirmation of the contingency and risk associated with his project) in a manner that does a disservice to his account (Vattimo’s account of kenosis, for instance, involves employment of the weakness metaphor understood as involving diffusion, an employment that Kearney’s translation would not readily permit). See Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Postmodern* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 190.

²³ Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, xxvii.

²⁴ Vattimo, *Belief*, 66.

defensible on purely philosophical grounds), the weak thinker must engage in a meticulous self-criticism (which need not, after all, be done in isolation but can, in fact, occur most effectively in the context of a community) and qualification of her positions, lest those positions themselves be twisted into particularly dangerous metaphysical structures.

Weak thought's emphasis on discipline as a means of combating a protean and insidious threat intersects productively with the Christian ascetic tradition and, in particular, with the early Christian ascription of an important role to the ascetic and to ascetic practice in combating demonic agency. Indeed, metaphysics might well be said to take on the role in Vattimo's discursive account of the world, that demonic agency occupied in early, Christian, supernaturalism worldviews, exploiting every lapse in concentration, changing forms, concealing itself, and, perhaps most of all, confronting the theorist with temptation: "[Metaphysics] seeks to master reality at a stroke, grasping (or so it thinks) the first principle on which all things depend (and thus giving itself an empty guarantee of power over events)."²⁵ This temptation to form, understood as power, in turn produces resistance in the form of an ascetic discipline embodied in a political productive species of criticism.²⁶ Brown's account of the omnipresent threat of demonic agency and the communitarian, ascetic response to it, could well be applied, with little modification, to the weak thinker's constant and disciplined struggle against metaphysical totality:

The good discipline sat in his cell, "twisting ropes while meditation floweth on as running water." But the Devil, too, was a master-weaver: given the loose end of one sinful or unconsidered thought, he could plait a whole rope from it. There was always a moment, then, when the thoughts of the monk could be sensed as no longer belonging wholly to the human mind, but to the demons or to the angels whose subtle presences were registered in the unaccustomed force of the flow, through the heart, of powerful trains of thought—the *logismoi*. Hence the crucial importance of the gift of discernment, of *diakrisis*, among the Desert Fathers. This meant far more than self-knowledge and good sense, though it might, in fact, often include a large measure of both. It meant the rare spiritual gift of being able to see clearly what one could no longer call one's own in one's own stream of consciousness. It was the ability to heed a warning signal to depend on others.²⁷

²⁵ Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press 1992), 8.

²⁶ Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*, 57-59.

²⁷ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 228-229.

Metaphysics, like the Devil, can exploit even minor lapses in focus to reassert itself in a new, unrecognized form or, worse still, co-opt the efforts of the weak thinker into a terrifying totalitarianism of its own. The only defense against these threats is a tireless dedication to critical and self-critical efforts and, just as importantly, a willingness (and it is here that we transcend mere intellectual discipline) to engage in such efforts in a spirit of love and humility. It is only motivated by that spirit, understood by Vattimo as composing a vital part of the cultural heritage of Christianity, that one is able to experience the contingency of one's constitution as a subject and the corresponding finitude which grounds our need for community and our dependence on and love for the neighbor "in whom God becomes present to us."²⁸ Vattimo's project, then, takes on the character of a (necessarily secularized) communitarian, ascetic struggle against diffuse, destructive intellectual, social, and political forces which, in many ways, expresses a striking level of continuity with the supernaturalist, metaphysical asceticism to which it opposes itself.

This focus on community has implications for both the originary impulse of weak thought (and, correspondingly, Vattimo's constitution as a theorist) and the political consequences of that project. Considering first the role played by community in the inauguration of Vattimo's project, we find that Vattimo's desire to dissolve weak structures stems precisely from a rejection of violence rooted in the Christian tradition:

We have sought to think Being outside the metaphysics of objectivity precisely for ethical reasons, and the latter must guide us in our elaboration of the consequences of a non-metaphysical conception of Being, such as an ontology of weakening. To be clear: the Christian inheritance that "returns" in weak thought is primarily the Christian precept of charity and its rejection of violence.²⁹

That Vattimo grants primacy to charity should not be taken to suggest that charity is unrelated to the other aspects of the Christian tradition that Vattimo appropriates. On the contrary, Vattimo describes his project elsewhere in his corpus as embodying "a passage from *veritas* to *caritas*."³⁰ Charity and the dissolution of metaphysics are related, as the former functions as the motive impulse for the latter, and the latter (in what Vattimo calls a circular gesture but that we might more productively regard, in a nod to process theology, as a relationship of mutual constitution) breaks down the barriers that inhibit the former.

