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Eucharist and Hesychia in a totalitarian Society

Abstract

The Eucharist is closely connected to Hesychia, the stillness of the mind by freeing it from any thoughts, so that chasing away any external influence, man should stay before God in a state of pure prayer. The guard of the mind through calling the Lord's name finds its fulfillment in the Eucharist. On the one hand, the stillness of the mind achieved through Jesus prayer is the most appropriate preparation for receiving the Eucharist, and on the other hand, the communion with the Body and Blood of the Lord opens us the depths of the heart so that our mind might descend and find peace in pure prayer. Thus, receiving communion from *the cup of salvation* and calling the Lord's name (Ps. 116, 13) represent two major pillars which support the new life in Christ.



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Keywords

Jesus prayer, communion, communist prisons, life in Chris

“I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord” (Ps. 116, 13).

1 The Holy Eucharist – Mystery of Mysteries

The Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition reveal to us the highest calling of man, that is, to be completed in the likeness of God through the union with Christ and the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. It is what the Holy Fathers of the Church call with audacity - theosis by Grace, the perfection and the plenary pervasion of man by God¹. If our protofathers fell from this great calling, listening to the “*voice of the stranger*” (Jn. 10, 5) and looked for their self-theosis without God, the incarnation of the Son of God reopens the way to theosis.

“Now, human nature – through the hypostatic union of the two natures in the person of Christ - is irrevocably unified with the divine nature (...). Now, no matter how much we as men sin, no matter how much we separate ourselves from God – if, through repentance, we wish to unite again with God, we can succeed. We can unite with Him and so become gods by Grace”².

Man’s union with God is fulfilled in Church where we are reborn through the Holy Mysteries to the new life in Christ and with Christ, led by the Holy Spirit. And the Mystery of the

¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Ascetica și Mistica Ortodoxă. Vol. II. Mistica*, (Alba Iulia, Deisis Publishing House, 1993), p. 192.

² Archimandrite George Kapsanis, *Îndumnezeirea – scopul vieții omului*, translated from Greek by hieroschemamonk Ștefan Nuțescu, (București, Evanghelismos Publishing House, 2006), p. 18.

Mysteries, which crowns everything that was given through all the other Mysteries and unites most plenarily each believer and all in God Who is One and infinite in love, perfecting the communion with God, is the Holy Eucharist³. As Mystery of the union with Christ and with each other in Church through the communion with His Body and Blood, the Holy Eucharist is the greatest Mystery and the centre of the life of the Church, because one cannot go beyond it, or add anything to it⁴.

The Holy Eucharist is indeed the greatest gift that God offers man because He Himself is offered to us as the true food and drink for eternal life, as the Saviour clearly says to the Hebrews: "*Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life*" (Jn. 6, 54).

2 The Personal and Ecclesial aspect of the Eucharist

Starting from the words of Christ the Saviour and the experience of the Church, the Holy Fathers, inspired by the Holy Spirit, discerned with awe the implications of this overwhelming central mystery of our faith. In essence, the teaching of the Church, expressed by the Holy Fathers, affirms the two aspects of the Holy Eucharist: the communion with the Body and Blood of Christ is the privileged means by which the Son of God unites with us and offers us with love His divine and eternal life, sanctifies us and leads us to theosis; at the same time, the Eucharist is the mystery of the unity of the Church,

³ Dionysios the Areopagite, *Despre Ierarhia Bisericească*, III,I, in: *Opere complete*, translation, introduction and footnotes by D. Stăniloae, (București, Paideia Publishing House, 1996), p. 78.

⁴ Nicholas Cabasilas, *Despre viața în Hristos*, IV, Romanian translation by Teodor Bodogae, in: Nicholas Cabasilas, *Scrieri. Tâlcuirea Dumnezeieștii Liturghii și Despre Viața în Hristos*, translation, introduction and footnotes by Ene Braniște and Teodor Bodogae, (București, Arhiepiscopia Bucureștilor Publishing House, 1989), p. 193.

because, each of us, being united with Christ and becoming a body with Him, He unites us all in the Church, His Body⁵.

