

Ieromonk Ghelasie Gheorghe

The Iconic Hesychasm

Transl. from Romanian by Fr. John Downie

Foreword: Metropolitan Serafim (Joanta)

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**Father Ghelasie from Frăsinei.
Iconic perspective for surpassing contemporary crises**

Metrop. Serafim (Joanta)

I greatly rejoice that the disciples of Father Ghelasie Gheorghe, good theologians and missionaries, have begun to make known the life and works of this devout Father from Frăsinei – one of the most profound Romanian monastics. In an authentic Orthodox spirit, they have shed new light through their explanation and popularization of his thought – that could be inscribed along the lines of the theological renewal launched by Father Dumitru Stăniloae – the Theologian. If the writings of Father Ghelasie appear difficult to many, due to their very personal vocabulary and style, which could discourage the reader, behold – his disciples make them accessible to us through their “explanation,” so that as many people as possible can rejoice in them.

I believe that it was precisely his unique vocabulary and style that lead some into hurrying to condemn him as developing a nebulous, untraditional mysticism, a kind of modern gnosticism. That this is not at all the case is proven not only by his disciples, but also by the disappointment of those who, being tempted by all kinds of syncretism and gnosticism, which is in fashion in our days, drew close to the Father with the hopes that they would find him to be their mentor. The result was that Father won many of these to the single healthy mystic life, which is that of the Church.

We could even say that through their style, the writings of Father Ghelasie are like a trap which catches precisely those who search in them for occult, religious syncretism, and esoteric things.

Essentially, in his writings, Father Ghelasie attempts to bring the Orthodox mystical tradition up to date through an iconic vision, by returning from scholastic theology to biblical-patristic theology. He grasped as no one else has until now, the iconic character of Romanian spirituality as an un-confusable seal of Orthodox Tradition in general.

In the works of the devout Ghelasie, one can follow a ceaseless striving to manifest and extend the liturgical way of Orthodoxy into mystical modes. The ritual of personal worship flows from the ecclesiastical ritual and in the same way it has spiritual transformation as its finality.

An important contribution of Father Ghelasie consists therefore, in his un-fragmented, unitary vision of the Christian life: therefore, Father approaches the connection between the liturgical life of the Church and the personal living of mystery from many different angles. The very Liturgy of the Church is viewed according to its likeness of divine inter-Trinitarian Love.

As an example, the biblical-patristic understanding of man's image as an icon of the Son of God is manifested by him in the hesychastic practice through iconic prayer, as gesture that consists of the entire man, soul and body, the gesture of worship according to the likeness of the Son's offering Himself up to the Father in the joy of the All-Holy Spirit. Life is then discovered like a liturgy of spiritual transformation.

In the context of the growing de-valorization of the body's mystery, in a world assaulted by "consumer values," Father Ghelasie offers possibilities for the rediscovery of the Christian ethos, in which the body has the mission of being an "altar of the divine embodiment-partaking."

Christian asceticism, so poorly understood in a world of comfort and explosion of information that assaults and overwhelms us, is revealed to us precisely in this finality of "the remaking of the eucharistic condition." It is "the enflaming divine longing," and preparation for partaking without condemnation of the Body and Blood of Christ.

The reader is sensitized through a more profound and detailed understanding of certain aspects with which he is confronted in today's world. In his considerations, Father

Ghelasie insists on “the theological image” of man, which has its origin in divine love and its fulfillment in the mystery of spiritual birth.

Marriage is depicted in the same iconic-liturgical modality as the mystery of birth. Children, as Father Ghelasie shows, bear in them, through genetic inheritance, the memorial – affected by the destructiveness of sin – of the parents, the nation and the entire body of humanity. At the same time, they have the mission and gift from God to cleanse and sanctify the inherited or acquired memorial through the Holy Mysteries of the Church and by bearing personal fruit through a life of prayer.

Modern man’s understanding of these truths is fundamental for obtaining his own health and spiritual growth, for evading certain tragic errors that lead to the amplification of the anarchic and destructive memorial. In this way the murder of newborn children has at the same time a self-destructive character for their parents, since children are the very bearers of God’ gifts that lead towards salvation.

“The trauma of abortion” that sooner or later supervenes and effects the lives of those who take part in these actions, especially the mother, was noted by numerous researchers in the sociological, psychological, psychiatric and medical domains. Child murder casts the responsible party into the shadows, onto a steep slope of tragic destiny, marked by psychophysical tumult – from which only divine grace, through the participation in the Mysteries of the Church, can save and renew.

On the other hand, the importance of marriage is revealed precisely as the mystery of birth that fulfills the image of man. Bodily relations with the refusal to give birth bear the seal of un-fulfillment, of the absence of the divine gift, of the image of birth that crowns conjugal life. Father Ghelasie understands marriage as the “liturgizing of the mystery of birth.” To give birth and to raise holy children properly is the mystery of conjugal holiness. This perspective offers to the current generation, Christian references for understanding and surpassing crises in familial relationships, through the re-

sacralization of the body and beginning the personal liturgy in the Church's Body again, for bearing the fruit of the Holy mysteries in our life.

In this way, it is important that parents participate as much as possible in the Mysteries of the Church and become complete partakers of the Holiness of the Church in their lives. And this is not only for them, but in order not to give their children and all of those who love them, an inheritance weighted down with "destructive memories" or a "poisoned gift." The sins of parents weaken the genetic base of children. Abortion does not just "weigh down" the parents, but adds to the "dowry-cross" of the children that they have born or will give birth to. Today, we assist an unprecedented rise of illnesses that have a genetic basis. The number of cases of cancer among children is in unsettling growth.

Father Ghelasie draws attention to the responsibilities of man regarding his own mission, his own growth on his road towards "the borderline of eternity." The sobornical understanding of this responsibility helps to escape from the tragedy of egotism that searches for blind and individual satisfaction. At the same time, it sustains the longing for spiritual transformation. The solution to stop life from skidding is only one: entrance into the cleansing bath and the sanctifying bush of the divine Mysteries.

Likewise, Father Ghelasie presents the monastic Image to today's world in its greatness and divine importance. Father reveals it as "the mystery from the border of eternity," "the mystery of the age to come." It is the "remaking and perfecting of the image of heaven in the icon of the kingdom, the image of Eucharistic union and of eschatological vision, of man's standing face to face with God.

Father Ghelasie strives untiringly to give "iconic references" to contemporary man, disoriented by the "loss of his image among the things of this world." The loving care of Father for the tempering and re-Churching of today's man is a living and strengthening example for the fulfillment of the Christian mission to be "leaven that raises all the dough" of the world.

I once again express my joy that Father Ghelasie's disciples have engaged themselves in this important effort in the research and clarification of his works, for our benefit and for building everyone up. The three volumes published up until now: "*The Iconographer of Divine Love*," "*The Devout Ghelasie the Hesychast*" and "*Ghelasie the Hesychast, the lover of God*," have stirred up a living interest. They have brought to light an exemplary life and thought imprinted by the spirit of prayer, full of spiritual penetration and interest for the actual problems of current life. The Image of Father Ghelasie is added to the pleiad of the great spiritual fathers and confessors of the Orthodox Church, given to us by God so that we can "walk into the renewal of the Spirit" being made firm on "the Rock that is the Corner Stone, Christ, our Lord."

Nürnberg, 11 April, 2005

The feastday of Saint Calinic of Cernica

Diogenic Dialogues

An Iconic Dialogue

Gabriel Memelis: Reverend Father Ghelasie, with God's help and your permission we will begin recording this dialogue today, approaching different themes that span your theological thought. So, as I confessed to you earlier, I thought of this form of interview, in principal, for two reasons: the first might be a little subjective, to maintain the distinct mark of your verbal qualities, which is edifying to me in many ways. The second is, in fact, closely correlated with the first. It is in order to create a kind of antechamber for accessibility to your writings. Because experience, not a few sad times, has demonstrated that the reader can't attack them directly without great difficulty, given their atypical style and their content's great concentration of thought. While trying to think of the most comprehensive question that we could begin with, I'd like to dwell on the following: could you tell us about the essence of your discourse, Father? What message would you like to transmit in the current theological and philosophical context of our times?

Fr. Ghelasie Gheorghe: Dear sir, the problem that you propose must be looked at from a different point of view. In the first place, my preoccupations with Christian mystical life are due to the fact that I myself have chosen the monastic life. I'm not, nor am I trying to be one who considers that he could give a message. Rather, in my regular life as a monk, I've noted a few things that are a result *of the relational* with others, in a general context of spirituality. And from this there resulted, first of all for me personally, some conclusions that I considered might be good to note because they might be useful to somebody. In our days the problem is no longer posed of dedicating yourself in a special way to writing. Nowadays, intellectual preoccupations are ordinary. We all have spiritual occupations. As such, we too – in the monastic life – have these spiritual preoccupations into which the activity of writing enters. I believe that these records that I've written, if they present an interest, are offered to a rather limited circle of readers, even if we were to try to make some publicity around them. However, from the start I'd like to mention that I don't do theology in a special way, and I don't assume the right to be one who is somehow noticeable. Dear sir, I am an ordinary monk, and what I have registered is a result of dialogue with others, which I hope will be useful. It is my own way of speaking, as every one has the right to – an actualization of my own receptivity towards the life that we carry on in the monastery.

So, I can't say that I have a special message to transmit, it's only bringing the Christian message up to date, as Father Stăniloae does, in the general context of contemporary spirituality. This preoccupation isn't only mine, since the majority of those who now come to the monastery are people who already have the preoccupations of spiritual life and bring with them an entire general context of spirituality. I remember a father, who being asked what brought him to the monastery responded beautifully – “knowledge.” Likewise, the aim of coming to the monastery is knowledge and shouldn't be motivated only by a simple decision.

G. M.: What you've said just a little before seems very important to me, that is, what matters today is bringing theology up to date. It is necessary in every cultural context...

G. G.: Dear sir, you know that – in the conditions of a very contradictory spirituality like that of today – we Christians must, first of all, distinguish the Orthodox theological way. Our spirituality must be centered on this meaning and should truly have a theological basis; even if we have certain inherent defects from culture and education that aren't in conformity with *the theological*. Our struggle is precisely to become ourselves and to harmonize in this way with the Orthodox Christian *theological way* taught by the Holy Fathers.

And I attempt, through my speech, precisely this – to frame in the basic reference points of the Holy Fathers' theology. Of course this isn't easy. It implies, along with a detailed and solid knowledge of the *theological* and the capacity to penetrate it, living and integrating into it. I am perfectly convinced that in this context where we have to deal with all kinds of mixed gnosis, with occult syncretism and magic, we need a clear distinction, which is, what does this particular Christian character consist of, that I'm trying to distinguish?

G. M.: In your books, Father, you attribute great value to the Carpathian, hesychastic traditional vision, whose founder was the hermit Neofit. This vision can't be treated as a simple addition to the Philokalic method. Rather it has its own unique character that may consist of an especial accent on the theology of the icon,¹ on a dialogue between God and man. Could you please give us some details of these things by bringing into relief the uniqueness of Carpathian hesychasm, as you called it?

G. G.: Dear sir, the subject that you're dealing with – and which I attempt to deal with too – comes from personal experience: truly, I have known a monastic tradition, we could say, of

¹ Or image, in its many meanings and manifestations (trns. note).

an indigenous nature, a tradition of the hermits from the Apuseni mountains – from the clefs of Râmeț. It was here that I met a hermit to whom I became a spiritual son and who illustrated this traditional ascetic precisely. I was surprised to find some references in this essential feature that were a true revelation for me, in the sense of living Christian theology. There's no cause however, to make this into a novelty, which people will consider as something different or torn from the traditional *theological way* of the Holy Fathers. On the contrary, however much the monastic life and the hermits of our country may have been isolated, they maintained faithfulness to our Christian Orthodox *theology*. It didn't deviate... However, what I try to distinguish is the fact that this indigenous character left its imprint on the common Philokalic base of the Holy Fathers. So, to be concrete, what in fact does this common Philokalic base mean? Translated into more accessible terms, the Philokalic doesn't only mean love for the beautiful, but it became – in the Orthodox mystic sense – the spiritual in and of itself. The common base of the Philokalia is Orthodox-Christian spirituality which can't be anything but the same, indifferent whether it receives a Sinaitic character or that of the Thebaiden monks, the Athonite character of Greek spirituality, or a Slavic character. This is the distinction that I make. This Carpathian characteristic that may sometimes seem like it has departed from the common tradition, is in fact a personal witness of that, which for me, meant a true revelation. It is understood that, indifferent of the common base of certain realities, a tradition's imprint matters very much.

There has been talk about Slavic influence over the monastic life in Moldavia; similarly, there has been talk about a specific Athonite character of the monasteries in Muntenia. I found however, in the region of Ardeal,² this tradition of the hermits from Apuseni who follow the practices of the hermits from the monasteries of Râmeț. I was amazed to find an essential feature here, somewhat distinguished, that denoted in fact an indigenous characteristic aspect which isn't in contradiction with the common Philokalic base. I stress that the Philokalic base remains common, being the spirituality of the Holy Spirit transposed, dressed however, in personal, individual forms. In this way, it could be said that I am trying to distinguish an essential characteristic of Romanian monasticism, conferring to it a kind of form and at the same time a distinction. We should consider, though, that my effort is to intentionally point out and appeal to an eventual continuation of research. It is a record of what might have been overlooked, and I

² Transylvania.

believe that it has importance for Romanian monasticism. However, the belief must be definitely avoided, that Carpathian hesychasm is superior to others, or that it could bring something in plus, in the sense of an invention compared to the common Philokalic base. This, I repeat, remains the same. It's just that it is transposed, dressed in particular characteristics. Many unknowing people become tied, however, precisely to this exterior part, the clothing, without knowing what I'm referring to.

Again, many ask, in what does this common Philokalic base consist of? It is nothing other than what we know from the writings of the Fathers contained in the twelve volumes of the *Philokalia* translated by Father Stăniloae. The Philokalic base is the aspiration of man that puts a special accent on returning to God through surpassing sin's abnormalities. And in the Philokalic texts we also see how a few characteristics are outlined:

- *The Sinaitic character* insists on the reconstruction of the dialogue between God and man through asceticism, if we could put it that way, preponderantly disembodied. It's not excessive or extremist. However, in its framework the foundation is placed directly on the spiritual and on rising above everything that is bodily. It is a drastic asceticism whose goal is gaining a life where the material is almost abolished. This characteristic is also due to the desert like environment in which materiality, vegetation almost doesn't exist. So then, the Sinaitic characteristic, which seeks an almost pure soul, will be very spiritualized. All the holy hermits, starting with Anthony the Great put a special accent directly on the spiritual part.