The sentiment in the passage above might well leave us wondering why, after all, metaphysics is necessarily violent. It would seem that a proponent

²⁸ Vattimo, *Belief*, 90.

²⁹ Vattimo, *Belief*, 44.

³⁰ Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 35.

of a given metaphysical system would respond "It is not metaphysics per se that is violent, but rather *particular, erroneous metaphysical systems*." This sort of logic permeates the cultural conflicts so prominent in contemporary society, with the proponents of rival metaphysical systems (say, the Scientism of the New Atheists and the fundamentalism of this or that religious group) engaged in necessarily futile debates against interlocutors with whom they share few if any presuppositions in an effort to demonstrate that they, in fact, know how things *actually* are. The violence at issue in metaphysics, for Vattimo, consists precisely in its capacity to silence interlocutors: "I define [metaphysics] as the violent imposition of an order that is declared objective and natural and therefore cannot be violated and is no longer an object of discussion...If you admit there is a first principle that can be grasped and known in a definite way, you prevent anybody from ever asking again."³¹ Furthermore, the abstract violence at issue in the silencing of dialogue can, and often does, produce literal violence as frustration with an inability to convince one's interlocutor (who, after all, may well be operating under a worldview utterly different from your own) prompts the abandonment of conversation and the turn to coercion. Vattimo is intimately familiar with this tragic progression and, indeed, openly acknowledges the role played by his personal encounters with leftist revolutionary violence in constituting his commitment to non-violence and corresponding rejection of metaphysical systems.³²

It is in the mutually constitutive relationship between charity (including non-violence) and the dissolution of metaphysics that we find the point at which Vattimo's theoretical activity (which, we have already seen, can itself manifest as a form of ascetic/otherworldly praxis) becomes productive of political and ethical patterns of conduct. Firstly, we find, somewhat surprisingly, that secularism manifests itself as the very expression of the Christian aspirations to universality and hospitality, not by operating as a totalitarian intellectual movement that brings, by whatever means, the whole world under its sway but rather by way of opening up a public space in which such totalitarianism is perpetually broken up (by means of the vigilant theoretical activity described above) in favor of non-totalizing, cross-cultural dialogue undertaken in the spirit of hospitality.³³ The Christian commitment to interaction with other religions is called, by Vattimo's lights, to abandon both the metaphysical totalitarianism that has characterized in the past (in the form of efforts to universalize its particular theological positions) and the fundamentalist collapse into identitarian isolation that

³¹ Gianni Vattimo, "Dialogue with Gianni Vattimo" in *After the Death of God*, Edited by John Caputo, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 93.

³² Gianni Vattimo, "Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality: A Biographical-Theoretical Interview with Luca Savarino and Federico Vercellone", *Iris*, 1, no. 2, 327.

³³ Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2002), 98-101.

increasingly characterizes its present, in favor of concerning itself with furthering the impulse of secularization that exists within it such as to allow for the possibility of interreligious and cross-cultural discourse in which, in Derridean fashion, Christianity functions as the gracious host that puts itself as the mercy of its guests (in the sense that efforts at cross-cultural dialogue are inherently risky and are rendered more so by the temptation, on the part of Westerners, to compromise the neutrality of the lay space that they create in an effort to promote Western values).³⁴ Here we find a different sense of otherworldliness, embodied in the Christian potential not just to await a “world to come” but to constitute a world in which Christianity, far from ascending to a triumphant dominance, in fact makes itself available as an appropriable resource to a multiplicity of belief systems, religious and otherwise. This approach to community seems to represent an excellent political manifestation of the principle of kenosis, with Christianity emptying itself of its metaphysical pretensions and endeavoring, thereby, to provide a welcoming climate in which new conceptual, political, and social intersections become possible.