The Eucharist completes the other Mysteries and fulfills the personal theosis of people, as we become one with Christ, we dwell in Him and He dwells in us. Receiving communion with the Body and Blood of the Lord we receive Christ whole not only in our body, but also in our soul.

“The body and blood of Christ are making for the support of our soul and body, without being consumed or suffering corruption, not making for the draught, but for our being and preservation, a protection against all kinds of injury, a purging from all uncleanness”⁶.

The Body of Christ is so intimately pervaded by the Holy Spirit that receiving Christ also means receiving the Holy Spirit. Receiving Christ, we unite with Him and we receive the power to engage with love in the struggle to fulfill God’s will. Each time one receives communion means nourishment with the Body and life-creating Blood of Christ the Resurrected One, the Body together with the Soul and with His Godhead, His Body full of the Holy Spirit, it means a plus of power in our spiritual struggle. Father Stăniloae remarks that “Christ’s divine energies, and thus, Christ Himself extends his work in us from His Body and therefore we need to receive this Body as often as possible”⁷.

The Eucharist as Mystery of personal theosis is at the same time the mystery of the unity of the Church, because the believer’s

⁵ See a selection of texts in this sense, analysed by Archimandrite Placide Deseille, *L’Eucharistie et la divination des chretiens selon les Peres de l’Eglise*, (Monastere Saint Antoine le Grand, 1995), pp. 3-24.

⁶ Saint John of Damascus, *De fide orthodoxa*, IV, XIII, PG 94, 1117-1148, apud Callistus and Ignatius Xanthopoulos, *Metoda sau cele 100 de capete*, 92, in: *Filocalia*, vol. VIII, translation, introduction and footnotes by Dumitru Stăniloae, (București, IBMBOR Publishing House, 1979), p. 205.

⁷ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Liturghia comunității și jertfa interioară în viziunea filocalică*, in: “Ortodoxia”, year XXX, nr 1-2, 1978, p. 395.

personal accomplishment does not mean separation from the others. The very term *person* – unlike the term *individual* – means opening towards the communion with God and one's fellow beings. The Body of Christ sacrificed and sanctified, whom we all receive, lacks any selfish impulse and is full of the effusion of offering Himself, so that we also take this effusion of offering ourselves to God and to the other people⁸.

The two aspects of the Holy Eucharist, personal accomplishment and the union in Church, the personal and the ecclesial one, are woven and presuppose each other, the more so as the Eucharist, everyone's communion with the Body and Blood of the Lord, is the climax and the *raison d'être* of the Divine Liturgy, the service that unites the community in a wonderful iconic representation and an actualisation of the iconomy of salvation.

3 The Extension of the Liturgy of the Community in the inner Liturgy

Father Dumitru Stăniloae remarked that the Fathers of Philokalia mention the extension of the participation in the Liturgy of the community, which becomes plenary in receiving communion, in a personal, inner liturgy of the faithful by chasing away sinful thoughts, gathering the mind in the heart and directing towards Christ with love⁹. Thus, Saint Mark the Ascetic shows that if the effort to direct with love our mind towards God means sacrificing the firstborn thought on the altar of the soul, and Christ, dwelling in the innermost chamber, the most secret and the most pure of the heart through

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 390.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 394-397.

Baptism and Eucharist, receives the firstborn thoughts of the mind and consumes them in the divine fire of His Love¹⁰.