- *The Athonite character* accents a kind of metaphysics, a dialogue between the spiritual and the bodily part. Christianity reveals its special contribution here by the fact that it doesn't make the body into something contrary to the spirit. It affirms man rather as the unity of soul and body in the ideal of Christ the Resurrected one, Who ascended to heaven with His body.

- *The Slavic character* brings out into relief the subterranean part of sin, that tries to form itself as a counterpart of negative life replacing true life, spiritual life. It's a kind of focusing on the anti-spiritual part that makes Slavic spirituality dominated by the war with the demonic, with the un-spiritual.

- *Our Carpathian character* comes with its own traits: this is also due to its own special natural environment, of lush vegetation... In addition, here, the problem of a break between soul and body, of a drastic asceticism like the Sinaitics was never posed, because it was believed that

the body forms an integral part of our being-ness. The dramatic character of the Slavs, of the furious battle with evil spirits, was never emphasized.

And now, what I'd like to bring into light is a feature that I've called *iconic*. Why do I say *iconic*? Because they say that the hermits from the Apuseni mountains call themselves iconographers; not in the sense that they were painters, but because they had an extraordinary veneration towards icons, practicing in their own way a mysticism of icons. They were true bearers of the icon, of iconic image,³ which means that their modality of Christian theological mysticism was made concrete in this way.

To get back to a common terminology we must see what understanding is given to the icon in the general theological sense, and then in the Carpathian. It's known that the iconoclastic disputes, which were so bloody, came to a close through the definition of the icon's theological meaning. It appears, however, that the iconoclastic spirit is maintained until today, and very many theologians of a more intellectual nuance conserve a certain reservation towards the mysticism of the icon. The difference is however, that the specific Carpathian characteristics are centered on this mystical consideration of the icon. In this manner, I'm even trying to make an enlargement of the mysticism of icons, in whose framework I try to bring into relief particular Carpathian characteristics. In the regular theological understanding, the icon is a modality through which the spiritual can "materialize," a kind of presentation of the spiritual into some forms, so to speak, corporeal-material, which call us and stimulate us to pass through to a *spiritual* that is beyond the material part. So through the image we turn to the one represented on it, as Saint Theodore the Studite says. As you see, the mysticism of the icon poses the problem on a deeper level, because the icon is at the same time a cult object; and cult for us means integration in the liturgical ritual. Liturgical ritual implies on its behalf, a participation of the bodily too, a partaking of the corporeality in spiritual life. Because the corporeal becomes Eucharist, it participates in a special way in spiritual life. It isn't just a symbol, a simple modality

³ *Chip*, in Romanian; this word has no direct counterpart in English. It can refer to any or all of the following; face, countenance, image, appearance, aspect, person, manner, kind, and way. It corresponds quite closely to the Greek πρόσωπον, but is even richer in content and connotations. I have rendered it variously as image, countenance, manner, and way. When it has been translated other than image, I have marked it with an asterisk. The translation of this term has proven difficult due to the great importance and attention Father Ghelasiu gives to the word. *Chip* is used in the classic Biblical passage, "Let us make man in Our *image*; according to our likeness (Gen. 1:26)." However, the word also strongly implies personality and mannerism. I've generally rendered it as *image* except where it could cause confusion in the meaning of the dialogue (trans. note).

of passing through to a realm of “spirit” beyond ordinary materiality; and precisely here the distinct Carpathian iconic character comes out into specific relief. The relevance of the icon doesn’t only come from the directly spiritual part, it isn’t only a modality of passing through from a representation to something beyond the body, but it is a revelation of a mystery. So how can the spiritual become *incarnate*, however? If this isn’t understood and if the icon isn’t seen as an *embodiment* of the spiritual, the iconic characteristic that I want to talk about won’t be understood. In the Carpathian iconic understanding, I repeat yet again, the whole of the mystery isn’t a passage from the material to the spiritual, from the bodily to the spirit. But rather, what must be well underlined, is that this mystery is a passage of the spiritual – from the spirit – into an incarnation in which the bodily participates in spirituality properly speaking. If in the usual, traditional sense of the Holy Fathers, and especially of Athonite theology, that which is bodily must be raised to the spiritual and become spiritualized, the specific Carpathian character sustains that the pneumatic spirituality doesn’t pass to a superior level, it doesn’t isolate itself. It doesn’t seek to stimulate the corporeal part, the bodily, the material, to raise itself to the spiritual, but the spiritual itself became a kind of more evident incarnation of the spiritual. This happens to such an extent that at a certain point the material, corporeal part, becomes a place, an altar, even a kind of eucharistic pre-figuration. In this way the representation, properly speaking the iconic [pictorial] of the incarnation, becomes a living reality precisely in this state of bodily representation.⁴

⁴ It is evident that what Father Ghelasie is attempting isn’t a complementing of a presupposed missing zone of the icon’s theology, or a correction of the patristic discourse on this theme. It’s simply about a shifting of accent to the idea, fundamental in iconology, that (having the Incarnation of God as a foundation) the icon is, as a cultic presence, an event of the Incarnation. Father Ghelasie restitutes, through the medium of Carpathian mysticism, an aspect less contoured in the icon’s theology: the moment of descent, of God’s lowering Himself into the icon, of its transformation into a pre-Eucharistic reality, as the intermediary through which we have access to the Holy Spirit. We should make note of a truth that will be developed by Father Ghelasie in the following interview. We can’t speak of the participation of the Holy Spirit without the Incarnation’s assumption, without Christ. Father draws subsidiary attention to the fact that too often we fall into the temptation, almost reflexively, of speaking about “asomatic” spiritualization, without the body, evasionist, that loses the body along the road, or else it recedes into a kind of ethereal materiality. Christianity showed that spiritualization doesn’t mean evasion of the body, but the body’s new reality, Eucharistic reality. So that veneration before an icon – as such a reality – would contain the spiritual and corporeal aspects alike. The icon is a support for an integral relation of the faithful with God. Without negating the analogical function of the icon, Father urges us towards an understanding of these functions in the sense of an intensified Incarnation. Just as the Ascension of Jesus into heaven was not a receding into the light (see further on), but a condition for the coming of the Holy Spirit as the One Who intensifies and generalizes the Incarnation’s truth, the icon’s pre-Eucharistic constitution doesn’t place as much value on the vertical ascension towards the Archetype, as much as on the Incarnation of Him in visible reality.

G. M.: A little earlier, you sketched a kind of spiritual geography where you framed in each mystical transposition. Where do you think this affinity of the Carpathian spirituality for the Incarnation and the iconic comes from, as you've developed it up until now?

G. G.: Dear sir, it might be that this characteristic of our indigenous spirituality is due, even like I said, to the geographic environment, but first of all I think it is due to an ancestral memory; because every nation distinguishes itself precisely through a kind of memory of origins. The nations differentiated themselves religiously through each one's specific way of keeping these memories. For example, the Jewish nation kept a few memories closer to the adamic memories, and probably because of this it was the nation through which God could prepare the Incarnation of Christ. Other nations kept a more spiritual memory, metaphysical, as the Greeks did for instance; and others conserved a more ritualistic character etc. Therefore, each population distinguished themselves after the adamic fall through these specific characteristics. It seems then that our Thracian-Dacian characteristics were made concrete in the way the ancestral memory of heaven was kept. The soul and body weren't in contradiction, but rather they were completing the ideal of being in a participative union in an almost equal measure, like the Holy Fathers say. It seems that it was because of this that Christianity caught on so easily and quickly here. The spiritual Thracian-Dacian character was a kind of solidification of an ancestral base that our people had already had. A base that conformed to a great extent to a central idea of Christianity, the Incarnation of God. The particular Christic character is precisely the Incarnation of God, an ideal present in the Thracian-Dacian ancestral memory where, as we've seen, there existed a unity between soul and body. Because of this, the essential nature of Christianity caught on miraculously. It felt at home and stimulated our specific spirituality in the *iconic* direction that we're talking about. The iconic is just this – the modality in which the Incarnation doesn't contradict the soul, but rather the mystery where the spiritual, the soul-ness, *that something* beyond the visible [plane], becomes visible, accessible – the seeable participating with the unseen.

If, in the Athonite way, the visible must participate without fail [through the raising and in a way through the negation of itself] with the unseen... Well, in other words, in the Carpathian sense the spiritual doesn't mean a raising of the seen into the unseen, but rather a kind of mystical descent of the unseen's sacredness into the seen. Into a showing, so much so that at a certain point the icon becomes a kind of eucharistic pre-figuration, where the exact mystery of

the unseen's transformation is shown in a body of giving.⁵ Likewise, in the particular Carpathian characteristics the icon isn't a mere presentation, just a modality for passing from the seen to the unseen, from the bodily to the spirit. It is something different. It is exactly the mystery in which the Divine becomes body and shares itself, making itself able to communicate. The value of communion isn't so much in making ourselves spiritual, but it is in the truth of the spiritual lowering itself into our concrete sight and which, purely and simply, we can consume. It becomes an integral part of our entire being-ness' constitution with the soul, body and spirit alike.⁶

G. M.: Could it be believed that the unseen that descends into the seen could remain on the visible plane?

G. G.: No! This is exactly the clear difference between the Carpathian iconic mysticism and Athonite iconic mysticism. There really does exist [in the latter] a fear that the unseen or spiritual, through the fact that it "enters" into something seen, could be lost or absorbed, that it could become devalued. But, and here is the beauty, the unseen or spirit's descent into the iconic bodily achieves a miraculous thing. In the Athonite understanding, the iconic heads in the direction of transfiguration, where the regular bodily representation must without fail pass on to the transfigurative light, full of grace on Mount Tabor. This is where the usual countenance⁷ of Christ is proven to be, in fact, the Image of God Who offers Himself for contemplation. In comparison, the Carpathian iconic road is, in a way, in the opposite direction. We know that the test of authenticity for an Athonite icon is being able to see the transfigurative light in it, beyond the representation itself (and in this sense Saint Symeon the New Theologian and Saint Gregory

⁵ In the original the term was *împărtășire*, which often means not only giving or sharing, but giving/receiving the Eucharist, or communion.

⁶ Father Ghelasie's discourse, which might appear excessively realist sometimes, does nothing other than bring to mind a truth that is common, in fact, to all religions and is culminantly affirmed in Christianity. Man's relation with God isn't formulated – as we used to believe on account of some vulgar, platonized interpretations specific to the cultural context of Europe (and not Christianity) – in spiritualistic terms, but in a clear way in terms of mystical physiology. It is formulated by the insertion of the Sacred into man's own reason for being human (in this way the etymology *physis* + *logos* in the word *physiology* may be observed), until It would become just as imperative and indispensable as any physiological need, be it air, water, or food. To be religious means, after all, to get back to being natural, to live a relation with God as the nature of existence itself – as the reason to be human. In addition, as Father Ghelasie adds in a different section, in Christianity this naturalness is iconized. In this context, Father's pleading for the Eucharist's centrality as food – in the most concrete way – as the Body and Blood of Christ, is revealing. So Father is adding that Eucharistic reality isn't merely localized in Bread and Wine itself, but contains by extension the icon too, as a cult object, and the faithful that devotionally address it, and the whole life of the Church in its ensemble.

⁷ *Chip*

Palamas are representatives). Otherwise, the icon has no [doxological] value. The visible must be viewed without fail in this Christic transfiguration of Divinization which gives the icon an intrinsic spiritual value. Therefore the icon is reduced to a simple passage, at all costs, from the visible representation to the transformation by grace of the Transfiguration. The Carpathian modality of the icon comes, however, with an additional specification that in fact doesn't contradict the Athonite transfigurative. That is, it no longer begins from the seen, but from the unseen, [already present in the seen] without putting into doubt the Taboric light. If the particular Athonite character begins with the hiding of the Taboric light in order to reach the vision of the light, in our Carpathian sense we begin with the Taboric light, which makes an extraordinary act, that of incarnating into something, of showing, of becoming iconic. If in the icon of Athonite modality, the light of grace is hidden and you, beginning from the icon, must arrive at it [the light of grace], in the Carpathian iconic the Taboric light is no longer hidden in the representation's materiality. In the Carpathian modality, the icon receives something special, a *super-sacredness*. Why do I say super-sacredness? Because the iconic in the Carpathian sense tends to show through this super-sacredness that Taboric light enters in a special way into visible iconic representations, where it makes for itself a kind of place for its altar. It descends and enters into the materiality, into the corporeality, into the bodily. It's not absorbed into the materiality so as to become devalued, as you've suggested, but rather it is a mystery, which at a certain point produces a direct relieving of both aspects. Whereas in the Athonite iconic there isn't an equal representation of both parts, because the bodily must be overshadowed by the Taboric transfigurative of the light of grace; so that at a given point, the body passes directly into a kind of spirit. In the Carpathian iconic we find however, a kind of aspiration to the ancestral memory of heaven, where the bodily and the spiritual, the Divine and creation stand face to face. They no longer reciprocally exclude each other, but are both seen at once.⁸

⁸ As we have seen, all of Father Ghelasie's nuances gravitate around a few key terms, "seen," "unseen," "transfiguration," without negating the authenticity and value of the Greek manner of understanding and practicing iconology. In the final analysis, he proposes a different conceptual framework, an other gestalt for understanding these terms, where the primary issue is not the seen-unseen dialectic, but their reciprocal revelatory conjunction, realized in a type of Incarnation; and in this different framework, practically incomparable with the Athonite, it would be a particularity, as Father Ghelasie holds, of an indigenous Carpathian spirituality and closer to the Christian spirit. It could be objected that the distinction that Father Ghelasie tries to make isn't discernable in devotion. How could the faithful transpose such a subtle distinction, practically, in gestures or concrete veneration of an icon? Such an objection would overlook, by falling into a kind of intellectualism, that it is not understanding that determines how we show devotion, but inverse. The modality in which veneration is practiced has a formational ontological effect over all of

G. M.: Nevertheless I'd like to ask you, doesn't it seem to you that the Athonite iconic modality preserves the Resurrection's and Ascension's message, that consists precisely in Christ's physical presence "blurring" into light?

