



## OLD AGE AND YOUTH IN THE MYSTERY OF MAN'S PERSONAL RECONCILIATION WITH GOD

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### ABSTRACT

*The view of Eastern spirituality on aging and death is different to the secular one. The believe in and the following of Jesus Christ as Lord – fully God and fully human in essence – opens the door to everyone to the everlasting life, a state of incorruptibility of the body and absence of any sorrow for the soul. Forgiveness and reconciliation, promoted in the Church as remedies to the effects of the sinfull life and as ways of accessing a fruitfull communion with the Triune God, become effective if totally assumed by the believer, and do not work as automatic, mechanical acts. This simple, yet also intense, process of rejuvenating, regenerating the human person starts from the earthly life as an affirmative answer to God' calling and as first steps of openness towards the authentic dialogue with God, which will rich its peak in the life to come.*

**Keywords:** *communion; confession; elderliness; holiness; reconciliation; sin; spiritual guidance;*

### INTRODUCTION

If biological life means a decay of youth into old age, spiritual life means a continuous rejuvenation of the human being at the dawn of eternal life. Salvation, with its various meanings, presupposes first of all a human being who is no longer subject to degradation, disintegration. Holiness and deification presuppose a profound physical transformation, by no means just a legal acquittal. And this process of regeneration of the human being can only be achieved through a continuous dialogue of confessing the desire to share the inexhaustible mystery of divine love. The mystery of man's personal reconciliation with God becomes a continuum of reversing the effects of sin. Old age, from the perspective of spiritual growth, reveals itself to us as a stage of wisdom, of the ability to see much more clearly beyond the physical limits of this world. Eventually, this spiritual maturity becomes a return to the true youth of human nature, to that point where we are reconciled not only with God and fellow humans, but also with the passage of time.

The state of sin is revealed as unnatural to authentic human existence. The fall becomes painful, and not only for oneself but for one's whole reality. To break out of this seclusion, man needs a long journey of transformation, in which he cannot take himself apart from others. If sin is individual, salvation is communal, ecclesial. Returning from sin means first and foremost regaining the availability of authentic dialogue with other persons, just as sin was a closing in on oneself, a disintegration of the wholeness of existence. "Man has been able, by his will and by his connection with all things, to bring about disunity between all things, as between them and God, their ultimate unifying principle. For in separating himself from one man, he separated himself from that man's way of seeing the whole of reality and its



fraternal use, and thus each set up all reality against another, or divided it among themselves by enmity and strife, always seeking to keep it disunited by the same means. They have thereby divided themselves, and none of them is in accord with the whole reality as it is."<sup>1</sup> Sin thus appears to us as man's flight from himself. When he affirms himself autonomously, man is in fact affirming his nothingness. And until he is aware of his nothingness, it is impossible for him to actually find himself.

## 1. OLD AGE AND YOUTH IN THE MYSTERY OF MAN'S

Moving to the level of the Church, Repentance and Confession means the reactualization of a deep personal relationship, and not simply reconciliation as the cancellation of a debt. It begins with the realization of personal worth in contrast to the dissolution of sin. It is therefore thirst after personal communion, or the soul's state of being thirsty after so much desolation. "If repentance signifies, on the one hand, a realization of the believer's estrangement from God and neighbor because of sins committed, on the other hand it signifies the restoration of the believer's bond with God and neighbor through confession of sins, atonement and forgiveness."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, forgiveness does not come only from God as impassive Judge, but constitutes a mysterious encounter in the depths of the human being, an unveiling of the "face" overshadowed by sin, a revelation of the true identity of being a son of the heavenly Father. And this return leads to a true renewal of existence. "There is something existential going on in forgiveness. It is not just a legal act. It is the bringing to light of the divine image. Deeper than the sin is the divine within us, the support of our being."<sup>3</sup>