This presupposes freeing from passions by fulfilling the commandment of loving God above all things, so that the thoughts can be brought as sacrifice, not bitten by *beasts*, that is by the passions that draw them to sin and besmear them¹¹. Through watchfulness, for which we pray in epiclesis in order to be the first fruit of receiving communion¹², through the guard the mind from any exterior thoughts and tending completely towards God, one reaches such a deep communion that Saint Mark the Ascetic dares to say that Christ, that we eat in the Eucharist, “*eats*” our mind, uniting it thoroughly with Him: “Just as at the beginning of faith through Baptism, the Body of Christ was made food for the believer, in the same way, now, the mind, becomes strong in faith and pure by chasing thoughts and by hope, makes itself food for Jesus”¹³.

Referring to the extension of the communion with the Lord’s Body and Blood at the Liturgy of the community in the inner liturgy which consists in making our mind “*food*” for Christ by freeing from the slavery of thoughts and directing it towards Christ, Saint Mark the Ascetic draws attention on the close connection between Eucharist and hesychia.

4 Eucharist and Hesychia

Hesychia is a fundamental concept in Orthodox spirituality and means the stillness of the mind by freeing it from any thoughts,

¹⁰ Saint Mark the Ascetic, *Răspuns celor ce se îndoiesc de Dumnezeiescul Botez*, in : *Filocalia*, vol. I, translation, introduction and footnotes by Dumitru Stăniloae, (București, IBMBOR Publishing House, 2008), pp. 340-341.

¹¹ Saint Mark the Ascetic, *Răspuns...*, p. 339.

¹² *Liturghier*, (București, Editura IBMBOR, 2012), p. 177.

¹³ Saint Mark the Ascetic, *Răspuns...*, p. 346.

so that chasing away any external influence, man should appear before God in pure prayer. This is the state to which every Christian should aspire, both monks and laymen. Hesychia can be defined as dwelling incessantly in God with the mind in the heart, “*going inside and finding peace*”¹⁴. The beginning of the hesychast way is to fight passions and the privileged method in order to free ourselves from the slavery of thoughts is to call repeatedly the Lord’s name by saying the Jesus prayer.

Philokalic writings teach us how man can purify, illuminate and complete himself, and although they insist especially on inner asceticism, on guarding the mind and on unceasing prayer, they do not ignore the Mysteries of the Church and do not put forth a non-sacramental spirituality. On the contrary, they imply that the spiritual ascent – man’s purification of the passions, illumination of mind and theosis – consists in man’s appropriation and bearing fruit in him of Baptism and Eucharist¹⁵. Thus, Hesychios of Sinai, an author particularly preoccupied with watchfulness as a spiritual method through which, with God’s help, man is first freed from impassioned thoughts and words and leads him to the knowledge of God¹⁶, shows that through watchfulness we actually allow Christ, received in the Eucharist, to cleanse us and illuminate us¹⁷.

The essential importance of the reception of the Divine Mysteries in the spiritual ascent is also affirmed by monks Callistus and Ignatius Xanthopoulos who, at the end of the XIVth

¹⁴ Father Zacharias of the Monastery Saint John the Baptist in Essex considers that this expression includes in itself the whole tradition and theology of hesychasm. See Archimandrite Zacharias Zaharou, *Omul cel tainic al inimii (I Petru 3, 4)*, translated by Monahia Tecla, (București, Basilica Publishing House, 2014), p.

¹⁵ Archimandrite Placide Deseille, *L’Eucharistie et la divination...*, p. 20.

¹⁶ Hesychios of Sinai, *Scurt cuvânt de folos sufletului și mântuitor despre trezvie și virtute*, Suta întâia, 1, in: *Filocalia*, vol. IV, translation, introduction and footnotes by Dumitru Stăniloae, (Sibiu, Tipografia Arhidiecezană, 1948), p.41.