Another prominent sense in which Vattimo’s consideration of weak thought manifests politically is through what might be termed a weak activism. The futility of violence resistance to prevailing systems of power, combined with the dissolution of metaphysics in the spirit of charity, necessitates the establishment of an activist model the efficacy of which is found not in strength but in weakness. Vattimo calls for “an undisciplined social praxis which shares with anarchism a refusal to formulate a system, a constitution, a positive ‘realistic’ political model according to traditional political methods: for example, winning elections (who believes in them any longer?).”³⁵ The rooting of political efficacy in weakness has several meanings. The critical efforts of weak thinkers cum activists can productively function as means of calling into question the metaphysical foundations grounding particular power structures, thereby prompting a crisis within those structures (as, again, in the case of the Catholic Church).³⁶ Similarly, the self-critical theoretical activity that occupies such an important part of weak thought as a project serves to reduce the risk that weak activism will assume (in spite of the best of intentions) a metaphysical and violent character or become subsumed into existing systems of power. However,

³⁴ Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 101.

³⁵ Vattimo, *Weak Communism*, 206.

³⁶ It is worth noting that, in certain of his polemical writings, at least Vattimo takes this critical capacity to apply to inter- as well as intracultural criticisms: “In the case of the clash of cultures, Vattimo seems to reject cultural relativism, and uphold the nihilism of the West as the very basis by which we may make judgments about other cultures. In simple terms, cultures and traditions which betray strong claims to metaphysical truth, may be criticized on that basis.” Ashely Woodward, “The Verwindung of Capital: On the Philosophy and Politics of Gianni Vattimo” *Symposium: The Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 13, no. 1, 97.

at first blush, it is not entirely clear as to how these principally negative benefits of weak power might translate into actual political change.

Once again, we find an instructive point of comparison between Vattimo's thought and the Christian tradition of *contemptus mundi* to which it owes so much. As Kallistos Ware observes,

When Saint Benedict hid himself in a cave near Subiaco, he wanted simply to save his own soul and had not the slightest intention of saving Western Civilization... But his solitary quest for personal salvation did in fact exercise in the long term a profoundly creative effect on European culture. Often it is the men and women of inner stillness-not the activists, but the contemplatives, fired by a consuming passion for solitude-who in practice bring about the most far-reaching alterations in the societies around them.³⁷

While the analogy between the contemplatives that Ware describes and Vattimo's activists is admittedly an imperfect one, we might nonetheless find it to be instructive. The contemplatives that Ware describes proved to be transformative social figures precisely insofar as they engaged, not in the concrete search for alternatives to existing social orders, but rather removed themselves and stood apart in silent witness to the insufficiency of existing orders and the possibility of and need for new ones. While for Ware's ascetics, these new and better orders were principally metaphysical and supernatural in character (otherworldly in a very literal, metaphysical sense), it certainly seems that Vattimo's weak activists could similarly function as embodying an otherworldliness construed as a principle of novelty. Simply by critiquing existing structures, without challenging them directly (power against power), and refusing to participate in those structures to more than a minimal degree, weak activists would stand as a symbol demanding the reopening of dialogue and the questioning of the sacrality of prevailing power structures.³⁸

³⁷ Kallistos Ware, "The Way of the Ascetic: Positive or Negative?" in *Asceticism*, Ed. Wimbush and Valantasis, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.

³⁸ We are perhaps already seeing test cases in which this sort of methodology is being applied. On the national and local levels, the Occupy Wall Street Movement's high visibility and scandalous refusal to articulate a list of demands, endorse candidates, and otherwise become overtly involved in traditional politics (after the fashion of, say, the Tea Party Movement) seems to make it a prospective candidate for a kind of ascetic activism, in which the insufficiency of the current system and the need for a new one are manifest in the very withdrawal of the protesters into their various encampments. On an international level, Vattimo and Zabala discuss the role played by certain South American Socialist experiments, notably Chavez's Venezuela, in calling into question both the necessity of Capitalism for national success, and the necessity of American dominated institutions (such as the International Monetary Fund) for regional and global economic stability. See Vattimo, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 121-131.