The time limited by death is a consequence of separation from God. The fall is a continual self-absorption through it. And to be alone, as a tormented existential state of being, is tantamount to a diminishing of existence to the point of no longer knowing that we exist. "Through sin, or the withdrawal of the divine Spirit, creation weakens in its vital resources. Our being itself, in the state of sin, can advance to the point of the egoism of singularization, so that it hardly knows whether it really exists."<sup>4</sup>

From this point of view, of an existence alienated from God, the world goes so far that it becomes a place where you can no longer meet people. From history man becomes more absent than God. In this context, God means the absence of people, and the *love of neighbor* leads to Sartre's observation: "hell is other people". An existence and a world that longer prolonged in the presence of God seclude the man so that he sees only himself, or what limits him.

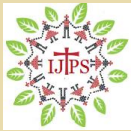
Father Stăniloae observes a total existential anxiety generated by this limitation of existence. "Man is a mystery because he is an abyss submerged in the luminous abyss of God's existence. Sin has brought an impoverishment of personal mystery, because he no longer has the consciousness of living fully in the abyss of God's existence, and has weakened this very living. And death weakens to the utmost the rootedness of the one whose being has been weakened by the sin of selfishness and pride in the abyss of the senses of the divine being and their communication by God to the one... Finding in himself nothing but self-loathing and being in a solitude which he has prepared for himself, he gives

<sup>1</sup> Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, Ed. IBMBOR, București, 1997, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Pr. Dumitru POPESCU, „Pocăința ca refacere a legăturii credincioșilor cu Dumnezeu și cu semenii”, în *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, 1971, nr. 9-10, p. 1027.

<sup>3</sup> Pr. Constantin GALERIU, „Sensul creștin al pocăinței”, în *Studii Teologice*, 1967, nr. 9-10, p. 487.

<sup>4</sup> Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 328.



hallucinatory proportions to his loneliness and to the impossibility of real communication to which he has become accustomed in the course of earthly life. This keeps him in a kind of unremitting schizophrenic state."<sup>5</sup>

Reconciliation with God is indissolubly linked to the awareness of inseparability from our fellow human beings. Interpersonal relationships are deformed by sin precisely in the fact of the interruption or inconsistency of the relationship with the other. The words we can say to one another are finite, and love, however strong, is doomed to death. We are therefore faced with a certain perceptible contradiction in the human being, that between the "infinity" of his person and the finite time that is directed towards death. Hence the whole human tragedy. He can never reconcile himself with the thought of death; as a person, he is opposed to death and to the time that kills him.

But openness through the word also implies the inexhaustibility of the word. The word is not only a hardened expression of being, but it is being itself personally existing. For Dumitru Stăniloae, the word-reason constitutes the very foundation of man's being, which ultimately leads to the relationship with God through Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word. The ontological basis of the human being is precisely the call to existence through the Word on the part of God-Trinity. "The identification of the rational with immortality will be better understood if we consider man's existence unto death as non-rational or meaningless, but also if we regard the rational as a speaker. *Man speaks because he is moved by God, because he is placed by speech in relationship with God; and because he speaks, or rather because he responds, man will never finish responding, because God will never conclude telling him what he is and showing him his love, and man will never finish understanding and wanting to understand even more and to express his joy, gratitude and doxology for what God shows him.*"<sup>6</sup>

The loss of the dimension of communitarian-personal existence has meant for man the loss of himself, wandering among the countless objects of this world. The fall is first of all the breaking of the dialogue with God, in the absence of which man loses the meaning of his own existence, is diminished as a person. From now on, every love is doomed to death, and every word carries the grim threat of the end.