¹⁷ Hesychios of Sinai, *Scurt cuvânt...*, Suta întâia, 100, p.66.

century, compiled a work containing almost exclusively writings of ancient Fathers, destined to monks and which, like the *Ladder* of Saint John Climacus, aims at presenting systematically the whole spiritual ascent, insisting on the importance of incessantly calling the name of Jesus, feeling deeply His love, as a power on which is based the entire struggle to free from passions and progress in one's own accomplishment and union with God. Towards the end of the writing, as an introduction to an ample selection of texts on the Divine Eucharist, the authors affirm:

"But nothing helps us and contributes so much to the purification of the soul and illumination of the mind, and to the sanctification of the body, and to the transformation of both to a more divine state and to immortality, but also to defeating passions and demons, or to the union above nature with God, as the continuous communion, with a pure heart and soul, as much as it is possible for man, with the most pure, immortal and life-creating Mysteries, with the very precious Body and Blood of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ"¹⁸.

Purification, illumination and sanctification brought by partaking of the Divine Mysteries are explained through the fact that in the Eucharist we partake of Christ, Who reached Immortality through the cross, and Who remains in a mysterious way in a sacrifice state so as to give us the possibility to mortify the former man and to offer ourselves, freed from the chains of any selfishness, to God. The Eucharist is hence the source of a spiritual life continuously improved in the sense of progressing into completeness in the likeness of Christ, as in the Eucharist the believer unites with Christ Who lives and extends in him all His saving acts and states, in continuous action: the incarnation, the sacrifice and the resurrection¹⁹.

¹⁸ Callistus and Ignatius Xanthopoulos, *Metoda sau cele 100 de capete*, 91, in: *Filocalia*, vol. VIII, p. 201.

¹⁹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Taina Euharistiei, izvor de viață spirituală în Ortodoxie*, in : "Ortodoxia", year XXXI, nr. 3-4, 1979, p. 510.

In this sense, Saint Nicholas Cabasilas compiles, again in the XIVth century, an admirable synthesis of Orthodox spirituality, entitled "*The Life in Christ*", in which man can reach theosis in Church uniting with Christ through the Holy Mysteries, if to these he adds his own endeavour of keeping and deepening the new life in Christ fulfilling God's will, animated by the thought of the infinite love God reveals in Christ: "We must have the same communion through will and mind with the One with Whom we share the same blood...In other words, we must, as much as it is humanly possible, to force our mind to obey God's will, not to wish anyone else except Him and to rejoice what he rejoices"²⁰.

Christ Himself, the One we receive in the Eucharist, strenghtens us in the struggle to live the new life:

"O! What overwhelming mystery! The soul and the body and all the faculties immediately become spiritual, for our soul is mingled with his soul, our body with his body, and our blood with his blood. And then, how strong our mind must be, when it is mastered by God's mind, how resolute our will, if the Lord Himself guides it and how fervent our courage when fire itself effuses it!"²¹.

Saint Nicholas Cabasilas is a distinct figure among spiritual writers, being a layman who refers to the possibility of living in Christ and reaching theosis not only for monks, but also for laymen, through the Holy Mysteries and our endeavour to fulfill God's will, will which consists precisely in our sanctification. He does not urge us to leave the world, but to sanctify our occupations, showing that the divine life effused in us through the communion with the Body and Blood of the Lord works in us to the extent in which the attention of our mind is directed incessantly towards love, if we meditate on God's law, if we chase away impassionate thoughts with good thoughts, and first of all thinking of Christ, the ultimate climax of goodness in

²⁰ Nicholas Cabasilas, *Despre viața în Hristos*, VI, p. 235.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 195.

the whole world²². Through this, Saint Nicholas Cabasilas expresses for laymen what the hesychast writers teach the monks, that is, the stillness of the mind by freeing the mind from any thoughts and calling the name of Jesus, so that man finds himself before God in a pure prayer.

Callistus and Ignatius Xanthopoulos, in their synthesis of the hesychast spirituality, mention the unceasing calling of the name of the Lord, as well as the continuous communion with the Body and Blood of the Lord. Thus, the guard of the mind by calling the name of the Lord finds its fulfillment in the Eucharist, in participating in the Holy Liturgy and receiving the Body and Blood of the Saviour. On the one hand, the stillness of the mind through the Jesus prayer is the most adequate preparation for the reception of the Eucharist, and on the other hand, receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord, Christ, Who dwells in us, purifies us and opens the depths of our heart so that the mind can descend and find peace in pure prayer. Taking communion from the “cup of salvation” and calling the name of the Lord (Ps. 115, 4) represent the two pillars that support living in Church the new life in Christ.