Of course, not all of Vattimo's potential confrontations with asceticism work in favor of the internal consistency and social efficacy of his project. For some critics of Vattimo, the denial of the very possibility of a "way the world is" itself constitutes a sort of asceticism. Specifically, in reducing the world to the discursive (that is, to the shifting play of meaning and context) Vattimo is simply reiterating a literal "contempt for the world," a rejection of the material (indeed, the very possibility of the material) in favor of the spiritual (here understood as the discursive). Along these lines, Depoortere writes (grouping, perhaps unfairly, Vattimo and Altizer as "death of God" theologians³⁹), "Vattimo and Altizer remain too philosophical, too spiritual, too idealistic... Their views are not grounded on an anthropology that takes into account the human being as a physical and material creature."⁴⁰ While Depoortere's concern is that this rejection of the physical seems to prevent Vattimo from constructing a coherent Christology (understood by Depoortere in the highly conventional sense of demanding some account of physical embodiment), it likewise seems to pose a greater challenge to Vattimo's thought in that it seems to resemble the very metaphysical prejudices to which Vattimo seeks to oppose himself. In answer to this latter concern, we can only observe that if there is an apparent resemblance between Vattimo's (supposed⁴¹) rejection of the world in favor of the discursive and the metaphysical rejection of the physical in favor of the spiritual or ideal, this resemblance is born precisely of Vattimo's reversal of that classical, metaphysical formulation: If the traditional rejection of matter in favor of spirit was precisely by virtue of the impermanence of matter relative to the permanence of spirit (manifest, as we have already seen, in the relationship between limits and otherworldliness), Vattimo's account privileges impermanence, difference, flux, and relationality, placing value on the emancipatory potentials of the ever-shifting, contingent, discursive plane upon which we operate, over and against the totalizing, dangerous, and violent permanence (or, more correctly, illusory permanence) offered by materiality understood as a discernable "way the world is."

Similarly, it might be argued that Vattimo's project, rather than embodying a sort of reappropriated, post-metaphysical otherworldliness, is, in fact, merely anti-worldly, nihilistic in the most pejorative sense of the term.

³⁹ Vattimo, in a strict sense, does not share Altizer's concern with theology proper and, perhaps more importantly, regards the death of God as referring, principally, to the end of metaphysics.

⁴⁰ Frederiek Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, (London: T and T Clark, 2008), 31.

⁴¹ It is not, in any case, entirely accurate to say that Vattimo posits a purely discursive world. In certain places in his corpus, he does leave a space for "earth" in the late Heideggerian sense, which, while devoid of discursive content, solicits discursive content and, in an admittedly mysterious sense, serves as a referent for it. See Frascati-Lochhead, *Kenosis and Feminist Theology*, 100 and Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), Chp. 4.

Vattimo has no shortage of critics who claim that his reappropriation of the Christian tradition in sheds much of the theological and scriptural content of that tradition, functioning not as a productive and even pious reimagining of Christian approaches to *contemptus mundi* as a sort of intellectual self-mutilation, self-inflicted reduction brought about for its own sake. Guarino provides an excellent formulation of this concern:

One wonders whether Vattimo, in taking this position, realizes his hoped-for a *Verwindung* of Modernity. If it is true that the enlightenment excised religion from the public square, isn't it also true that Vattimo is simply replicating this excision, but invoking Nietzsche and Heidegger, rather than the positivistic rationalism of modernity? Is Vattimo, in fact, offering a laïcité of the Enlightenment, the naked public square of modernity but even more radically because, while appearing to be mildly accepting of religion's contribution, he is, in fact, emasculating religion of its specifically cognitive content? Isn't *pensiero debole* merely "privatization" and "marginalization" by other means, the French Revolution absent the guillotine? Religion here only realizes its "supernatural" potential when it is completely secularized.⁴²

For Guarino, Vattimo's approach to secularism threatens to rob religion of what he (Guarino) takes to be its essential discursive content. There is more at stake in this charge than the prospect that believers will become alienated, unable to recognize their religious traditions apart from the metaphysical systems that have accompanied them for centuries. Indeed, for Guarino, the abandonment of metaphysics robs Christianity not only of its content but also of its transhistorical and universalist impulses, its ability to make claims that apply transtemporally and cross-culturally, thereby uniting believers past, present, and future in a coherent, living community. Given Vattimo's own concern with communitarian activity, and his connection of such activity to political praxis, such charges as those leveled by Guarino are serious indeed.

Serious though Guarino's objections may be, that are not unanswerable. Indeed, we have already observed that Vattimo regards his reappropriation of the Christian tradition (and, as we have seen, perhaps especially the otherworldly elements of that tradition) as continuous with and an example of that tradition. Vattimo would surely object to Guarino's own emphasis on the need for metaphysics to ground universality by pointing out that metaphysics is violent and dangerous, both intellectually and socially. Likewise, Vattimo argues that Christianity can live up to its universalist aspirations (without the risks associated with the positing of metaphysical positions) precisely by abandoning the notion of absolute truth in favor of

⁴² Thomas G. Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology*, (New York: T and T Clark, 2009), 71.

hospitality. As far as transtemporal truths are concerned, Vattimo would surely observe that our situatedness in particular historical circumstances make the very idea of such truths incoherent, while nonetheless maintaining that said situatedness functions precisely as the means by which we might recognize our indebtedness to an initiative not our own and our connection to the past epochs that have played such a vital role in constituting us.