G. G.: No, this isn't true! We shouldn't talk about Christ blurring into light!

G. M.: Maybe the word was a bit too harsh. I'm referring to a transfiguration, an eruption of light...

G. G.: We have to say that Christian theology had to face up to the spiritual context of the respective times. Therefore, Christian thought received some imprints from Greek mentality, dominated by a metaphysics and thought form where the spiritual is considered the essence of the Divine.⁹ The Holy Fathers insisted a lot on the idea that the Divine made itself a kind of co-dweller, almost equal with the material, with the bodily. The bodily is also the work of God, not only a simple product as in Greek metaphysics, according to which the materiality of the bodily represents a prison and an eclipsing of the spiritual, and so needs to be spiritualized at all costs.

In the Carpathian iconic sense, the value of Christ the Resurrected One doesn't rest in the fact that He would have transfigured the bodily into a kind of pneumatic spirituality. Interestingly enough, Christ makes a miracle beyond nature, showing that the spiritual, Divinity, can descend so much that it can participate in itself and in the bodily in an equal measure. Not only that, but the Divinity and the bodily stand face to face in an equality of presence at the same time; not in the sense that the spiritual's presence must make the bodily blur until it's no longer seen, absorbed into the spiritual. However, not inversely either. That is, the spiritual doesn't remain unseen behind the material and corporeal. This is where the beauty lies. It is in the fact that this supernatural iconic allows the Divine to remain Divine in itself, the spiritual to remain spiritual, the bodily to remain bodily. They are both seen at the same time, one participating with the other in an equal way, without contradicting each other – transfiguring each other at the same time. On the other hand, in the Athonite spirit, the transfiguration is unilateral, not simultaneous from both parties. The Athonite perception remains that, at a certain given moment, in Christ the

man's faculties, including his thoughts. In addition, the importance that Father Ghelasie accords to the very gesture of veneration itself must be taken into consideration, as we will see in the last interview that we held with him.

⁹ Modern researchers like R. Rocques have shown that this dominant metaphysics did not place enough accent on the Incarnation and was passed on to Christianity in Greek expressions through authors like Origen and Evagrie up until even Dionisie-Pseudo Areopagitul (see Lars Thunberg, *Man and Cosmos in the vision of Saint Maximos the Confessor*). So all the developments Father Ghelasie makes about the specifics of Athonite mysticism, even though they are critical, shouldn't seem unfounded to us.

usual body was no longer seen, but only the light of grace,¹⁰ like an absorption of the body into the light. While in Carpathian spirituality no kind of absorption is talked about, but rather a co-dwelling without confusion, without either part overshadowing the other.¹¹

G. M.: Is this how you explain the fact that during the Supper on the road to Emmaus Christ made Himself unseen right at the moment of the breaking of the bread? At the moment of the Eucharist's presence Christ made Himself unseen?

G. G.: Yes, because the seen is already Eucharistic. Some consider that I make a too difficult and daring affirmation when I say that in the Carpathian understanding of the simultaneous and equal presence of the transfigurative Taboric grace and the Incarnation's body, the icon is in fact a representation of Eucharistic type.* If the Catholics manifested themselves in a mysticism of the Eucharist itself, like the veneration of the host, we speak of a mysticism with a conspicuously Eucharistic character, that is something completely different. This character manifests itself on a Thracian-Dacian ancestral memorial basis, in which the Divine and creation can be together precisely in this supernatural image, the Eucharistic image.* This manner of approaching the icon is closer to the message of the Incarnation, which is none other than that the Divine can become body too. That Christ the Divine One, the Son of God, descended to us and is at the same time in "equality" with the body. Our Liturgics are differentiated, consequently, from the Protestant modality that makes the Eucharist into a kind of symbolic iconic. The Catholics kept something of the Eucharistic mysticism, but for us Orthodox, the Eucharist doesn't produce an automatic transfiguration – in the sense that if I received Bread and Wine I will necessarily head towards something more spiritual. The Holy

¹⁰ This is a debatable observation (trans. note).

¹¹ It is evident again, that for any well intentioned reader this reciprocal cohabitation of the Divine and the human that Father Ghelasie speaks about conforms perfectly with the dogmatic specifications of the Synod of Chalcedon. Father is merely urging us to view the Incarnation's event, the resurrection, and in general, all the theology of human nature's deification that derive from them, through a different grid than Greek philosophy. The Holy Fathers transcribed Greek philosophy ideologically and terminologically. In the perspective belonging to the Carpathian spirituality, as Reverend Father says, God and man stand face to face, in an "equal" position, in a co-habitation and reciprocal reflection. Father reformulates, in fact, using a terminology of his own, the same *principal of analogy* announced by Saint Maximos the Confessor in Ambigua 13: "God and man are each others models (παραδείγματα)." In regards to the spirit-matter binome, it becomes – if not actually inoperative – free of any dichotomous interpretation; it is about a new kind of relation between these two aspects of reality. It is a relation that implies a kind of inter-penetration and reciprocal transformation while, as we mentioned in the previous note, it also concerns a new reality, the Eucharistic-iconic reality, which implicates the spirit and body in a distinct union. Father Ghelasie says that the Resurrected Body of Christ is such a reality, Who was doxologically touched by Thomas the Apostle – a simultaneous pneumatic and somatic reality, susceptible at any moment to convert into Eucharist (see Father's following response).

Eucharist is, in fact, materiality deified. The problem of transcendent metaphysics is no longer posed here – of separations and passages beyond. No, but [in the Eucharist] there is already a co-dwelling, an un-separated weaving where the Divine and bodily are in an inseparable, unconfused, undivided unity, at the same time – in equality.

Thus, it seems that the future of our Christian theology would consist of this; an active updating that especially awakens Liturgical Eucharistic living. The Catholics also have this intuition, but they make in my opinion as a priest, a great error, a kind of concession. They consider that you must give communion to everybody. They have, on the other hand, the justifiable intuition of the fact that integration in the Liturgical iconic and Eucharistic is a resurrection of life. On the other hand, they don't take into account the truth that the world is so unprepared that at a certain point, a kind of devaluation of communion is produced, if not even a mockery. That which is spiritual can't enter into a vessel that hasn't cleaned itself beforehand. We Orthodox, however, make a special foundation out of the aspect of ritual. It could be said in a way that Christianity's essence, especially in the lives of Christians, is the Liturgical ritual. Why is this? It [liturgical ritual] poses the very problem of reactualizing the iconic Eucharistic countenance.* In this way, what is important isn't so much the act of communion itself, going directly to receiving the Holy Eucharist, even though it is without a doubt, the crowning. The most important thing is to enter as a receiver into the process of Eucharistic transformation. Let us bare in mind that at the epiclesis we pray, "Lord, send Your Spirit over us and over these Gifts..."

G. M.: So it's about a Eucharistic transformation of the entire community...

G. G.: Not only that, but we ourselves must become of Eucharistic condition in order to be able to receive the Eucharist.¹² First and foremost, in the Liturgy we ask to become of Eucharistic condition [constitution], iconic, in order for us to commune. In Catholicism the

¹² This is concerned, in traditional liturgical terminology, with the subject of the "worthiness of the receiver" which Father will develop in the next interview. We'll only remark here that Father develops logically, on the Eucharistic plane, the principle of the Divine and human being situated "face to face in an equality of presence," naturally arriving at the question of "Eucharistic condition." It is the same as Saint Maximus, the worthiness of the receiver is founded on the principle of analogies (*tantum-quantum*: see the previous note). The level of man's deification corresponds to the level of the Son's Incarnation. Implicitly, what God gives through the Eucharist is according to the measure of the partaker's capacity to receive. We should note, at the same time, Father Ghelasie's discourses' general theological affinity to that of Saint Maximus.' We find again in both cases the same insistence on the Divine-human equilibrium in the Incarnation proclaimed in the Synod of Chalcedon, the equilibrium cosmologically reflected in the unseen (intelligible) – seen (sensible) binome, and liturgically in the inter-penetration of the real and symbolic aspects of the Holy Mysteries.

receiver's condition no longer matters, and they go directly to communion. For us, the participation in the Holy Liturgy has great importance. The Liturgical ritual means a preparation for us to regain the Eucharistic condition, and only after that comes the true crowning – union with the Divine Who accepts a descent directly to us. Because of this, I say that the meaning of the Carpathian icon is not a passage from the material into the spiritual, but somehow opposite, a passage from the spirit to the material.¹³ There's no kind of invention in what I'm saying, I'm only giving value to a unique background that is in essence the same as the Holy Fathers, but has a special characteristic relief. It doesn't mean that I negate Athonite spirituality's value. It accentuates passing from the material to the spiritual, to the Taboric light, in order to accentuate the Divine – in order for Christ to be truly proven the Son of God and not just simply a wise man as some people say. However, on this foundation there is always a need for the miraculous to be shown, through which The Divine can descend into man's bodily image. The unilateral accentuation of the Athonite aspect could lead us to a forced metaphysics where we believe that everything must be absorbed in the spirit. As you suggested before, at a certain moment the *Christically* resurrected body or the Eucharistic pass into a kind of abstractionism, or symbolism, in which the body in fact, isn't deified, but merely raised to an improved level.¹⁴

In conclusion, the Carpathian icon comes from the affirmation that there is no contradiction or difference (!) between spirit and body. They must be viewed together at the same time, and so the icon bears a double manifestation. In Athonite characteristics there is a unique hypostasis, in which the materiality must be raised to the part of grace, of Taboric light. In the Carpathian icon, however, the Taboric light and the bodily are at the same time; it is a

¹³ Evidently, not in a materializing way, or by becoming the object of the spirit, but in the way of the incarnation.

¹⁴ If we try to look through an inter-religious and intercultural perspective, we could say that Father Ghelasie would like to avert us from falling into the tendency of interpreting Christianity in terms of Greek philosophy. Or more precisely stated, though being attracted by the prestige of Athonite spirituality (remarkable though it is), we shouldn't lose sight of the singularity of Christianity in rapport with, not only mystic-philosophic Greek classicism, but also with every other religion. The miracle, and at the same time "scandal," brought by Christianity wasn't so much that it affirmed that man is called to deify himself. All pre-Christian spiritualities formed their own ideals for man, in the final analysis as deification too, although clearly in terms specific to each one's own culture. Rather, it (the scandal) was in the fact that only Christianity showed that the support for deification could be nothing other than the Incarnation of God. In other words Christianity showed, not only that in order to be completely man in the full and consistent sense of the word means to be like God, but also that to be truly God means to assume humanity. The true God is the One that becomes human and incarnates. I believe that Father Ghelasie's entire discourse, clearly icono-logical and Eucharistic, is subordinated to the desideratum of placing theology under the auspices of the Incarnation, the event that makes Christianity into a meta-religion, not simply one of many....

double transfiguration, so to speak, a double manifestation. If this isn't understood, grave conclusions could be made.

G. M.: Moving on to a different subject, many people who try to read your works have great difficulties with your approach to language, Father, which seems too complicated to them. I'd like to ask if you're trying to give value to the iconic characteristics of language itself?

G. G.: Mysticism is analogous with poetry, with painting, with art in general, in the true sense of the word. So, maybe, I instinctively attempt to truly use an iconic language in my accounts. And, so that this language may be understood, we must return a little bit to what we were saying before in reference to the Carpathian iconic that distinguishes itself from the Athonite metaphysic that seeks the spiritual beyond the material. As I've said, in the Carpathian iconic the spiritual and the material, the spiritual and bodily can be at once, in reciprocal participation. So, my language seeks to conform to this iconic characteristic, and maybe this gives the impression that I use a mixed language, made from words with an ambiguous sense from which you don't know what part to choose: its usual part, or the spiritual part? In iconic language both meanings must be taken at the same time, as in a communication of gestures: the language must capture this double acceptance, the spiritual as well as the usual stand face to face in equality. I don't have, of course, any pretensions that this language should be accepted by the whole world, but as for now that's how I write.

G. M.: You even use, at a certain moment, the term "supra-language." Is the introduction of this word a sign of a desire to surpass certain conceptual frameworks that belong to Greek philosophy, to be emancipated from a certain metaphysical language?

G. G.: Not in the least, I'm not trying to depart from the Greek terminology ostentatiously, as if there existed an antagonism between the two terminologies. It's just that the Greek terminology is the nature of the respective thought forms. We couldn't exclude the validity of it, nor do I affirm that the iconic and Greek *languages* are reciprocally exclusive. This is right where the beauty lies, iconic language always maintains regular terminology without contradicting or absorbing it. Greek metaphysical language insists on a passage from the ordinary representative part (the material, bodily) to the spiritual part. So it illustrates a modality of rational knowledge, which passes into an "excess of mind." In iconic language, however, the

mental, not excluding the rational, must be considered at the same time with the other parts of a representation of form.¹⁵

G. M.: Then if I've understood correctly, Father, you hold to an adjacency of both aspects and to their reconciliation into a superior plane...

G. G.: Iconic means that, too...

G. M.: I'd like to discuss in continuation a syntagm that often appears in your writings, Father. That is, a "being dialogue." What especially surprises me is the fact that you define creation's being as a "divine of creation"...

G. G.: Divine with a small "d"...

G. M.: Yes, with a small "d"... This "divine of creation," as you call it, exists face to face with Divine being-ness Itself, in a certain, if we can put it that way, autonomy. You place a great accent on man's dialogue with God as a dialogue between two fulfilled *being-nesses*. Doesn't this somehow depreciate the dialogue through the intermediary of uncreated energy? I'd like to ask you to clarify this.

G. G.: So, it is good that we've especially discussed iconic characteristics. In my preoccupations with mysticism I've tried to make an enlargement, a theological, spiritual support for this Carpathian particularity that we're talking about. In this framework I stress the fact that, being created after the image and likeness of God, we received our own being-ness, [which is] of a created nature. We know that the metaphysical discourses of ancient philosophy considered that creation itself was the manifestation of God, a direct coming forth from Him. [It was] Divine Being manifesting Itself in some spiritual principles and then in structures, because in the end, everything would be reabsorbed again into Being. In the Christian understanding, God creates creation's reality, to which He also gives a certain "autonomy,¹⁶" because if He hadn't given it this "autonomy" we wouldn't be able to realize the dialogue of response in the presence of God. Our complete liberty is founded on this kind of autonomy. This is why I particularly accentuate

¹⁵ In other words, instead of increasingly accentuated abstractions, iconic language purposes a terminology that is, at the same time, concept and image which doubles the rational sense, conferring plasticity to it. It is actually, a returning to a prestigious characteristic of religious terminology in general, especially identifiable in sacred texts, which is *pictoriality*. The essential advantage of these features is the capacity to circulate multiple simultaneous meanings, such as the non-verbal language of gesture, as Father Ghelasie says above, there by retaining the non-sequentiality proper to mystical experience. In the case of the essential features of Christianity, the iconic manner of language is another sign of the Word's Incarnation.