5 Eucharist and Hesychia in Communist Prisons

The instauration of the atheist totalitarian communist regime in Romania in the middle of the XXth century took place when one could see the signs of a revival of the hesychast tradition of descending the mind in the heart and saying the Jesus prayer (*the Burning Bush Movement* and the beginning of the translation and publication of the *Philokalia* by Father Dumitru Stăniloae), as well as the signs of a liturgical renewal by focusing on the continual communion of the Holy Mysteries (Father Ioan Iovan and *the Vladimirești phenomenon*). The totalitarian regime intervened brutally, arresting the promoters

²² See Nicholas Cabasilas, *Despre viața în Hristos*, VI, pp. 233-247.

of both tendencies, but the spiritual work went on in freedom²³, but especially in prison.

The arrest, not only of the main promoters of the movements of spiritual renewal, but of the people's elites in general – regarded as dangerous for the stability of the new regime – makes prison become the place where many political prisoners experience true prayer and taste the joy of encountering the living God.

“In prisons we were so well guarded and so impelled, that we could only think upwards, vertically, of God. Usually, man prays fervently when he has sorrows, and in prison sorrows were really appalling. The prayers of the prisoners were received by God, and this was shown in the fact that they were fortified, so that despite all the destitution and wickedness inflicted on the poor prisoners, they all had a serenity and a joy which could only come from above, from God. Thus, the prayers in prisons might have resembled the ones of the Desert Fathers or of the holy martyrs burnt at the stake, who were joyful and prayed God while fire was burning below them, thanking God for this sacrifice brought before His Holiness”²⁴.

The isolation from the world and especially the suffering in prisons led many not only to faith, but also to a thoroughness of the spiritual life, to experiences of grace which sometimes

²³ A wonderful example of deep understanding, of living and experiencing discreetly the connection between Eucharist and hesychia in the communist totalitarian society is that of Father Miron Mihăilescu (1914-1998) from Ocna Sibiului, who gave up his academic career, as assistant of Father Dumitru Stăniloae in order to dedicate himself to priesthood and celebrated daily for almost 60 years, insisting on the frequent communion of the faithful and on spiritual watchfulness which intercedes the experience of the permanent presence of Christ in our heart and leads us to accomplishment. See the testimony of Metropolitan Serafim Joantă in: *Iubind ca Dumnezeu. Liturghii după Liturghii cu Părintele Miron Mihăilescu*, edited by Gabriela Moldoveanu, (București, Christiana Publishing House, 2004), pp. 11-14.

²⁴ Sofian Boghiu, *Duhovnici români în dialog cu tinerii*, (București, Bizantină Publishing House, 2014), p. 47.

outdo the ones of the hermits in the desert: Father Arsenie Papacioc confesses: “There was no other method of study, of preparation, which could offer the possibilities of spiritualisation, of deepening the vivid relation with God than the suffering there. I bless that period. I spent years in desert places, but there I didn’t have the possibility to deepen things related to eternity, of an eternal nature, as I did in prison”²⁵. The period of imprisonment was indeed a blessed period from the point of view of spiritual experiences for the ones who assumed it with repentance, because God the Lover of Mankind, allowing this trial to come over them, did not wrong them, but effused with bounteousness His grace over them.