Unfortunately, even if Vattimo is able to provide a less dangerous means of grounding community and universality and an (admittedly minimal) sense of shared history, we are still left with perhaps the most personal and difficult question associated with Guarino's objections: Does Vattimo's reappropriation leave anything of what most believers would identify as religious? It is at this point that we confront what is perhaps Vattimo's most profound expression of otherworldliness, understood not as a risky reappropriation of the kind with which we have principally concerned ourselves throughout this work, but as the very point at which reappropriation must end:

When I pray-since I pray in the most traditional manner, mostly by reciting the psalms and the other prayers of the Roman Breviary-I am aware that I am not merely acting on the basis of a philosophical persuasion but am going a step further. Conversely, it is the philosophical reading that I believe I can give to Christianity that allows me to avoid any pretension at having totally rationalized my religious attitude: I can accept that many things I think and say when I pray might undergo a further possible secularization (for example: the idea that God is Father and not Mother, or even that God is a person like me). Then the dissolution of metaphysical reason and its claim to grasp true Being once and for all allows me to accept a measure of "myth" in my life, which need not necessarily be translated in rational terms-ultimately reason too must be secularized in the name of charity; for example in the name of the sympathy I feel towards the Christian tradition, the admiration provoked by (almost all) the virtues of the saints, as I have already mentioned, the feeling I have, in spite of everything, of belonging to the Church understood as the community of those who believe in Jesus Christ-even, perhaps especially, those who pay little attention to the Pope, to his prejudices... In the end, to believe in belief means a bit of all of this.⁴³

Vattimo, having begun *Belief* with an inquiry into the relationship between the return to religion and the concept of limits, fittingly concludes the work with an act of self-limitation, a mortification of the intellect that produces not the harsh silence of totalitarian violence, but the fecund and pious silence that both calls to us continually for novelty, improvement, experi-

⁴³ Vattimo, *Belief*, 92-93.

mentation (even as the person of the ascetic does so in the social realm) and leaves a space open for that which rationality, be it hermeneutic or metaphysical in character, is unable to grasp. It is in this space that we may yet find the components of religiosity most familiar to believers, albeit divorced from their inscrutability and correspondingly subject to novel and charitable reimaginings. While this approach may seem simply to defer the question at issue (might not those reimaginings themselves wipe out all that is recognizable in religion?) they rather relegate it to its proper space, a space that is necessarily outside of the hermeneutic project in which Vattimo is engaged. The fate of particular prayers, rituals, and metaphors is, far from being settled (through the dissolution of such trappings of particular theologies) laid open for the first time by the dissolution of metaphysical principles to evaluation and consideration mediated by the desire believers have for a more emancipated, non-violent world, and the love they have for their faith and its particular modes of expression.

In Vattimo's *Belief*, and in his broader corpus, we find oppositions to metaphysical otherworldliness coupled with an experimental and risky effort to reappropriate components of the otherworldly tradition of Christianity. However unfamiliar this reappropriation might at first seem to us, upon closer inspection we find within it many of the most provocative issues associated with *contemptus mundi* as an orientation, including the renewed confrontation with the world occasioned by viewpoints that seem (in a certain sense) to abandon it in favor a "world to come," the expression of asceticism in the form of certain sorts of theoretical activities, the role played by otherworldliness in the recent return to religion (in its various forms), and the insights offered by *contemptus mundi* into the very possibility of a non-metaphysical, non-totalizing religiosity. More fundamentally, *contemptus mundi* is concerned with limits, boundary points that call our gazes to an unimaginable beyond and prompt us thereby, to dramatic feats of intellectual, social, and spiritual productivity that, at its best, carries with it the wisdom and humility to respect the boundaries that made it possible. Understood in this way, Vattimo's thought and his constitution as an ascetic subject in his own right, represent a triumph of *contemptus mundi*, a wedding of a continuity with and *pietas* before tradition and a radical, emancipatory novelty that, taken together, show the continued vibrancy of Christian thought in our post-metaphysical age.

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