¹⁶ In patristic literature (especially in the works of Saints Gregory of Nyssa and Maximos the Confessor) the term "auto-determination" (αυτεξουσία) is used.

the ideal that created being stands face to face with divine being,¹⁷ the created with the Uncreated, the spiritual with the bodily etc.

If a duality of contraries existed in ancient metaphysical thought, in the iconic sense, such a contradiction disappears, and the duality becomes an affirmative-dialogue. Do you understand? I wouldn't want to be misinterpreted... It's known that in Christian theology there exists a terrible fear, and rightly so, of the pantheistic danger of created being's entrance into Divine Being. I'm not dealing with the issue of entrance because Divine Being is beyond accessibility. We, being in the quality of created being, can't participate in Divine Being directly. That would mean to share the same being with the Divine. But I do pose the problem of a dialogue between the two beings. Divine Being, in Christianity, isn't conceived of in the essentialist modes of Greek philosophy. It is a super-iconic Countenance,* so to speak, and through the Christic Incarnation It makes a condescension and paradoxically becomes accessible through the energies of grace. Inaccessible Divinity can, in this way, pour Itself out even into a countenance* of creation. Then, a being-ness participation of creation in the Being of God, Who always remains beyond accessibility, can be discussed. When I talk about a being-ness mysticism, I don't have in sight a mysticism of Divine Being, but of the created being. Through this distinction, I delimit myself from pseudo-mysticism that is actually occultish, in which they especially speak about an aspect of energy, of a mysticism exclusively about energy. In a book that I'm working on, I want to solidify a kind of Christian anthropology on the thought of Saint Gregory Palamas. About how this Saint showed, as in the spirit of all theology up until him, that the Being of God is at the same time tri-personal, and "transposed" into uncreated energy. Then I try to develop a configuration of Christian anthropology where man is seen as a created being, with his energies of creation as image and likeness.

¹⁷ It is useless to insist again on the legitimacy of these views, given their massive occurrences in Biblical texts of the syntagm "before the face of God." At the same time, one of the typical formulas like the Liturgy's Old and New Testament refrain "Lord, don't cast me from Your face!" On this foundation, Father Ghelasia purposes a *prosopo* (πρόσωπον)-logical ontology, where created being is ontologically ensured precisely through the fact that (and only to the measure in which) it is situated "before the face of God," in the "perceptual" perspective of the Divine. And the situating "face to face" of the Divine and creation also presupposes a dialogue like structure and ingredient. The dialogue is not fulfilled unless the partners are fulfilled. Because of this, creation can only offer God its own irreducible response that God Himself awaits, if it has ontological auto-determination. Yet again, it seems to me, a very current vision if we consider the results that contemporary science (especially quantum mechanics) has obtained in evaluating the relation between the reality of the world and how it is perceived, with interactive and infra-real virtual realities.

As opposed to the ancient anthropological model where a metaphysical configuration concerning the material and spiritual parts of man was desired, the spiritual and bodily, I present the configuration in iconic language. It is a kind of iconic anthropology where I attribute to creation – of course from a Biblical basis – the categories of created being with created energy, without departing from the limits of Christian theology. It's not something new, just an enlargement based on the Holy Fathers, with an additional relief from our specific Carpathian characteristics. Whether this work will have theological value or not, I can't say yet. However, I know that framing in the essential Carpathian features is necessary in the Christian theological and Philokalical. Likewise, I propose an entrance of the theological into culture... In this sense I ask theologians especially to bring it to my attention if they observe any errors.

G. M.: In any case, approaching your writings, Father, presupposes a change of paradigms, of theological thought forms...

G. G.: No, don't say that, that's not true at all. It's not about a changing of thought!

G. M.: I was referring to this situating in iconic thought...

G. G.: Dear sir, that's true only when it is clearly specified that it has to do with iconic thought. As we've said before, I don't exclude normal language and thought. I do it so that a double language can be discussed, and not an exclusive one. In Christianity we must renounce conceptualizing Divinity and creation as two separate, incompatible entities. If God assumed for Himself creation's level then there is room to speak about divine language's entrance into a kind of form of creation's language. In this way Saint Dionysios the Areopagite could speak about names of divine grace in the forms of creation. It's true that, on the one hand, we give names and properties to the Divine in the order of creation. And at the same time, we give these names on the basis of some grace models that we have in ourselves as essence and as modality of perception. So talking about God in Christianity isn't simply analogical, it is done in a language, so called, "of creation," understanding this as a kind of "theological" of the image of creation, of the very nature of creation. We, as image and likeness of God, have a seal. We have divine grace models inside us. We are, through creation, theological beings bearing the image of God in us. We increase these divine models-images that we have, and when we increase them we give them something of our own. If we don't give them something of our own, it would mean that we don't

respond in fact, that we are nothing but mere imitations [of the Divine image]. We see then, why we can speak about the theology of our response before the Divine theological.¹⁸

G. M.: In other words, God could receive something from us too...

G. G.: The Lord knows us, and wants to receive something of our own. It's good, the theological of our response would interest me. This problem hasn't been dealt with yet...

G. M.: In order to make such assertions of yours acceptable in the eyes of some very rigorous theologians, Father, we would have to believe that the human, more precisely, the image of man had been assumed by the Son, if not from all eternity, at least a little before the act of creation properly speaking – of cosmo-anthropo-genesis. In one of your writings, Father, you say that "at a certain moment before time the Son showed Himself to the Father in the image of man." Do you believe then that there could be talk of humanity's assumption by the Son, at the theological level itself, and not merely of economy?

G. G.: Truly, I propose a kind of Christian "metaphysics" where I insist a lot on the pre-creation Christic image. I speak of the Book of Life where the Son has already written all of creation's images that He then manifested later on, transposed in action, in order that we could also achieve our response. This is a much deeper question, which must be confronted in a different manner...

In a way, there could be a discussion of the assumption of man's image into the Christic Image Itself [pre-creation]. Why? Because man, as I described in my "Mini-Dogmatic," has specifically human, as well as microcosmic, cosmic and super-cosmic destiny. In this way,

¹⁸ Father Ghelasie rests man's dialogue with God on an icono-logical basis, in terms of the celebrated syntagm "after the image and likeness of God." Practically every discourse about human being in Christianity begins with this. Father accentuates – in comparison with the classical interpretation – the fact that this syntagm doesn't only restore a kinship (συγγένεια) of man with his Creator, but also a certain singularity of the first – the quality of being an irreducible being even to God. It is in this that likeness with God is seen, Who is Himself a Trinity of Hypostases one irreducible from the other! Man is truly a created god (μικρόθεος), an anthropic ladder. We could speak, in virtue of Incarnation's theology, even more about a theological anthropology than an anthropologic theology. On the foundation of these singularities or man's "uniqueness" – as Father calls it in another interview – he can speak "in God's tongue." He somehow has accessibility to a language of essence, onto-iconological, and since God also spoke man's tongue, he could give Him his own irreducible response. In addition, being essentially configured after the divine Image, man has in his ontological structure "grace models" that, given to the Incarnation, confer to him – so to speak – the perceptual-conceptual gestalt of the Divine that models its own forms of expression, including terminology. The implications of Father Ghelasie's vision in theology, and in the philosophy of language are truly daring, as in general. Yet again they are in complete conformity with the Incarnation which bears fruit until its ultimate consequences: man can not only give utterance of reflections about the Divine in an analogous way, but can even utter an essentially divine language, to which mysteriously and unspeakably, he has access. Theology in Christianity doesn't only mean "speaking about God," but moreover speaking *with* God, which implies a true theology of language.

the image of man is also the image of the entire creation's union; and much more than that, the image of man is the image through which Christ incarnates Himself. That means therefore, that the image of man must be of Christ and like the model in itself. As the image of creature, we have the very image of the Son's incarnation.¹⁹ Here's the mystery – that we don't just have any image, but the one that already had transcendent origins, so to speak. It's here that man's iconic vocation is founded. That's why I say that man's image is an iconic image. I don't consider it to be just any kind of image; neither angels nor nature have an iconic image, only man. This is the meaning of the parable where Lucifer, the fallen angel, didn't want to understand that creation's significance is only achieved through the Incarnation, in fact.

G. M.: I still hold my opinion that entering into discussion with you, Father, presupposes a daring step forward, a surpassing of some schemes of thought...

G. G.: I wouldn't quite say so, because then all kinds of suspicions could appear. I believe that I'm simply bringing things up to date, and bringing things up to date always means bringing in a foundation that is in essence the same, into the present. To us it's just the "clothing" of bringing things up to date, due to the fact that everything has its own unique characteristics. I like the affirmation that in theology there isn't an evolution, but rather a continuous bringing up to date [an insertion] into a permanently new present. It doesn't do anything but bring out into relief something that is already fulfilled. This fulfillment must be lived by everybody, and must unfold in us, into our own response. This doesn't mean we add something. We just make the fulfillment current by our own response.

G. M.: And lastly, I'd like to ask you how each one of us personally could become skilled in this iconic way of living, practically?

G. G.: Truly, it seems that this iconic modality, transposed onto the level of mystical life could resurrect our spiritual living. The great tragedy is, however, that we, on the spiritual plane as much as the corporeal, are almost destroyed. I don't believe a spiritual elevation of the kind

¹⁹ The idea is, again with a solid grounding in New Testament Biblical and Patristic anthropology, that the archetype of man is Christ, it is the Logos Incarnate. Along these lines Father Ghelasie takes things further by speaking of human nature being rooted in the Christic Image, a truly *iconic proto-ontology* of human creatures. It doesn't seem like a significant contribution, but this accentuation implies, in fact, Father's whole discourse in reference to the major importance of the iconic that becomes, for Father, a kind of hermeneutical axle for Christian theology. Father Ghelasie's personality and thought verifies the ever attested criterion of the history of Christian thought, according to which theology didn't develop cumulatively, through original contributions, as much as through successive movements of accentuation and subsequent deepening (see the following response).

that there was in the past is foreseeable any longer. You can no longer ask today's man to make spiritual efforts or great corporeal asceticism. Iconic modality, which I brought into relief, implies principally the Liturgical living of this iconic of Eucharistic image which can reform the capacities of man. You can't ask man for something purely spiritual nowadays, because he has nothing to give. You can't even ask very much from him on the material-corporeal level. There is an almost equal defect there too. So then, what must be done? We need just this, a practice through which we can remake both aspects. Before, you could remake the body through the spiritual and the other way around too. In other words, figuratively speaking, if you didn't have one leg, at least you had the other one. If you didn't have one hand, you had the other. We are in a situation where we don't have a hand, or a leg. We are completely sick. So then, what can we do? We must find a different modality that can give us back our hands and legs. The iconic ritual does this. It restitutes normality's conditions. So I believe that this iconic practice should be made known, which doesn't demand too big of a mental effort, and it introduces you into a sacrality that gives you back the conditions of normality. Because of this, I believe that the iconic practice is more accessible to modern man.²⁰

I liked, for example, the youths' dialogue with Father Theophil Părăianu published by Byzantine Publishing house, where it's written that today's youth have a burning thirst to draw close to the Divine. It's true, and how is it given to them to draw close to the Divine? Today's youth no longer have any special spiritual capacity, or a very great biological force. So then we must urge them first of all towards closeness to the Church's sacredness, which is an iconic countenance.* The Church is precisely the iconic countenance where the altar and the naos' mystery, the divine and creation's, the soul and the body's mystery are all at once. So, the

²⁰ An additional sign that Father Ghelasie's discourse isn't merely an arid theological digression is that he has an end and a very pragmatic, realistic, ascetical application. This doesn't consist in extravagant proposals, or exotic religious practices, but in returning in a different perspective, to Liturgical Christian living. Yet again it is about living marked by theoretical iconic method as expounded until now, that isn't declared as superior to classical asceticism (remarkable in its psychosomatic and mental "performance"), but only adapted through divine condescension to the weaknesses of contemporary man. Doesn't the spirit and newness of Christianity stand in this, that "where sin abounded, grace abounded much more (Rom. 5:20)?" Where man's weaknesses are accentuated more, hasn't God given him the power to find new paths to Him? Christian asceticism has never formulated an infallible recipe, available for every historical epoch (just as theology hasn't remained cramped in a philosophical-cultural paradigm or a given period). It is rather the path of creating efficient theology on the ontological level that is formational for man in any epic. The dynamic aspect of Christianity is solidified in this, a reality that Dogmatic manuals declare but is put under acute and circumspect questioning when it is manifested in action. My opinion that I tried to defend in my preliminary arguments in these footnotes and which I hope to develop in future monographs, is that Father Ghelasie's thought is a good example of equilibrium between the steadfast and dynamic elements of Tradition.

youths' integration into the mystery of the Church, of the Liturgical ritual is their single salvation, and at the same time, the most efficient modality through which the youth can find God, and through which, at the same time, theology can make a resurrection of the youth. The iconic mystical theology isn't an intellectual mysticism, but Liturgical, of the Church, and of our Christian ritual. Neither is it a meditative, occult, or magic mysticism, like yoga. In brief, iconic practice is the image of the Church, Liturgical, Eucharistic, Christic image.

G. M.: We thank you that you had the kindness to grant us this interview and we hope that it will be as much of a use for theologians as for this generation's youth.

G. G.: I ask again, with all my heart, that you wouldn't be suspicious that what I do is a personal preoccupation, which I believe could also help others. I don't want to make a special point that I am doing something new and I acknowledge that I possibly could be mistaken. So I even ask, that if in some way you find some mistakes, to correct me with the words of the psalmist, "Let the righteous strike me, let the faithful correct me." Because the one who seeks can certainly have deficiencies too, but we hope in Christ's words, "Seek and you will find, knock and the door will be open unto you!"

G. M.: We thank you again.

*The Holy Monastery of Frăsinei,
August 12th 1997*

The Iconic Ritual

Gabriel Memelis: Reverend Father Ghelasie, in our last discussion you made a very useful introduction for us about the specific characteristics of Romanian, or Carpathian hesychasm. You then noted that our indigenous mysticism could be characterized by an especial accent on the icon and iconization. And when you say “icon” you weren’t necessarily referring to the Athonite understanding of this term, in which the icon in itself maintains a kind of “trasfigurative metaphysical,” being a symbol or a modality “of passing through to the spiritual, to the spirit beyond ordinary materiality.” The Carpathian iconic is, as you were saying, “the revelation of a mystery” – the Incarnation, the co-dwelling of the spiritual, spiritualized along with the corporeal-material part. The icon is therefore a place, an altar, a kind of Eucharistic “pre-figuring.”