The prison proves an environment favourable for the hesychast work of gathering the mind in the heart by calling the name of the Lord. The systematic practice of the Jesus prayer started as early as the 40s by the so-called *group of the mystics* in Aiud, who spread this prayer to other prisons, too. When the members of *the Burning Bush Movement* were arrested at the end of the 60s, a new group of prisoners with hesychast preoccupations entered prisons, thus reinforcing the already existing tradituion. As a result, many former political prisoners confess that they said the Jesus prayer in prison²⁶. Their spiritual measures were not the same. Some ascended the heights of holiness, acquiring the unceasing prayer of the heart. The intensity of repentance, the fervour in saying the prayer, the power of concentration was different, but all of them used and felt the power of the prayer and the real, concrete presence

²⁵ *Sfântul închisorilor. Mărturii despre Valeriu Gafencu adunate și adnotate de monahul Moise*, (Alba Iulia, Reîntregirea Publishing House, 2007), p. 45.

²⁶ Even Father Dumitru Stăniloae, the translator of the *Philokalia*, confesses that the prison was the only period in his life when he could say the Jesus prayer continuously; see Olivier Clement, *Cel mai mare teolog ortodox al secolului XX*, in: “Ortodoxia”, year XLV, nr. 3-4, 1993, p. 120.

of the Saviour by calling His name. Each of them tasted to a smaller or greater extent that *going inside and finding peace* which characterises hesychasm and which, after dismissal, made them long for the spiritual experiences in prison.

Despite all the obstacles imposed by the communist regime, the prisoners were not completely deprived of the food of eternal life, the Body and Blood of the Lord. The divine economy arranged so that the Divine Eucharist should be brought in various ways from the outside or to be served in secret with improvised means by the priests imprisoned²⁷, in order to support and consolidate living the new life in Christ. However, as Saint Nicholas Cabasilas ²⁸shows, and it is confirmed by the ones who had this experience, in the case of those who, although they were full of zeal, but for reasons beyond their will they did not have the possibility to receive communion, the exceptional work of the divine grace brought into their soul and body the sanctification of the Eucharist and the fruits of receiving it.

In conclusion, we might say that in the extremely appalling conditions of communist prisons, martyrical life mingled with hesychast work, supported when it was possible by the Eucharist, reaching spiritual experiences hard to equal in freedom.

²⁷ Father Ioan Iovan confessed that he made celebrated services daily during his detention. Monahia Cristina Stavrofora, *Părintele Ioan Iovan de la Mănăstirea „Nașterea Maicii Domnului” – Recea de Mureș*, 2010, p. 42.

²⁸ Nicholas Cabasilas, *Tâlcuirea Dumnezeieștii Liturghii*, XLII, in: *Scrieri*, p. 92: “If one of the living has the soul embellished with the above mentioned virtues, but does not approach the Holy Mysteries, does he acquire the same holiness? Not anyone! But the one who finds himself, just like the souls of the dead, in impossibility of approaching with the body”.

6 Eucharist and Hesychia in the World today

The experience of political prisoners in the communist prisons teaches us that isolation from the world and suffering encourage taking up a hesychast work. But the essence of hesychia, the stillness of the mind, does not rely on being a recluse, or in leaving for desert places, but in dwelling incessantly in God²⁹. Hesychasm is the way open to all those who want to progress spiritually, not only to monks, but also to laymen. What is important is gathering the mind in the heart and keeping the inner quietness by freeing oneself from the war of thoughts, not being silent on the outside and going out in society³⁰. However, contemporary spiritual fathers remarked that today's man no longer has power, no longer has a disposition for hesychia, but he can gain from an active and conscious participation in the Divine Liturgy the fruit he cannot acquire through hesychia³¹.

Father Sophrony Sakharov writes:

"My observations on contemporary people, led me to the conclusion that the most appropriate thing for them is to pray in churches, especially at the Holy Liturgy. The liturgical prayer and receiving communion frequently means fullness. However, for this we must live and understand the Holy Liturgy. Then we will be revealed that the Liturgy embraces in itself our whole life; it comprises all the plans of our existence in relation to God ... Without deepening his knowledge in this field, man can easily fall

²⁹ Archimandrite Sophrony, *Cuviosul Siluan Athonitul*, translated from Russian by Hieromonk Rafail (Noica), Alba Iulia, Reîntregirea Publishing House, 2009, p. 144.