Coming out of the living relationship with the Word as a person, "man found himself alone before a world of objects, shut up for him in a meaningless rationality, or with a meaning limited exclusively to earthly life alone, without an extension into eternity; he found himself outside the relationship with the supreme Person who gives meaning to the reasons of things, and meaning and life to the human persons created by Him, and a continual newness; he found himself before a world subject to processes of uniform repetition of the continual making and unmaking of its unities, which for individual human persons means death."<sup>7</sup>

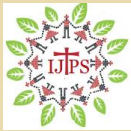
If "man's thirst for perfect dialogue with others can only be satisfied with and through the divine Persons", this becomes almost impossible after the fall into sin. In the new historical condition, salvation will be tantamount to reopening access to communion. "To this end one of these Persons became man, while remaining also God, in order that we too might reach the perfect dialogue both among ourselves as men and with the Holy Trinity."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, *Chipul nemuritor al lui Dumnezeu*, vol. 1, Ed. Cristal, București, 1995, p. 72-73.

<sup>6</sup> Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 1, p. 268.

<sup>7</sup> Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 2, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, *Studii de teologie dogmatică ortodoxă. Omul și Dumnezeu*, Ed. Mitropoliei Olteniei, Craiova, 1990, p. 201.



## 2. LOGOS, WORD AND REASON - EXPRESSED IN THE ASPECT OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Without Christ as the divine-human Person, death and solitude remain the reverse of being. Being itself is either divine-humanity or nothingness. Man's existence would be a terribly lonely existence without the love of an eternal Person who goes to death in his love for man. God himself dies. This is the meaning that Western Christianity has often lost in the legalization of the act of mercy. Salvation means a reconversion of everything we know about the evolution of life: "But what shall I say, what shall I say? The wonder frightens me. The Ancient of Days became a child. He that sitteth upon a throne, high and lifted up is laid in the manger. He who is undefiled, He who is pure, He who is unblemished, He who is uncorrupted, He who is without a body is held by human hands; He who has broken the bonds of sin is presented in diapers, because He wills it. He will transform dishonor into honor, he will clothe with glory the one who is dishonored, and He will make the one who is subject to reproach to be a figure of virtue. Therefore he takes my body, that I may make room in me for His Word. He takes my body, that he may give his Spirit. He giveth to me, and taketh from me, that He may give me the treasure of life. He takes my body to sanctify me. He gives me His Spirit to save me."<sup>9</sup>

God died out of love for man, to save him from death. It is the love of the person who dies so that the beloved may die no more. It is what the human person also feels in all the tragedy of his mortal existence. If there is a truly pressing reality that pervades existence, it is not so much death as it is love that desires that the loved one may die no more.

The inability of a simple man to fulfill this tendency of being is expressed by analogy with the encounter with a saint. "What one experiences in the presence of a saint is a pale analogy to the experience which the person of Jesus Christ brought to the apostles and ever since to those who believe."<sup>10</sup> The insufficiency of the personal relationship in which death intervenes is ultimately seen as fulfilled in the existence of an eternal person, as a "supreme Thou." As Martin Buber observes, "through everything that becomes present to us, we glimpse the edge of the eternal Thou, from each we feel its breeze, in each Thou we utter the eternal."<sup>11</sup>

Logos means both *Word* and *reason* - expressed in the aspect of interpersonal communication. The meaning of the word is to open the being to another. The word has a meaning and stands in connection with understanding - a point also insistently made by existentialists.<sup>12</sup> It is not a lifeless concept, but through words communion is expressed. Christ is called the *Word*. His character as divine Person is thereby felt in the utmost relation and closeness to us. If we fragment language by losing the meaning of words, the Word is an address which calls for the whole being. It is an entry into a personal relationship with the divine Thou who also became man. This relationship ultimately enables man to emerge from the limitation and relativity of an existence in death. Reconciliation involves not just going through a legal procedure but confessing the truth of our being to Christ.

Until then, however, we may be deficient in dialogue with our neighbors. The fact that we desire more and tend towards the other can never reach fulfillment without Christ. Unless we encounter Christ as You, our relationship with every person we meet is doomed to

<sup>9</sup> Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Cuvânt la Nașterea Mântuitorului nostru Iisus Hristos*, în vol. *Predici la sărbători împărătești...*, p. 26-27.