This makes Romanian (Carpathian) mysticism first of all, a mysticism of the icon, and implicitly, a mysticism with a Eucharistically pregnant character, which looks for the re-actualization of the iconic-Eucharistic image in man. Man must enter into the “process of Eucharistic transformation.” So because of this, Reverend Father, you accord the liturgical ritual overwhelming importance, through which the Eucharistic transformation of man is realized. And so the iconic practice that you prescribe wouldn’t consist so much of an accentuation of mental effort, but of the introduction “into a sacrality that gives back the condition of normality.”

For these reasons I’d like to center today’s discussion on the aspect of ritual and the connection between the liturgical and the ascetical. For a start I’d like to ask, where does ritual have its ontological roots? Could there be discussion somehow, of ritual on the Holy Trinity’s level, in the sense that the relationships between the Divine Persons could be viewed from a perspective of ritual? What would this kind of ritual in the Trinity mean, and what would its connection be with creation’s “ritual of response?”

Fr. Ghelasie Gheorghe: Dear sir, as a theologian you know, better than others, that to talk about God is, in our Christian theology, a delicate enough problem. The Holy Fathers especially accentuate the fact that Divinity is beyond all representations, all attributes, and all references [analogies] that we could make. In spite of all of this we must understand that Divinity doesn’t remain hidden, as Blaga says, but makes that very lowering... And so I insist very much [on the Incarnation], because – in the Christian theological use – Divinity is

apophatic, but It does an extra-ordinary thing by Its coming towards creation, even if creation doesn't have access (ontologically speaking, n.m.G.M.) to Divinity.

Again, what must be understood – and it is a truth I especially stress – is the very image of creation's being-ness. In the end, we won't go back to this topic again, because we discussed it in the last interview... And the delicate problem of the specific Carpathian characteristics that I try to make evident is precisely the fact that between creation and God there is an account of an inter-mediation. An inter-mediation in what way? God comes into creation, and it can't receive Him, because it has the condition of creation. However much God would desire to show Himself, creation can't see Him. Creation, because of its ontological conditions, however much it would like, doesn't have access (directly), and can't see God. So then that is why I accentuate the iconic, through which Divinity clothes Itself with something created²¹ with which creation can have a kinship and through this kinship God can reveal Himself.

The theology of the Holy Fathers accentuates the uncreated energies of grace very much. In the Carpathian iconic understanding I accentuate the *Christic image*, because grace is also something divine, also inaccessible, in a certain way, to creation. So there must exist *a something* for kinship, and only Christ can make kinship. Grace is accessible to the world through Christ, it isn't directly accessible (John 1:17). Some want to make a theology directly about grace, and afterwards about Christ Himself – to make Him into a kind of “product” of grace, which I don't hurry to confirm... What I stress, however, is the fact that it is only the iconic which you brought to mind, brother, that is the mystery of the Divine and the creation's co-dwelling.

And now we must yet understand one thing, a very deep and acute issue. Divinization – through the fact that it gives creation the condition of image and likeness (and I also see likeness as a category of being, and of created nature, not of energy) – confers a great importance to the *inter-being-like*²² *inter-personalism* that I talk about. And we must understand that inter-personalism isn't a simple inter-being-ness that would fall into a so-called pantheism of the confusion of beings. Because it is clearly known that Divine being, and creation's being cannot

²¹ This is not referring to, as in Catholicism, a created grace that makes an inter-mediation between Divine and created nature, fundamentally incompatible. Rather it's about a kinship, as Father Ghelasie clearly states, an iconic kinship between God and creation (founded, as he will say shortly, in “the pre-creational Christic image”). Catholicism arrived at the doctrine about created grace because it developed a predominantly ontological argumentation,* devoid of an iconic or personalist perspective. The notion of “kinship *syngeneia*” is in the spirit of Pauline and Patristic theology. It refers, as I've said, to an iconic kinship not strictly ontological.

²² interfiintial

be confused in any way. The ancients say that the being of creation must be absorbed into the Divine being, yet for us there can be no discussion of any kind about pantheism. The mystery of Person [Divine] is that it is capable to assume [distinct, without confusion] two natures. The Person [the Divine Son] can then “dress Himself” in the *being* nature of creation. And then It can make the iconic. And we must not see the Divine “outpourings” in creation as just mere grace energies. First of all we must see them as an iconic model in the sense of the Christic’s descent, that already makes them a kind of Divine-creation inter-personalism. So then, the qualities and attributes of grace depart afterwards, shining from the iconic. Some put the energies of grace first, then comes the Christic nature... I don’t know, I don’t think it’s a dogmatic deviation if I stress the fact that the assumption of the Christic image [by the Son of God] is first. It is an assumption of creation’s *being* nature, where the Savior’s Person remains apophatic – since He is God – but at the same time you can’t only deal with the kataphatic in the sense of energies or simple attributes. The Savior’s assumption of creation’s *beingness* isn’t just a simple attribute of the Godhead.²³

The possibility of achieving a kinship between Divinity and creation is an extraordinary mystery. It is known that philosophy’s greatest problem is precisely this: how can a connection between the Divine and creation be made, between the uncreated and created? The ancients offered a pantheistic solution, where Divinity is the only being (the only one that has significant ontological density, n.m., G. M.), and creation is only an energetic transposition, in the end, pantheistic – in such a way that there can no longer be any real encounter between the Divine and creation. Divinity only makes an illusion of creation, and creation must destructure itself in order to give occasion for the Divine to return to Its true state. From the Christian point of view, this is a true reduction [of the Divine] to a lower rank. In the Christian understanding, the Divine can’t pass into something un-divine, but Divinity makes – paradoxically – a kind of

²³ In other words, the Incarnation surpasses the plane of simple names / attributes / Divine grace energies, it isn’t consumed on an exclusively energetic level, even uncreated energies. Saint Maximos speaks in this sense in Ambigua “...the God of all, the Incarnate One, doesn’t simply have the name of man, but is in His entire being truly man.” Or further on, “...it’s not because He is the Maker of Man that we give the name of man to Him Who, according to nature being God, truly took our being (becoming substantial like us), but being (G. M.)” Moreover, the Son of God, on the foundation of a indefinite iconic mobility of His Hypostasis, to Whom is conferred an eternal possibility to incarnate, assumes for Himself – says Father Ghelasie – in a pre-creational plane, the image of man. The dialogical interval, the framework for relations between man and God is therefore iconologically founded in a pre-ontology of the human, and only this assumption can confer consistence to the devotional act of man as being concrete. While diminishing the role of uncreated energy, Father reminds us that the Hypostases have priority over them (obviously in the ontological and not chronological sense).

“auto-surpassing” (of ek-stasis, ecstasy, n.m. G. M.), assuming for itself a different condition, a condition of creation. Theologians stress, and rightly so, the energetic-grace part a lot, in order to evade pantheism. The Holy Fathers fought a lot with ancient pantheism, and they had to find a point of connection between the Divine and creation. It must be understood that in the context of today’s theology, the Christic has been diluted very much, and so could fall into a kind of “grace-ish” pantheism.²⁴

If the Holy Fathers showed that there couldn’t be a “being” pantheism between the Divine and creation, today there may be a tendency towards a dilution of Christ into a few attributes of grace. In the end Christ Himself could be confused with grace, everything is grace and it becomes like a kind of grace Christianity... But grace is precisely the shining and witness of the Christic, it’s not what produces the Christic. Grace comes from the iconic. The iconic isn’t a product of the grace... I don’t think that this could be considered a heresy, but more of a theologumen or a theological enlargement.

The Holy Fathers, in the context of the spirituality of their time, up until Saint Gregory Palamas and even later, sought to deal with a being through grace, precisely to avoid *being pantheism*. Currently however, it [modern theology] must by all means arrive at a theology of grace through being. In other words, [it needs to arrive at a theology of grace through being] in order not to lose *being*, hidden, somewhere far off, so that there is only energy or grace. Especially in the current context of true neo-paganism that comes with energetic mysticism. [If it wouldn’t do this] it would mean that Christianity too, in a certain way, is nothing other than energetic mysticism...

I insisted – in my writings *The Image of the Mother of God* and *The Christic Logos* – on the fact that the Son of God, as Model and as connection with the world that He had made in the pre-Christic plan, He assumes a being-ness of creation. Because of this we can speak of a *being-ness “in itself”* of creation, not in the sense that this is confused with the Son of God, Who remains a divine being, but creation, so to speak, is the Son of God who assumed a being-ness of creation. This is precisely the iconic that I’m speaking of. Inasmuch as the being of creation is

²⁴ The same criticism which in the previous interview Father brought against the dominance of the metaphysics of classical Greek philosophy, a dominance that was passed on to the Athonite type of Christianity, he now brings against the energetic cosmology of the Greeks, which migrated into Christian discussions. They [Greek energetic metaphysics] view grace energies first and only then the personal encounter with God, face to face. Only the iconic can constitute a basis for a real encounter.

precisely this Divine-creation Mystery; the being of creation isn't just a simple being...there is such a great mystery here...

G. M.: It's an iconic being...

G. G.: It's an iconic being in the sense that, at the same time, it represents the assumption of the Divine by creation just as much as the assumption of the creation by the Divine! Because, in the pre-Christic image, not only the Son of God Himself assumes creation, the image of creation, but the very image of creation assumes something from Divinity,²⁵ otherwise, there wouldn't be an authentic connection (in the sense of reciprocity, *G. M.:* see note 7 from the previous interview). This is the mystery of the Christic Image: it is unrepeatable, unique, but it can be imitated through Christ...

G.M.: Yes, there is a reciprocity... however I'd like to get back to the issue of the ritual...

G.G.: Now, after I've stressed this [particular] understanding of the iconic, we must specify that Christian theology, in comparison with other religions, has supernatural Revelation, as it is called in the dogmatic textbooks. Through this Revelation the Son of God uncovers a few reference points for us about the divine things, beyond all the manifestations of creation...

G.M.: In the theological plan, as it's said...

G.G.: Of course... and so, speaking about the Holy Trinity, the revelation of this Mystery doesn't consist of saying that the Trinity is an image of attributes, as the energetic mysticisms hold.²⁶ The Trinity doesn't merely consist of some energetic attributes. If we were to believe so, nothing would remain of Christian theology... We must understand that the Persons

²⁵ It may seem at the limits of Origenism, but Father Ghelasie is not speaking about an ontology of creation before the concrete act of the creation of the world by God. He is referring to a reciprocal assumption in both directions (Divine and creation), as a connection of relationship that will later become the foundation of the unique response and essential feature of creation before God. It's about a kind of a pre-hypostatic union/assumption of the Son's Image on the iconic level, a union that confers to it, in pre-time, a foundation and an irreducible ontological honor. In general, Father is pleading again for a constantly current theology, in the sense of returning to the Chalcedonian accent on the hypostatic-iconic union between God and man. It is known that the Synod of Chalcedon marked the decisive separation of Christian anthropology from that of Greek classicism, and by extension, any extra-Christian anthropology: in regards to the union of man with God, the decisions of this Synod reflect a singular and irreducible understanding, in the sense that the union stands on the auspices of a hypostatic event, it has in other words, ontological consistency, also simultaneously conserving the distinctions of nature. Because of this, Father Ghelasie makes an apology for returning, through a kind of suspension of the discourse about theology of "grace through being" in other words, to ontological priority, without negating the energies.

²⁶ For example Hinduism, where Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva (that make up the Trimurti trinity) are simple attributive manifestations, temporary and in the end, illusions of the Absolute (Brahman). These hypostases are not ontological structures of Brahman, as is the case of the Hypostases in the Holy Trinity.

of the Holy Trinity aren't attributes, but *being-nesses*. And if the Son of God always remembers the Trinitarian relational – He and the Father, together with the Holy Spirit – this means that the inter-Trinitarian life, inter-being-ness, is that which later pours itself out, through Christ even into creation. So, the Son of God performs the descent of the Divine in an outpouring, and we “translate” it into the meaning of ritual.

And what does ritual mean? We won't dwell too much on the notion itself, because in the Christian understanding the ritual obtained other valences and other directions. We'll just say that the ritual is a sacred relational, which isn't only a simple gesture or a simple attitude, but it is the very life itself of the Godhead, which is more than a simple movement²⁷... It is such a great mystery, and we use the word “ritual.” We must understand that between the Divine Persons there can't be an ordinary ritual, an ordinary relational, but one in the sense of absolute sacrality, of absolute holiness and spirituality.

So, according to Christian Revelation, we say that God-Father, the Un-begotten, begets the Son and proceeds²⁸ the Holy Spirit. These relations are “translated” by us, in terms of our being-ness, as references to Divine ritual. Begetting and Procession, which we can't imagine, but which we take, and I repeat, just as a few references, also have a sense of returning, where the Son and the Holy Spirit offer themselves to the Father.²⁹ In this way, I attempt to speak about a divine ritual in itself. Moreover, it's said that – in Divinity – the Son's love is everything. The entire Godhead is nothing “other” than the love of the Countenance of the Son.

²⁷ In the Christian understanding ritual surpasses, again, the common significance of the other religions, where it has exclusive cosmological connotations [see the celebrated “etymology” of M. Buccellato of *ritus* (Latin) from *rita* (Sanskrit) – a cosmic order, a harmonic principle]. In pre-Christian religions, especially in oriental monisms, the ritual as a devotional act didn't offer man access to the divine *ontos* (ὄντος). Thus the ideal man (in front of whom the ritual moment is a mere preamble where he obligatorily suffers cosmic determinations) is formulated in a-ritualistic and a-cosmic terms. In Christianity, however, Father Ghelasia observes that the ritual is defined “from above down” as an outpouring of inter-Trinitarian life into creation. In such a way, it can open access to the mysteries of the Godhead-Trinity itself. As a Biblical verification, the Revelation of the Holy Trinity at the Jordan is described in the Gospels as a theophany in dynamic dialogue (of the Father's witness) and of gesture (the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove), thus in ritualistic terms. The Church, in the troparion of the Theophany chants: ‘As you were baptized in the Jordan, Lord, the worship of the Holy Trinity was made manifest’ (Ἐν Ἰορδάνη βαπτίζομένου σου, Κύριε, ἡ τῆς Τριάδος ἐφανερώθη προσκύνησις). This confirms the *proskynetical* [worship like] ritual structure of inter-Trinitarian rapport, the mysterious supra-movement of the Trinity that Father talks about.

²⁸ The Romanian term *purcede* can be used as a transitive verb unlike the English *proceed*. However, in order to maintain the meaning of the interview I used *proceed*, which is its theological equivalent, as a transitive verb, with the Holy Spirit as its direct object.