³⁰ His Eminence Kalistos Ware, *Rugăciune și tăcere în spiritualitatea ortodoxă*, translated by Siluana Vlad, București, Christiana Publishing House, 2003, pp. 78-79.

³¹ *Cuvânt din Sfântul Munte. Omiliile Arhimandritului Efrem, Egumenul Mănăstirii Vatopedi, în România*, Alba Iulia, Publishing House Reîntregirea, 2001, p. 77; Archimandrite Zacharias Zacharou, *Hristos, Calea vieții noastre. Darurile teologiei Arhimandritului Sofronie*, translated by hieromonk Evloghie Munteanu, Galați, Bunavestire Publishing House, 2003, p. 17.

prey to a habit which causes harm and death. We need to progress incessantly in knowing God and not allow the Liturgy to turn into a detail of our daily life"³².

Father Sophrony Sakharov's remark that the contemporary man finds it hard to gather his mind in prayer, and therefore, the most appropriate thing in order to reach the fullness of life in Church is to participate at the Holy Liturgy and to receive communion frequently, is supported by the words of another contemporary Father, archimandrite Emilianos of Simonopetra:

"Today, more than ever, man experiences two states contrary to the Liturgy (and also to hesychia): distraction and disunion. No one can hold his mind in one place, it runs continuously. Human existence is distracted. And disunion is also visible in all the manifestations of human life. The first, distraction, disintegrates man, it disrupts him. The second one, disunion, dissolves him, deconstructs him. There is not a more efficient weapon or cure against this double whip than the Liturgy, which not only unifies us with ourselves, but also unites us with God, with all the saints and with the whole creation"³³.

Indeed these fruits of the Liturgy are acquired when the participation is conscious and it is fulfilled in the reception of communion and is prepared through asceticism³⁴. Father Sofian urges us to think of the suffering of the people in prisons and the power of their prayer in order to assume our own asceticism³⁵. As for receiving Christ in the Eucharist (and since

³² *Ne vorbește Părintele Sofronie. Scrisori*, translated by Teoctist Caia, (Galați, Bunavestire Publishing House, 2003), p. 71.

³³ Archim. Emilianos Simonopetritul, *Tâlcuiri la sfințele slujbe*, translated by Ierom. Agapie (Corbu), (Arad, Sfântul Nectarie Publishing House, 2009), p. 181.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 188: "Personal asceticism of the faithful, following the example of monastic asceticism, includes patience, restraining, repentance, long suffering, abstinence, fasting, vigil, hesychia, toil, pain (...). Asceticism is, above all, the ecclesial key that opens wide our being for God to enter"

³⁵ See *Duhovnici români în dialog cu tinerii*, p. 47.

we are weaker than the people in the ancient times – who lived during times which were more orderly from a spiritual point of view) – we need more than them to receive Christ continuously as it helps us gather in ourselves and gives us the power to engage in asceticism, and especially in the hesychast work of the watchfulness of the mind by saying the Jesus prayer: “In quietness, in hesychia, which is so appropriate for us, trying to avoid distraction for a few hours, we should give this time and our whole mind to Christ as a personal bloodless sacrifice”³⁶.

Probably the most perfidious enemy of hesychia in our times is mass-media, the multimedia technology in general, which does not leave us the time to quiet ourselves, it distracts and disunites us, populating our mind with phantasms³⁷. Therefore, contemporary fathers who have tasted the joy of hesychia warn us against the dangers we face when entering the multimedia world: “The man filled with television can no longer pray; being distracted, he can no longer pray, he loses the most holy thing” affirms Father Petroniu Tănase³⁸. On the other hand, Father Paisios the Agiorite tells us that “quietness is a great thing. Even if someone does not pray, quietness itself prays. It is a mysterious prayer and it helps a great deal in prayer, just as

³⁶ Archim. Emilianos Simonopetritul, *Tâlcuiri la sfintele slujbe*, p. 190.