<sup>10</sup> Pr. Prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, Ed. Arhidiecezană, Sibiu, 1943, p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> Martin BUBER, *Eu și Tu*, trad. Șt.A. Doinaș, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1992, p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> Martin HEIDEGGER, *Ființă și timp*, trad. G. Liiceanu și C. Cioabă, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2003, p. 222.



death. Without Christ, we cannot fully live existence as persons. Being has as its meaning the supreme personal reality, it has Christ as its meaning. Man appears as an incomplete being without Christ, without the relationship with Him. In the absence of Christ, all that remains is the desolation of a continuous absence.

The restoration of the human being starts from its dialogical essence. The Savior Christ opens the framework of dialogue, and we are capable of responding to the call. The regeneration or re-rejuvenation of human nature as a reversal of the effects of sin presupposes a continual growth in dialogue with God and others. In the Church-communion we are not merely passive objects influenced by divine grace, but persons responding to divine love, freely opening ourselves to divine grace. And this is most evident in the sacrament of reconciliation and healing for sins committed.

The Church is a place of permanent spiritual rejuvenation. As St. John Chrysostom admirably expressed it: "At weddings, after the seven days, the wedding pantries are closed; but here, in this holy pantry, if you wish, you can stay forever. Moreover, at weddings, after the first or even the second month, the bride is no longer so dear to the bridegroom; here it is not so, but the more time passes, the more the Bridegroom's love is fervent, the more the embraces are unending, the more living together is spiritual, only if we lead a pure life, if we are awake. Again, the bride and bridegroom's bodies are also transformed. After youth comes old age. But here in these holy chambers, after old age comes youth. And if we will, this youth never ends. The grace is great, but it will be even greater if we will."<sup>13</sup>

Of course, often in patristic works, youth is synonymous with predisposition to sin. It is the most vulnerable stage of biological development, when the impulse to disobedience is hard to control. At the height of its physical growth, the human body is tempted to savor the world here and there, forgetting eternal values. Old age comes as a consequence of this indulgence in the pleasures of the world, as a way of reflecting on the ephemerality of life in the face of approaching death. But this physical slope does not automatically bring us closer to God, even if He can be seen as the only way to face death. Youth claims an endlessness of life, but paradoxically only the image of death can reveal the way to it: "Let us go to the graves, please, and see the mysteries there. Let us see the decomposed man, the broken bones, and the rotting bodies. If you are wise, look! If you are wise, tell me: Who is the king, who is the soldier? Who is the master, who is the servant? Who is wise, who is unwise? Where is the beauty of youth? Where is the beautiful face? Where are the bright eyes? Where is the well-formed nose? Where are the burning lips? Where is the beauty of the cheeks? Are they not all dust? Are they not all ashes? Is not all decay? Thinking on these things, brethren, and remembering our last day, let us turn, while we still have time, from our erring way."<sup>14</sup>

Forgiveness and reconciliation are not automatic, mechanical acts, but presuppose a rejuvenating, regenerating openness to authentic dialogue with God. The liturgical act of forgiveness is closely linked to man's longing for God. Acceptance of ageing and of inevitable death is indeed the possibility of turning to God, but it is not only the fear of death that makes us heal, but the love that rejuvenates the soul of the one who sets out on the path of repentance.<sup>15</sup> The positive dimension of confession, that of loving dialogical openness, predominates in Eastern spirituality.

<sup>13</sup> Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Cuvânt la Înviere*, V, în vol. *Predici la sărbători împărătești...*, p. 147.