²⁹ Meaning that the Son is born in an active mode, from the Father, and the Spirit proceeds, and this can be seen as archetypal ritual gestures.

The Divinity of the Father is His love towards the Son, and [the Divinity] of the Holy Spirit is the very blaze of the Son's love towards the Father. So, I stress the fact that the Son's Countenance is itself "the mobile" in the Godhead – as much as we can say having these reference points – of the love towards the Father, of love in the sense of Image of Son. It itself is the very life of God.

Then the Son of God, through the fact that He assumes for Himself a being-ness of creation, pours out all His love of Son in a love of Son of creation (He is a "double Son," so to speak). At the same time He pours out the image of heavenly life through [the "double Sonship"], because the Son's love is love towards the Father. The Son of God comes and pours out, He seals us with the image of filial love, and at the same time He raises us and brings us with Him to the love of the Father. And then we can say implicitly that our iconic ritual has the mystery of inter-Divine life as its ontological origins. I don't want to be understood in a Gnostic way, but we must say that we have some reference points through which the Son of God shares some truly spiritual, Divine realities with us.

G.M.: What is clear, and I think that I've understood this from you, Reverend Father, is the fact that the term "ritual" is more adequate for speaking about the interpersonal Trinitarian situations than the term "relation" is, in the philosophical or psychological sense...

G.C.: Dear sir, I associate a lot the ritual with the iconic, which I stressed from the beginning of our conversation. The ritual isn't a simple relational. It is a common that appears after the inter-relational. The ritual is produced only if both parties make the relational, and then the responses of both parties unite and make one single response.³⁰ The ritual isn't when you make a simple gesture towards someone. That's only a simple relational; the ritual implies a

³⁰ Proposing a new definition of the ritual, completely coherent with iconic ontology that brings it out into relief, a definition that renounces the category of relation, Father Ghelasie indirectly sanctions a certain tendency of current theology (visible in the otherwise remarkable theology of Hr. Yannaras). This is about a kind of Christian existentialism in which everything, including ontology, is placed and excessively interpreted under the species of the relational (see below). For Father Ghelasie, the ritual is fulfilled through the conjunction of each parties' response into a new reality, iconic-Eucharistic. It is a meeting that doesn't suppress the special qualities of those that meet together. And neither do they "consume" each other in simple relational terms. Again, we could think of a similarity with Saint Maximos' theology that expresses the same thing in dynamical terms. The common ritual response/gesture is constituted in the inter-relational, as Father Ghelasie puts it, which brings us to the concept that Maximos named the state of the age to come (maximally anticipated in the Liturgy). There will then be mobile stability and a dynamic steadfastness, a placement of man before the face of God that will unspeakably surpass the two current modes of movement – active and passive. "There will no longer be any existing things that carry or is carried and moves those that are carried and move (*Ambigua* 53, for this antinomial dynamism see also *Ambigua* 170 and 180)."

reciprocity – the other one also makes a gesture and then, more over, the two gestures unite into one common [which don't annul each other]. This common that I call iconic is precisely the ritual. That is why a great accent is placed on liturgical ritual in Christianity, which unfolds into the Eucharistic common, in which God's love and the response of creation's love unite.

G.M.: Changing the flow of our dialogue a little bit, I'd like to make the observation that, Reverend Father, in textbook theology there exists a false separation between "the theological plan" and "the economic plan." How is this problem posed in iconic liturgical practice?

G. G.: Dear sir, we know very clearly that one must begin from the absolute of divine love. This love is so great that its outpouring into creation also implicitly assumes economy, so to speak. God doesn't just make a simple creation, but rather at the same time, in His love, assumes it and accords it Providence in terms of care, and maintenance. The Son of God, pouring out His love of affiliation, assumes for Himself at the same time a work. It must be understood that creation, however much it would try, couldn't raise itself to God by itself, if there wasn't Christ. He is the love. So, the Christic work of raising creation to communion with the Divine could be considered as economy. Moreover, there is still sin that has intervened, and so the Son assumes yet another work for Himself, that of salvation. In the plan of salvation it is possible to speak of economy, and the Holy Fathers are right when they stress this fact a lot. Sin has affected, to a certain measure, the image of creation. It must be remade. It must be reestablished.

G. M.: Do you believe that there exists a kind of similarity, from the viewpoint of ritual, between what "happens" between the Persons of the Holy Trinity and what happens between Them on one hand, and creation on the other?

G. G.: We can't quite talk that way, because the basis of creation is the image of affiliation, while in divine being – according to Christian Revelation – the Trinity is an impenetrable mystery. The life of creation is a life of affiliation, through which we participate in the Father's love and in the love of the Holy Spirit. However, what then is the form of Trinitarian life in Itself? This is beyond every reference point... We only know this much, that the love of affiliation, which is the basis of creation, is the personalism of our creation's life – it allows us to participate in the outpouring of Trinitarian love, without however, confusing these things... And for us Christians ritual must be seen in the liturgical sense. The Son of God and the Holy Spirit make a "double" ritual. One in the way of being-ness, which is apophatic and beyond creation, and the other where heavenly love permanently pours out into creation and at the same time they

[the Son and the Holy Spirit] take love from creation, make one common with [creation] and lift it up. The Son and the Holy Spirit perform this ritual of heavenly love. Saint Maximos the Confessor accentuates very much that our liturgical isn't a simple liturgical, but is rather a cosmic one, super-cosmic and afterwards earthly... Everything is connected... The Son and the Holy Spirit serve the ritual in Themselves, then they come and serve the cosmic ritual, the heavenly liturgy, and at the same time they make this union with the earthly liturgy, so that at a certain point this common that we've been talking about is realized. Because of this the Holy Eucharist has earthly, cosmic, and super-cosmic dimensions³¹... The iconic image of the Holy Eucharist must be stressed very much.

G. M.: So, if I understand correctly, the two rituals – inter-Trinitarian and the ritual...

G. G.: Let's not talk too much about inter-Trinitarian ritual however...

G. M.: The ritual that the Son makes in the Trinity...

G. G.: Dear sir, we must understand this aspect as a fine nuance. The Son doesn't serve a ritual in the Trinity in the usual sense of the word, in the sense the term has. That could lead to misunderstandings... The Son of God along with the Holy Spirit who permanently actualizes heavenly life in Itself – which we could say, in quotations, is itself “ritual” that is far above all our qualities and attributes or conceptions. This “ritual” pours out towards us and therefore we are able to participate in it. And with this “ritual” as the origin we can serve our liturgical. Without this we couldn't serve our liturgical.

G. M.: And thus the two rituals meet each other in the Son's icon?

G. G.: Not in the Son's icon, but in that communal icon, which is Eucharistic. In our Christian Liturgy there isn't just the Christic, there is also the descent of the Holy Spirit. There is the Christic, and at the same time there is also the cosmic (heavenly) Liturgy, that participates in the union. The Eucharistic has many dimensions and we can't reduce it to a single one.

G. M.: If you could tell us in continuation, Reverend Father, is it possible to discuss – in the sense we arrived at in our discussion – of a liturgical Philokalic? In other words, is a hermeneutic of liturgical living possible in the same way that the Fathers had a hermeneutic of ascetic living? And if it is possible, I'd like to ask you to explain to us how you understand the

³¹ It must be noted that through this distinction, Father Ghelasie doesn't speak in the spirit of gnostic stratification of the cosmos. For our Reverend, “the super-cosmic” means the level of the encounter of the love of God with the love of creation, the encounter of the celestial Liturgy with the earthly Liturgy. It is that common, that intensified level, which is called “the Holy above the heavens and the Spiritual sacrifice” of God, in the Orthodox Liturgical text.

Eucharistic iconic image in more detail? What kinship is there between the ritual and the iconic image, between the Liturgy and iconic practice?

G. G.: If you have followed with attention, the answers have already been given in part... But to be more explicit, we will say that the iconic modality, which I stress, must not be viewed as a different theology, as some people accuse me of... It is only a special feature, just as the Synaitic feature, or Athonite or Slav exists. In the Carpathian manner it is precisely the iconic that is observed, where the great mystery isn't just that God created the world but that the world also participates in the Divine. It is an enlargement, a greater openness: the relation between God and creation isn't marginalized to the relational, to accessibility, but is rather the mystery of the Kingdom of God, of the common, of the union and co-dwelling between God and creation, of their real encounter. It gets very delicate here, because many fall into a theology that doesn't deal with a real encounter between God and creation, but only a simple relational through which creation participates in a few reflections, in a few transpositions of Divinity and that's about all...

In the Carpathian understanding, God can communicate with the being-ness of creation, but without confusion; the being-ness of creation can participate, through the Christic incarnation – in other words through Christ – in becoming kin³² with the being-ness of God, precisely in this common that we're speaking about. So the iconic is the common between the Divine and creation, it is the Kingdom of Heaven. Heaven was only a kind of relational between the Divine and creation, while the Kingdom of Heaven is already an encounter, an inter-penetration.³³ We can talk about a kind of inter-penetration between God and creation, not in a pantheistic way, but in Christ.

³² This term that Father Ghelasie often returns to can only create bewilderment if we remain cramped in a ontologistic vision. As it is well known in Christianity, being is a hypostatic truth, so we no longer have anything like an ontological break between being and existence which, in general, characterizes the ancient mystics be it oriental or Greek. In this perspective, the term “*inrudire*” (becoming kin/family) refers to the iconic image that God conferred to creation and that is the brush stroke of onto-personal compatibility between this and the Divine, without their confusion of being. *Inrudire* is iconic and ontological at the same time, inseparable.

³³ The distinction between heaven and the Kingdom of heaven is in accordance with Patristic theology, where this dynamic interval is the cosmic correlative of the growth of man from the state of the image to that of likeness of God. In the ritualistic terms of Father Ghelasie, Heaven was more under the mark of the encounter's potentiality, yet incompletely fulfilled, while the Kingdom is reciprocal Divine-creation co-dwelling.

The role of iconic practices (asceticism) and its connection with the Eucharistic intervenes here, in the sense that the iconic is a Eucharistic condition.³⁴ Between Christ and us there can't be anything else except an iconic relational. Through baptism we gain the iconic seal, and receive the Christic condition, the iconic or pre-Eucharistic condition. We can't stop here though, because we would no longer go to communion, to the Eucharistic's fulfillment.

It is known that through the Ascension, Christ raised our condition of creation to the Godhead, to the right hand of the Father. The Son of God doesn't remain up there, as if we were missing Him, needing to climb up even to heaven in order to meet again with Christ. He sends the Holy Spirit Who now enters into His work of direct and personal Image of the Son. The work through which the Resurrected and Ascended Countenance of Christ descends into the earthly Church, becomes incarnate again in the Eucharistic prosphora and at the same time an "incarnation" of the Holy Spirit is made.³⁵ So the Eucharist isn't only the Body of Christ, but it is also an "incarnation" of the Holy Spirit. We insist a lot on the act of the epiclesis through which we invoke the Countenance of the Holy Spirit, because He brings us Christ the Resurrected. And through the Body of Christ the Resurrected, the Holy Spirit can also "become incarnate," meeting in this way with creation. Because the Spirit, being "pure," apophatic Divinity, wouldn't meet with us directly, and through the fact that He unites with Christ through the Resurrection – He makes Himself accessible to us through the Eucharistic image. Only through the Eucharist do we have access to the Holy Spirit. This is where a very deep subject lies, which theologians should think a lot about...

In general it is considered that the Eucharistic comes through the Holy Spirit. In other words, He comes first and then "brings" the Eucharistic with Him. But this one thing must be understood: the Christic is Christianity's absolute condition. Through the Christic condition the Holy Spirit makes Himself accessible to us and enters into work towards creation and, together

³⁴ Clearly not in the sense of a conditional cause, but of a constitution or Eucharistic pre-structure of creation made after the image of Christ (see the discussion from the previous interview). Iconic asceticism consists then of the process of the restoration of these Eucharistic constitutions through a mystic transposition of the Liturgical, ritual models in the dimension of interiority, from the Proskomedia to the Communion (see below).

³⁵ The entire text of the Proskomedia and of the Orthodox Liturgy comes to support these affirmations. The prosphora, which received the pre-Eucharistic condition during the Proskomedia, is transformed at the epiclesis into the "dough" of the New Creation rationally and spiritually founded through the work of the Father, and completed through the Son.

with creation brings the Christic image to actuality and at the same time He brings Himself to actuality.

G.M.: How about the possible connection between the liturgical and the ascetical that I asked you about...

G.G.: In the Philokalic understanding that you were talking about my brother, we must understand that asceticism isn't only a kind of hard life in order to acquire the virtues. Philokalic asceticism is precisely this *iconic in-spiriting*. As the Holy Fathers say, "Sin brought a deviation from holiness." In order to arrive at the reestablishment of holiness we must perform a kind of asceticism, as it were, that consists of our breaking loose from our negative states in order to return to these virtues in themselves. In truth Christian asceticism is nothing other than a returning to something normal, a return to the natural. The natural, however, must be iconicized later on. We must give the Eucharistic condition [structure] back to the natural and only then can Eucharistic communion be made. And the Holy Spirit is with Communion's Eucharistic at the same time! If it's a simple Christic Eucharistic there's no descent of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit there is no Eucharistic Christic and there is no Holy Spirit without the Eucharistic.³⁶

G. M.: Reverend Father, it has been acknowledged that in contemporary theology there are two major tendencies. They are both presented as solutions for the spiritual reinvigoration of the faithful. One of them insists on cult and on the Eucharist, placing the Philokalia's spirituality in the shadows somewhat, and viewing the Eucharist as the molding agent in and of itself. The second tendency is called "neo-palamite" and views the solution for reinvigoration in the personalism of uncreated energies, implicitly placing the Eucharistic contribution on the second plane. How do you see the iconic practice resolving the problem of accent, whether it should be on exclusively individual or ecclesial asceticism? Or in other terms, how could they harmonize – from the Carpathian – iconic perspective – the communitarian aspect of the Temple with the inner aspect of the "temple of the heart."