³⁷ The main challenges of mass-media for spiritual life are: the distraction of the mind, the discreditation of Christian values, the cultivation of passionate understandings of the world, besmearing the mind by consenting to the thought of sin, opening the mind to the slavery of phantasms and the replacement of the true spiritual life for a surrogate of religious experience. See Florin Botezan, *Trăirea duhovnicească într-o lume multimedia*, in *Invazia non-valorilor într-o lume multimedia. Criza spirituală și discreditarea sacralului*, Alba Iulia, Reîntregirea Publishing House, 2010, pp. 234-252.

³⁸ Petroniu Tănase, *Nevoința duhovnicească în contextul societății moderne*, in: “Ortodoxia”, second series, year III, nr. 1, 2011, p. 164.

man is helped by breathing, which is invisible. The one who has a spiritual work in quietness, descends in prayer afterwards”³⁹. Consequently, a key element of asceticism today and a proof of sincerity in the wish to live the new life in Christ is freeing oneself from the net of mass-media and seeking exterior quietness as a premise of acquiring inner quietness, of hesychia brought by descending the mind in the heart through prayer and by freeing oneself from the slavery of thoughts.

To sum up, we can say that it is possible to live a spiritual life in the world today if at the centre of our life we place the participation at the Holy Liturgy and the reception of the Holy Mysteries, to which we add the need to guard the mind by saying the Jesus Prayer as often as possible, being aware of the fact that “just as at the service we eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ, in the same way, the prayer is a transfusion of Christ through the intercession of saying His name”⁴⁰.

7 Conclusion

The totalitarian atheist communist regime has fallen , but at present, a new type of totalitarianism is looming, precisely what H. Tristram Engelhardt jr. calls the secular fundamentalist state⁴¹. This type of state is developing now in the West and it consists in the institutionalisation of atheist secular humanism as an official public ideology, imposing through the law a secular morality which gives its own definition to human good and seeks to restructure society and interhuman relations. The aggressive homosexual propaganda which we witness is an

³⁹ Elder Paisios the Agiorite, *Cu durere și dragoste pentru omul contemporan*, (Chilia Bunevestiri, Schitul Lacu, Sfântul Munte Athos, 2000), p. 165.

⁴⁰ Archim. Emilianos Simonopetrilul, *Tâlcuiri la sfințele slujbe*, p. 64.

⁴¹ See Mark Cherry, *Statul fundamentalist secular: câteva reflecții critice*, in: “Altarul Reîntregirii”, an XVIII, nr. 1, 2013, pp. 41-55.

expression of this secular morality which undermines family and regards sexual, idealised liberalisation in the name of freedom and tolerance as a panacea for all social evils⁴². The new totalitarian ideology suggests pleasure as a life principle, a very tempting suggestion, the more so as it is promoted insistently by mass-media. As Father Constantin Coman remarked⁴³, the battle is not at the level of ideas, but it is a battle between two ways of living: living with God and according to God, on the one hand, and living without God, on the other hand. Therefore, the message of the Church for the world today, maybe more than ever, must be a continuous invitation to living in Christ and in Christ led by the Holy Spirit, living based on the union with Christ in the Divine Eucharist and calling His name in prayer continuously, an invitation to taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps. 33, 8), taking the cup of salvation and calling upon the name of the Lord (Ps. 115, 4).

⁴² See Andrei Dîrlău, *Huxley+Orwell=Lunacek. Despre elite și europarlamentari*, in: "Familia ortodoxă", nr. 3 (62), 2014, pp. 49-54.

⁴³ Constantin Coman, *Viața duhovnicească în societatea postmodernă*, in: "Ortodoxia", second series, year V, nr. 1, 2013, p. 196.

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