<sup>14</sup> Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Omiliile despre pocăință*, trad. D. Fecioru, Ed. IBMBOR, București, 1998, p. 180-181

<sup>15</sup> Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Cuvânt la Fericitul Avraam*, I, în vol. *Predici la sărbători împărătești și cuvântări de laudă la sfinți*, trad. Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, Ed. IBMBOR, București, 2002, p. 559



The decisive step for the penitent in the sacrament of Confession is the actual confession of sins. It is emphasized that it is not enough simply to repent inwardly, but also to eliminate them from within the being, to exteriorize their reality. "The one who confesses his sins is protected, on the one hand, from the danger of relativizing them, that is, of weakening his repentance and continuing to repeat them; on the other hand, from the danger of the contrary disposition of despair, that is, of a state of torment which goes hand in hand with the tendency to mask it, but without complete success."<sup>16</sup>

If the confession of sins is a need felt quite acutely, the possibility of confessing them is given to us in the person of the priest, as the only one to whom we can really and effectively open ourselves. To an ordinary man it is difficult to confess one's sins, the dark secret of one's being. "My distrust of the other, a distrust which prevents me from confessing my sins to him, is justified by the fact that I can hardly find anyone who does not take advantage of the sins I confess to him to despise me, to hinder me on the basis of them at important moments in life from satisfying legitimate needs; I can hardly find anyone who does not communicate to others the weaknesses and sins I have confessed to him, who does not cause me all sorts of disadvantages by confessing what I have done."<sup>17</sup>

The presence of the priest is salvific, however, because the dialogue with the priest is somehow assured by the silent presence of Christ. This constitutes both a possibility of literally telling one's sins to someone else, in order to free oneself from them, and also the environment that allows the sincere opening of the soul in recognizing them. "The presence of Christ between the two of them is suggested by the fact that the priest listens to the penitent's confession before the icon of Christ, or says to the penitent after the introductory prayers: 'Behold, my son, Christ stands unseen, receiving your confession with humility. Therefore, do not be ashamed, nor be afraid, nor hide from me anything of what you have done, but tell me all things without doubting and without fear, so that you may receive pardon from our Lord Jesus Christ'. The priest demands complete sincerity from him, for his confession is not made only before man, who may be lied to, or before whom confession may be counted as a humiliation unworthy of human pride, but especially before Christ."<sup>18</sup>

In the act of confession, in the dialogical form, the barriers created by sin to communion with others are literally removed. Sin has created a separation from which the penitent now frees himself, overcomes it, and overcomes his own sin. Confession restores communion. The sacrament of Confession is thus "the sacrament of the restoration of full communion between a believer and the priest as the seen agent of Christ and as the representative of the Church. It is therefore the Mystery of restoring the penitent to communion with Christ and the Church, preparing him for his communion with the Body of Christ."<sup>19</sup> It is only in this setting that the sinner returns to the truth, the authenticity of his being, rediscovers himself. For Paul Florensky, "man actualizes his being, his deepest reality, opening himself only in relationship with another, in the dual unity of love", and "in this unity the Holy Spirit himself is present as the wellspring of love".<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Înnoirea și sfințirea credincioșilor în Taina Mărturisirii, după învățătura Bisericii Ortodoxe”, în *Ortodoxia*, 1986, nr. 3, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, „Înnoirea și sfințirea credincioșilor în Taina Mărturisirii”, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, p. 89.

<sup>19</sup> Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, p. 89.

<sup>20</sup> Pr. Dumitru Gh. RADU, „Caracterul ecleziologic al Sfințelor Taine și problema intercomuniunii”, teză de doctorat, în *Ortodoxia*, 1978, nr. 1-2, p. 26.