G. G.: I insist a lot on the mystery of the Eucharistic iconic, where it's impossible to deal with just a simple relational, a unilateral relational. But [instead I deal] with one [relational] that

³⁶ The Son and the Holy Spirit unite in the liturgical work, as Father Ghelasie says, as they also unite it to the economic, reciprocally promoting and bearing witness for each other. The Spirit pours itself out and Eucharistically offers itself through the Son, and the Son opens the Eucharistic path towards the participation of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, it should be noted again as in St Maximos, the centrality of Christ's Person in Father Ghelasie's discourse.

is made in every direction – both towards the Godhead and towards creation – and even more, of a kind of a uniting of the relational into a common. The Eucharistic, in the iconic understanding, has the dimensions that we have already brought to mind: of earthly Church, and of heavenly Church, and even of a super-cosmic manner of pouring a divine Mystery out through the Son of God. So that, especially in the current situation, in which the world is unraveled and de-structuralized, the prime necessity is, first of all, to remake the Eucharistic condition. It is just as important as the act of receiving communion itself. In what way? If many say that their participation in the Liturgy is useless if they don't commune, I would consider this opinion mistaken. In the Christic ritual of the Liturgy, even if you don't commune, it remakes the Christic, Eucharistic condition. It is here that our temples of our hearts, as you say, brother, are remade. The Eucharistic can't "come into being" until a temple exists, in other words, a Church. How can you make the Eucharistic in someone whose inner Church isn't re-established?

It must be understood then that only through the participation in the liturgical ritual, can each person remake his own condition of Church and then, to the measure in which one begins to serve the Liturgy in his own temple, the Eucharistic Mystery is fulfilled in him.³⁷ Only then, having the Eucharistic condition re-established, is it possible to partake of the Church's Eucharist, literally speaking. However, if we move too quickly to communing without previously remaking the interior Church, it's as if you're throwing pearls to swine... You can't just make any house into a Church. The house must first be consecrated, it must be offered, in order for it to be given the condition of Church – so it can become as such. And so it is with us. We can't commune until we acquire this condition... And afterwards, from the Christian point of view,

³⁷ Once again, St Maximos also showed that the participation in the liturgical ritual is similar to an asceticism where the successions (ακολουθία) of the liturgical actions are a type of what happens with the inner man. He likewise says, though clearly in other terms, that participation in the Liturgy operates a iconic-Eucharistic reconstitution of man in the sense of a gradual interior transformation whose steps are developed *ad extra* in the very moments of ritual. "The Christian should never be absent for the Holy Liturgy" because the grace of the Holy Spirit is always present in an unseen way, and in a special mode during the Holy Liturgy. This transforms and changes each one of us that are found present, rebuilding us, (remodeling us) in a more godlike image, according with our features (μεταπλαττούαν επί τὸ θεϊότερον ανάλογος χεαυτό), and raising us towards what is indicated through the mysteries that are completed... He activates the grace of salvation, indicated through each of the heavenly symbols (σύμβολον) that is completed, leading us in line and after an order (καθ' χεῖρμον καὶ τάξιν) from the closest till the end of all Mystagogy XXIV." In this fragment, the value of a forming model that St Maximos attributes to liturgical work should be noted (see the use of the verb μεταπλάττω – to reshape clay or wax which has the same root as πλάσσω and in ancient Greek πλάττω – create as in Genesis 2:7). This brings man to a state of maximum ontological plasticity. In addition, Maximos sees this reshaping, as Father Ghelasie does, in accordance with the celebrated principle of analogy (ανάλογος χεαυτό). God recreates man in analogy with this model, respecting his singularity, as we have noted in the previous interview.

the ritual is a kind of participation in a contest: everyone participates, but only some take the prize. All of the faithful participate in the ritual, but only those who've prepared themselves reach communion.³⁸ Nevertheless, the possibility exists for everyone to take the prize, in the measure in which they make some "performances." You can't just give the prize to anybody... This is the meaning of Philokalic asceticism as I see it.

As far as the tendency towards removing the Eucharist from the ascetic context is concerned, I believe that it is a mistaken understanding of the very iconic meaning of the Eucharist. An icon is that sacred something that you shouldn't touch unless you yourself become sacred. It's like the Holy Apostle Paul says, those who partake unworthily will have more to suffer. The Eucharist is a consuming fire and so this is the only way it works: if you find filth in you, it certainly won't do anything but burn you. Something must be found that can resist the heavenly fire. What is in you that can resist this fire? If there is nothing there, the single solution is to do the ritual, to participate in the liturgical ritual and then, little by little, the interior temple will be rebuilt. Only then can you partake too...

G. M.: And the last question, Reverend Father, to what extent, or better said, in what way are the other types of hesychasm in the Eucharistic image? I'm referring to Egyptian, Synaitic, Greek, and Slav, where the accent seems to fall more on the ascetical than the liturgical.

G. G.: I don't know to what extent the Philokalic spirit is understood... How I've tried to understand it, I see it also in the sense of the remaking of the image of the interior Church, of the Eucharistic condition. The asceticism of the Holy Fathers is nothing else than a remaking of the image of holiness from the inside, which also can't be done without a ritualization. In as much as I understand it at least, every Christic virtue is a kind of ritualistic gesture. Every spiritual virtue

³⁸ As we have said in the preceding interview, this is the sense of "becoming worthy" that is discussed in liturgical texts, which is in order to remake your Eucharistic condition. We should also observe that, with the whole accent placed on the pre-Eucharistic preparation, Father doesn't consider the remaking of the inner Church (Eucharistic constitution) a process that could develop autonomously before the Eucharist properly speaking. In reality it is also a type of Eucharistic transformation where the faithful (a living prosphora) gradually advances on the road to an inner Proskomedion. This is done through continual communion with the Spirit of Christ, towards the fulfilled Eucharistic condition lived as deification in the Communion. So then, it's about a mystic synchronization between an interior ritual, served in the temple of the heart and the liturgical ritual, of a undivided conjugation that has the "common Eucharistic" as its precise base which Father has been speaking to us about. The accent of Father Ghelasie constantly falls, in a most authentic Orthodox Spirit, on the fact that the liturgical act is one of participation; and participation means response. It means the *amen* of the community of the faithful which isn't a mere echo of the divine call, but is irreducible utterance that certifies the acquisition of the Eucharistic condition. Father insists on reminding us that the ritual of the Eastern Church is fulfilled in the space of a Eucharistic type of conformity between the Mystery and the faithful.

is a ritualistic gesture so then the other mysticisms (Egyptian, Synaitic etc.) are in fact, in the final analysis, iconic mysticisms too.³⁹ It's just that their particular ancient characteristics, since that was the context at that time, were to put a great spiritual accent directly on the mind. So because of this, their kind of ritual was more spiritualized than the iconic kind. They're also a kind of iconic, but more spiritualized. While, in the Carpathian understanding there is also a spiritualized iconic, but it is more Eucharistically accented, where the Body and Blood's part is just as emphasized as the spiritual part. The Eucharistic isn't just something spiritual, but it is truly the Body and Blood of Christ.

G. M.: We thank you, Reverend Father, for your kindness in answering these questions.

*The Holy Monastery of Frăsinei,
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³⁹ By extension Father's assertion verifies a universal reality. Any religious experience has double dimensions – mystical and ritual – these are *interrelated languages* where the same exigency and finality of religious practice are transposed. So the mystical experience is equivalent to an inner ritual, a reshaping of being through a continuous interior sacrifice. Reciprocally, the ritual is the reflex, it is an *ad extra* transposition in terms of gesture, of an inner itinerary, and at the same time a criterion of validity for inner experience. For these reasons interpreting the ascetic-mystical experience of diverse schools in ritual terms (inside of Christianity) is not at all a forced approach. What asceticism identifies as virtues is, in ritual terms, equivalent to a devotional gesture. It seems to me, therefore, that the virtue-gesture isomorphism that Father Ghelasie enunciates is altogether significant, to the extent that it reduces both the excessively moralistic connotations of virtue, and the certain mechanical formalism of ritual gesture. Under these auspices, virtue becomes again the sign and measure of the assumption of the ritual in the strict sense, of the formational model of the human being. St. Cyril of Alexandria also refers to the same virtue-ritual gesture isomorphism (or spiritual offering), "Those who haven't freed themselves from the slavery and bondage of passions cannot bring God fruits and spiritual sacrifices, in other words, they cannot follow Him worthily with manliness." Generally, St. Cyril's sacramental theology pleads for the idea that Christian spirituality succeeds in surpassing the *hiatus* between the mystical and the ritualistic dimension of religious experience – which can be seen in other religions. Fr. Ghelasie naturally enrolls in the spirit of this tradition, as daring as his formulations may sometimes appear.

The Ritual Gesture

Gabriel Memelis: Reverend Father Ghelasie, in the last conversation that we held you made some important specifications connected with iconic Orthodox ritual and its importance in our contemporary mystical context. So in general you define the ritual as not only being a simple relational, but as “the common that appears after the inter-relational.” The ritual is produced only if a reciprocity of relations exists between the divine and human, “afterwards, both parties’ responses are united and they make a single response...” The Kingdom of Heaven’s Mystery (which is as we know from the Fathers, greater than Paradise) is completed in God and creation’s union and co-dwelling, as a real encounter, as inter-penetration without confusion.

Similarly, you then say that this ritual’s mystery is hidden in the inter-Trinitarian life that overflows into creation through Christ. Our Orthodox iconic ritual has the mystery of inter-divine life as its ontological origins. The Son and the Holy Spirit make a kind of “double ritual” in the Trinity, one in the sense of being-ness, which is apophatic and beyond creation, and the other in which heavenly love permanently overflows into creation and at the same time receives love from creation. They make one common with creation and raise it. In the end you also discussed the importance of the faithful’s participation in liturgical ritual, and the importance of the ritual’s effects in remaking the Eucharistic condition in each one of us.

I would like to bring to mind that the purpose of these conversations that we are having by your graciousness, Reverend Father, is to make the message that you’d like to transmit accessible for those that many times meet with difficulty when reading your books. So, remaining on this note, in the following interview I would like you to develop the aspect of ritual gesture. It is understood that the iconic-Carpathian practice of prayer that you are proposing has the gesture of the icon’s veneration⁴⁰ as its center, which is a

⁴⁰*Închinarea* in Romanian does not have an exact English counterpart. It refers here to the whole aspect of worship, the condition or state, yielding, dedicating, devoting, to God both in the inner aspect and concentration along with bodily manifestations, such as crossing oneself, bowing, kissing icons, the rubrics of veneration. Technically, according to western theological terminology we have separated this word into veneration and worship, though we should remember that these aspects are in truth inseparable, I’ve translated *închinarea* both ways according to its emphasis, though I’ve usually rendered it worship. It must be noted that the icon is obviously not considered to be God, but since God is omnipresent, icons are used as “reference points” where His omnipresence is seen and noticeable {trans. note}.

kind of antechamber to prayer of the mind.⁴¹ As you once said Father, for those of today it is more difficult, if not almost impossible, to approach mental prayer head on, and so there is need for an introduction, for help along this path.

Therefore, I'd like to suggest having the importance of ritual gesture in a few words of Saint Macarius of Egypt as a point of departure, and likewise as a motto for our discussion today. These words are, "There is no need for many words, it is enough to stand with hands up raised." The first question would then be – why is gesture in the first place and not the mind? Does gesture have a more direct resonance in the ontological depths of human nature? Is it possible to discuss gesture as the ontological language of man?

Fr. Ghelasie Gheorghe: As you've already reminded us in the introduction that you've made – from what I've understood – I affirm that gesture, or better said, the ritual, which I consider a synonym practically, isn't only a product of a relational. It is itself an abyss of being, which then facilitates the relational. So this perspective must be understood and valorized (in spite of the usual opinion) that our being-ness, even though it is created, has a mystery of expression.

In fact, what does gesture mean? Gesture is a modality for the expression of our being-ness in its integrality, not with just one certain part. Common language [verbal], being more mental, only expresses a certain side of our being-ness. Through gesture the whole of being is expressed. We don't realize to what extent we express ourselves in our gestures. In fact, for the one who can decipher and read them, for the one who can understand them and receive them as the mystery of the whole being's expression, the gesture is precisely the normality of our being-ness' expression. Gesture is considered something more than a language.⁴² It's a language too, but as I've said, in the sense of a complete expression of being-ness whose inner meaning *is*.

⁴¹ Or prayer of the heart.

⁴² The word *limbaj* can mean both language and terminology (trns. note). Father Ghelasie begins with a conceptual background (which is common to all the religions) always nuancing the irreducible essential characteristics of the Christian paradigm, which he latter unfolds. By inventorying the modalities of universal religious expression, anybody could ascertain the preference for nonverbal expressions (in the species of gesture), which are more appropriate than verbal language in transmitting the multiple meanings of mystical experience. The nonverbal language of gesture is an optimum form for the communication of the data of experience, especially in the relationship of Master-disciple. Mystics constantly prefer the words of silence (silence is the language of the world to come) which speak more than words, and preferred exemplariness (communicated in gesture) and positions compared to verbal didactics. And, while extra-

...Today, in general, the tumult of the “theologians” of the Protestant kind, as well as the mysticism of the oriental-hybrid influence, lean a lot towards a de-sacralization of the ritual and of gesture. They put a great accent on the mental, on a so called “spiritualist” or even “spiritual mysticism”, to such an extent that at a certain point some (without understanding it very well) speak about “grace” mysticism, which is completely foreign to grace properly speaking. Because of this we must emphasize, especially from the Orthodox Christian point of view, the theological of expression and response. Through our relational that we live, not just with God but amongst other creatures and ourselves, we should understand precisely an expression of the integrality of our being-ness. Not just through a single side...

To be better understood (in fact I related this in a more recent work, in a kind of anthropological attempt, *On the Anthropological Trail*,⁴³) I’ll attempt to explain, as much as possible, what iconic means in the Philokalic-Carpathian acceptance of Neofite the Hermit. Only after this can we understand what iconic gesture is, which I attempt to accentuate on the basis of these Carpathian traditions.

Neofite the Hermit begins with the mystery of man’s configuration. What did God breathe into Adam (Gen. 2:7)? First of all He breathed man’s image into him. Many people make all kinds of speculations, but we say that what God breaths into Adam is the image of man. And what does the image of man mean? It is a pre-figuration of the image of Christ’s Incarnation. The image of man, then, isn’t his own image [it isn’t image in itself G.M.], but rather it is the Image bestowed by the Son of God; and through the bearing of this Image man also gains the image, the divine-creation mystery.

Beginning with this truth, we’ll say that our being-ness has the iconic, it has this sacrality in itself. From the viewpoint of the mystical vision of Neofite the Hermit, a few reference points can be traced, which in no way propose to exhaust man’s mystery. If the Holy Fathers say that man is a dichotomy of soul-body, and that in the soul there is an abyss of mind (νοῦς) through which it is possible to access Divinity, the modality of

Christian spirituality (especially oriental) tends towards an informal union with the Absolute, seeing the state of *unio mystical* as a limitation, in terms of an ontological situation that can’t even express gesture, Christianity makes the gesture (as terminology of being in a body) into a kind of indispensable expression whose prestige is founded (again as Father Ghelasie will develop it soon) in the reality of the Incarnation. If God “translated” Himself (*exegestato*) in the concrete flesh through Jesus Christ (John 1:18) the gesture is no longer a simple mute terminology...