Confession engages the believer in the most vivid and personal way possible. Dialogical confession brings out the person, erased by sins, cast into individualism. Confession of sins is thus more than a mere enumeration of sins with a view to erasing them. "More than a cleansing from sins, it is a saving and edifying sacrament. It builds us up, forms us spiritually, according to the revealing image of life in the Holy Spirit of Christ."<sup>21</sup>

This personal dialogue constitutes a uniqueness of the Sacrament of Confession in relation to the other Sacraments of the Church. Grace has as its object human freedom itself, the soul of the recipient, with which it cooperates or which it restores through dialogue. In Confession "the priest enters into the soul of the penitent, which opens itself to him willingly; it does not remain a fleeting and superficial contact. Both the penitent and the priest make a much greater contribution in this sacrament. In the other sacraments, grace works on the objective, ontic level, at the root of the being, often in an often-insubstantial way. Here it works through the more detailed and vibrant involvement of the penitent, through confession and repentance, then of the priest in the appreciation of the means recommended to the penitent for the spiritual healing of the one who is sickened by heavy sins, and then again through the penitent's contribution to their fulfillment."<sup>22</sup>

In the end, confession of sins is revealed as liberating. This is reflected in the spiritual state of the penitent, who, through the priest, has rediscovered his identity as a person in a saving relationship with Christ.<sup>23</sup>

Practice of confession involves a spiritual pedagogy that has been amply developed in the tradition of the Church. The confessor is our "father" because he has received the grace to give birth to others for a new spiritual life in Christ: "O my children, over whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Galatians IV, 19).

In the course of history, alongside these confessors, parallel to the monastic life, there appeared those "starets", "elders". They were often ordained, counselors and guides of conscience. Although this guidance did not have sacramental power, "this exemption is explained by the monastic state, a state of absolute repentance: masters of this art, the starets can help others."<sup>24</sup>

John Meyendorff and Paul Evdokimov speak of those spiritual fathers who can be simple monks, before whom it was possible to confess sins in monasteries: "that institution of starets, "spiritual fathers" more than that of "guides (directors) of conscience" indicates the Orthodox people always in search not so much of a hierarchical instance formed, but of a living manifestation of graces, of the authority that comes not from a function, but directly from God and in which the Holy Spirit manifests himself"<sup>25</sup>.

The starets were often "spiritual fathers" of bishops. It is not specified, however, whether these starets officiated the Mystery of Confession. In the twelfth century, the canonist Balsamon makes a clear distinction between the ministry of counselor and the power to forgive sins and reaffirms the classical tradition of bishop and priests entrusted with the ministry of forgiveness.

<sup>21</sup> Pr. Constantin GALERIU, „Taina Mărturisirii”, în *Ortodoxia*, 1979, nr. 3-4, p. 485.

<sup>22</sup> Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, p. 87.

<sup>23</sup> Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, p. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Paul EVDOKIMOV, *Vârstele vieții spirituale*, trad. I. Buga și A. Manolescu, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2006, p. 314.

<sup>25</sup> Pr. Dumitru RADU, „Preotul ca săvârșitor al Tainei Spovedaniei și puterea lui de a dezlega păcatele, după învățătura ortodoxă”, în *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, 1982, nr. 9-10, p. 828.



The Confession made to these non-ordained "confessors" was not related to the Mystery of Confession, Alexander Schmemmann states, but was an integral part of monastic life and discipline based on total obedience. This confession is of a "non-sacramental type, compared, mutatis mutandis, with what we today call 'counseling' or 'spiritual guidance'".<sup>26</sup>

The functions of the two modes of exercising spiritual paternity that have coexisted in the life of the Church have never been confused. Thus, the notion of practice of confession appears as a complex concept with two aspects: liturgical sacramental, linked to the administration of the Sacrament, and pedagogical-pastoral. From the sacramental perspective, the practice of confession is an ordination, a special blessing by which the bishop gives the priest the right to hear confessions and to bind or loosen people's sins.

The priest is more than a simply agent carrying out a divine ministry; he is the dialogue partner, the one in whose reciprocity the penitent regains forgiveness and communion. But he does this not by his own power, but by Christ's. "Repentance is a very profound encounter of the penitent with Christ, for it must bring not only the forgiveness of sins, but also the actualization, or more precisely the reactivation of communion with Christ."<sup>27</sup>

Forgiveness takes place in one voice of the priest and the penitent before Christ, before God. They reproduce the very mystery of the Church. Confession thus supports the Church's condition of unity of the members in Christ. It allows these members to be reinvigorated, highlighting the ecclesial character of salvation in the dialogue between the confessor and the penitent. It is never considered as an individual act. We cannot always obtain forgiveness by isolating ourselves from others, but forgiveness always comes through the openness to the other.<sup>28</sup>

Everything takes place in the ecclesial space, even if the "elders" mentioned in the patristic tradition and in monastic histories often live in isolated places. However, they keep in a silent way the link with the Church, their asceticism not being a separation from the others: "Do not be separated from the Church, for no one is stronger than the Church. Your hope, salvation and redemption is the Church. It is higher than the heavens and wider than the earth. It never grows old, but is always in full glory."<sup>29</sup>

Old age is synonymous with wisdom and with a state of strength in the spiritual struggle. "This youth knows no old age, it is not subject to infirmity, it is not lost through lack of vigor, it does not weaken with time, it cannot be conquered by anything, it is not impoverished by anything, except sin. For its old age comes through the weariness of sin."<sup>30</sup>

Such an elder can pass on his experience to his disciples, his advice can strengthen them in the fight against passions.

## CONCLUSION

Old age is, of course, also the result of ascetic effort. The latter, apart from being a process of mortification of the body, aims at healing the bodily impulses to consume to the point of destruction this physical world, the inclinations of all kinds to the gluttony of

<sup>26</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Postul cel Mare*, trad. A. și L. Constantin, Ed. Doris, București., 1998, p. 168-169.

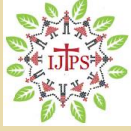
<sup>27</sup> Pr. D. RADU, „Caracterul ecleziologic...”, p. 303.

<sup>28</sup> Pr. D. STĂNILOAE, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 3, p. 96.

<sup>29</sup> Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Despre Rai și Scriptură. Despre iubirea lui Dumnezeu pentru noi. Despre «Șezut-a Împărăteasa de-a dreapta Ta»*, trad. V. Manolache, Ed. Bizantină, București, 2009, p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Cateheze baptismale*, trad. M. Hancheș, Ed. Oastea Domnului, Sibiu, 2003, p. 102.





material pleasures. Ultimately, life here, instead of being a journey to death, becomes a continual regeneration and rejuvenation in God.

Man, reborn in Baptism and constantly renewed by the mystery of Confession, lives in the light of Christ's resurrection. Rebirth comes through Baptism, and through Confession and Repentance we continually cleanse our souls. "Our soul, being aged and obsolete in sins, through Baptism has been renewed, as being created anew, for which also we desire heavenly life."<sup>31</sup> Spiritual nourishment enlightens human nature, gradually growing the one reborn through Baptism. "The beauty of the soul never fades, and even in old age it has many lovers and continually flourishes. So that we too may gain this beauty, let us covet those who have it and make ourselves enamored of them. For only in this way will we be able to take this beauty and enjoy eternal goodness."<sup>32</sup>

In the Orthodox tradition, Confession is not just for the formal purpose of being absolved of sins. It is an ascent of the opening of our person freed from sins to God's communication of the very life unending. The light that those "elders" share with us is a light of the eternal living Word. Old age becomes a source of spiritual life, continually rejuvenating our soul. The revelation of our depths through the confession of sins becomes an open door to gradually fill ourselves with the unspoken divine - to move towards that inexhaustible dialogue open to the being created by the eternal communion of divine persons.

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<sup>31</sup> Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Comentariile sau Explicarea Epistolei către Galateni*, trad. T. Athanasiu, Tipografia Editoare „Dacia”, Iași, 1901, p. 126.

<sup>32</sup> Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Tâlcuiri la Epistola a doua către Corinteni*, trad. T. Athanasiu, Ed. Sophia, București, 2007, p. 85.



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