⁴³ *Pe Urme Anropologice*, not yet available in English.

Neofite the Hermit comes along with a kind of enlargement of this truth. [It considers] that man is first of all divine breath, which is actualized at each human being's conception. Man's image unites with the parent's genetic dowry, configuring man as soul and body.⁴⁴ The Carpathian perspective emphasizes the sacred image, the iconic, which man has through God's action of creating him.

To the extent that this iconic isn't merely, as I've said [in the preceding interview], a product of a relational, it must be understood that it is at the foundation of our being-ness itself. For they say that this iconic is in a certain way similar with the very countenance* of a person. Many people make different evaluations, as we've seen for example with Yannaras and other newer theologians who say that we are not yet persons, but we form ourselves into *person* which is for now only in potentiality... In the end, we don't want to start a controversy, but only want to bring into relief the characteristic features of Neofite the Hermit, where a *being reality in itself* is emphasized a lot, which then facilitates and points out the relational. It is a configuration of mystery, where man is first of all iconic image* breathed by God. It is the image of man, the image of Christic incarnation that have the seal of image and likeness with God, as the Scriptures say. This image dresses both the spiritual and bodily parts. It's not about a trichotomy, but something else: the soul-body dichotomy exists as man's reality, but at the same time they exist in a unity, a common, which is precisely the iconic, a pre-figuration of the Christic Body. Many theologians consider the Christic Body as a mere material body that the Savior took, lowering Himself into the material, earthly, ordinary part. In the iconic sense, according to Neofite the Hermit's vision, a distinction is made. On one hand the soul and body are dealt with, and on the other, "overtop" of these there appears a "vestment" of iconic body that Adam lost. This is why Adam saw that he was naked. He

⁴⁴ Father Ghelasie proposes an anthropological approach that is different from the Greek paradigm of soul (mind) – body; the Carpathian modality doesn't see the mystery of man mainly in this dichotomy, but in the integrality of the human being as an iconic being. The anthropological problematic is therefore organized around the being-image (chip) binome – structured through the breath-assumption of the Christic Archetype – not of the platonic soul-body binome. Man is configured as being "in himself" to the measure in which he bears (assumes) the Christic Archetype of Incarnation. Likewise, such a specification avoids the risks of an approach that is all too often spiritualistic, which counts too much on the soul's "indestructibility" (in the anthropological approach), practically reducing man to the soul. And last but not least, it avoids the dilemma of the soul's origins (creation or translationism) revealing that we must concentrate our attention, in fact, on this ultimate ontological structure of man, which is the seal of the Image of God.

still had soul and body, but he no longer had that “vestment” of iconic body [“the garment of light” G.M.].⁴⁵

So now we can arrive at the understanding of iconic gesture, because our true expression, as being-ness, is in the integrality of the iconic body. Because of sin we lost this expression of the iconic body. Now we search to make the expression, be it through the soul as the mental (νοῦς) part, or be it through the corporeal, as the sensible, mechanical, energetic part... This is why in Neofite the Hermit’s vision, the mystical ideal isn’t to express yourself in a mental or sensible form, but it is rather an expression of that mystical (or mysterious) integrality that we have. We still have the iconic image, but because of our sins it is covered. The Christic baptism that each Christian receives “activates” the iconic image. Through the spiritual life we then develop it and bring it back into evidence in all of its fullness. Until then, however, our expression is still made through the mental part of the soul too, or through the corporeal’s sensible part. And the true Christian, according to the gospel parable, can only participate in the Great Supper, the Wedding of the Son, if he has the “wedding garment” (Mathew 22:11-12). The

⁴⁵ Through the act of creation man possesses an iconic sacrality of his own, as a basis for growth towards the likeness with God. This iconic reality isn’t a simple result of the divine creating act (even though it is relational) but is rather an ontological element on the basis of which it is possible to constitute the relational plane of the human person. It is a mystical constitution where the iconic image breathed into man by God mystically proceeds and “dresses” the soul-body aspect, as a vestment of iconic body (the very consequences of the two references to anthropo-genesis from Genesis 1:27 and 2:7 verifies this). Lost due to sin, this “vestment” can’t recuperate without the coming of the Christic Archetype. The ascetic mapping out of the Christian life will then be an iconizing continuation (an imaging) of the brush strokes of the iconic Model. This is done through a mystical chiseling, in and of itself, of the realities of the iconic body as “the wedding garment,” with which it is possible to enter into the great Feast of the eschaton. It should be observed then that Father Ghelasie refers to the “garment of light,” to the integrality of the soul-body, not only of the body. In the end, original sin introduced a degradation of the soul and body, and therefore a certain “mortality” of the soul according to the biblical phrase “earth you are, and to the earth you shall return (Gen. 3:19).” What remains of man, however, is the iconic image received through the divine breath, which had also been disfigured according to the measure of the departure from God. In the same way, the Resurrection of Christ restores and perfects the human being’s integrally, soul and body. In addition, we should note that the anthropological vision that Father Ghelasie elegantly puts forth avoids the heretical tendency situated between Apollonarianism and Docetism. All the Christological heresies in this interval had the attempt of integrating the teaching about the Incarnation to the models of classical Greek anthropology as their origin. By applying the dichotomous paradigm, the conclusions could have been none other than; the Logos, upon entering into man, had to dislocate or loose something (precisely in order not to be a kind of an addition beyond the full human nature as soul-body), whether it was dealing with the rational part of the human soul (Apollonarianism), or whether it was about His body (Docetism) as such. However, by perceiving man as being an iconic structure, where the image (the garment of iconic body) “dresses” the soul and body unitedly and distinctly these errors are avoided. Carpathian anthropology proposes a lesson for the Incarnation as a natural coming of the Archetype Who, without dislocating anything in man’s being, reconfigures it iconically, together with the soul and body. In other words, from this perspective the meaning of the Incarnation as “becoming Human” is clearer.

wedding garment, according to Neofite the Hermit, is the reality of the iconic body. It is only through this that we can regain the true *being-identity*.⁴⁶

It is said that we are, first of all *imago Dei*, in other words the seal of the Image of God, or in the theological sense, divine reason, that word that created us, that divine creating act. Then God also created in us, through the same divine creating act, an *imago ipsi* – our reality of being-ness: to the extent that our reality is the mystery of the image of God. This is oriented towards us in a special way – of interweaving and condition of standing face to face. The *imago Dei* is also the Son of God’s word for us in which the eternal Arch-model exists, where each one of us is contained, the Book of Life that the Holy Fathers talk about – with the personal reality of our creation. Our personality of creation, the *imago ipsi*, is permanently face to face with this reflection...

G.M.: Maybe even a dialogue exists...

G.G.: At first it is just a reflection in the divine image (*imago Dei*) oriented towards us in divine action, where we identify ourselves, and by identifying ourselves we can then have a dialogue. In this way the dialogue can’t take place in anything other than a sacrality, and this in turn can’t be in anything other than the ritual’s mystery.⁴⁷

In the ritual’s mystery everything becomes clear. Truly, what is our ritual of creation expressed through? Our liturgical ritual has the mystery of an integrality, where

⁴⁶ Father Ghelasie improves the specifically schizoid religiosity of post paradisiacal man, where a discord exists between mental-psychological experience and corporeal devotion. The mark *ad extra* of these fractures is the divorce (ascertained in the extra-Christian religious space) between mysticism and ritual. Either the mystical experience excludes ritual forms, seeking for liberation on a trans-devotional plane, or the ritual gains an almost magical dominance, efficient in itself, throwing into the shadow the mystical participation and union with the Divine. Bringing to light the new reality of the iconic gesture as a modality of integral expression of the human being, Christianity annuls the tension between ritual and mysticism that is present in all of the other religions to differing degrees.

⁴⁷ Man is therefore, by creation an iconic being, a syntagm that implies, and at the same surpasses (it is incommensurable with), the soul-body dichotomy. Gathering fruit again from the principle of analogy, Father Ghelasie opens a new and especially subtle theme of man as “double image” – at the same time both godlike and unique. We should understand, however, that it isn’t about a doubling *ab initio* of the human being, but of an authentic iconological foundation of it that later develops as a dialogue reality. The iconic, to Father Ghelasie, has the sense of a unitary equilibrium between the divine and human image. On this foundation a permanent dialogue between *imago Dei*, and *imago ipsi* exists in man. The second constitutes as otherness to the measure in which it finds its identity in a dialogical mode in the first, so much so that man is not just a simple reflection “in the mirror” of God. This dialogue isn’t made in a vacuum, but rather in an atmosphere of the mystery of ritual. So man appears dependent on the creating and providential action of God, and likewise freely constituted as self-determining (αυτο εξουσία) existence, having opened the possibility of an unending deification. At the same time, the ontological growth of man is ritually structured and doesn’t lead to an indistinct fusion with Being, but to a unity of distinction owing precisely to the very subtle “dialectics” between *imago Dei* and *imago ipsi*.

the altar's mystery is on the highest level. From the Biblical point of view, the mystery of relationship with God isn't a simple relational – it first of all implies the construction of an altar. The Old Testament shows that in order to draw close to the Lord God, you must make an altar for Him. On the altar you must bring a gift. And God only comes in the gift; in the gift you hand yourself over, and in this gift a dialogue is made. It is impossible to have an abstract dialogue, without something concrete. Because of this, our liturgical ritual's mystery can't be made without the Eucharist, without the Savior's Body and Blood.

The gift that we bring to the altar is at the same time ours, and at the same time it is a gift of the Lord Christ Who receives it and makes yet another “actualization” of the incarnation in the holy lamb.⁴⁸The true encounter is in the Eucharist's ritual where the two gifts unite. Our ritual is never empty; our standing face to face with God, in the authentic Christian sense, is precisely this understanding of the iconic. This is why, in the specific characteristics of Neofite the Hermit, the iconic is considered to be a kind of pre-Christic, pre-Eucharistic, in the sense that it is a reality of a common that forms it and that constitutes that same body in union, and even more so of that *partaking*. In this union (here's the beauty of iconic mysticism) all the major dangers of mysticism are avoided, which are the following. If you have a tendency towards entering into God, you are a pantheist, because the Godhead is beyond the capacity and condition of creation. If the Godhead were to try to enter into creation's being-ness, creation would be annihilated, becoming overwhelmed by Divinity. Christian mysticism comes with this “intermediary” iconic where the Divine (inaccessible to creation – and creation – that in a way can't stand before the face of God without dying) can meet each other in a real way. Their meeting can be more than a simple relational, even more than a simple standing face to face. In the iconic common, the Divine truly enters into creation, and it [creation] truly enters into the Divine. In other words, the Divine truly incarnates, since we're not talking about a dichotomy, and at the same time creation enters into Divinity without the risk of pantheism. All of the heresies in the Church's history started from the fear of the Divine descending into creation and degrading Itself. For example, iconoclasts couldn't understand how the Godhead could take on forms from creation. The iconoclasts'

⁴⁸ or Agnets, a liturgical term referring to the bread which becomes the body of our Lord and Savior.

mistake was that they didn't understand that the Godhead doesn't in fact take the forms of creation, and neither does creation take the forms of Divinity. A terrible mystery is realized that isn't encountered in any other religion. That is the mystery of the icon, where, without destroying creation, God's descent is just as possible as creation's ascent into God without losing its created nature.

So, iconic mysticism brings an enlargement and at the same time a fulfillment of a mystic's vision in general, and especially of the Christian ideal. God can meet with His creatures without confusion with them, and what's even more, He can realize a common beyond nature (supernatural) where created nature participates in divine nature and It [divine nature] even participates in creation's nature. And we emphasize, without the confusion of natures! So if the iconoclasts wouldn't under any condition admit that the Divine could be "translated" into creation's terms, and the other heretics maintained a distance between the Divine and the creation out of fear of pantheism (see for example Nestorianism and the heresies derived from it), in the Eucharistical, iconical sense the mystery that is realized between the Divine and the creation is truly the fulfillment of the mystical man's ideal.

In conclusion, I'll mention yet again that the ritual has, first of all, the gesture as a basis for "expression." Why is it a question about gesture? Because gesture isn't just a simple expression. We must always have the perspective of the integrality of expression, where offering is an action that begins with an expression of a certain orientation toward something, then latter on it is dressed in a garment of direct expression which is *the word*. Then there is an expression of fulfillment, where a union in silence is made, which is a partaking. It's an encounter in the highest sense of the word. But it isn't properly speaking a silence; it's rather a gesture of receiving, where the mystery can no longer be expressed in words. It only has fulfillment, and the fulfillment itself is the expression.

This is why Neofite the Hermit emphasized the matter of our being-ness so much, which is gesture. Through the gesture our very foundation of being is brought into remembrance. We, the creation, have a being memory whose basis is, first of all, the memory of the Divine. Just as a child has the memory of his parents in him directly, we also have, first of all (in our being-ness), the ontological memory of the Divine. And just like a child, who through his gestures, before he can express himself and name his mom

or dad, can recognize them, Neofite the Hermit considered that our first expressions towards God are made through the gesture of recognition. We are like children, like newborns brought into being, who through growth arrive at naming too, and finally we also make our response properly speaking.⁴⁹

We must still penetrate one aspect a little deeper: the iconic image in itself is, for us humans, the Image of Son. In Neofite the Hermit's traditional manner, he emphasizes the iconic of the Son's Image a lot. It is man's sacrality. All of the hesychastic practice in this tradition is centered on the mystery of the Son's Image. What's even more is that the character of offering and worship appears as a concrete form of the Son's Image. This is why the essential feature regarding ritual gesture is the gesture of worship and of offering which is a pre-figuration of the altar and the sacrifice upon the altar. This is the Christian way for the Divine to "overflow" into creation, and for creation to have accessibility towards the Divine, for God's encountering creation until reaching the point of the common of great mystery, the Eucharist. The gesture then is itself the foundation of the expression of our creation's being-ness. Our creation's image (which we receive – because the same creating, divine action that there was with Adam, is repeated with each man) is "breathed" by God into man differently than [He breathes it] into all the other

⁴⁹ Father Ghelasie says that in iconic Carpathian mysticism the gesture is the Alfa and the Omega of the ascetic road towards God. The expression of man in self-abandonment towards the Creator begins with the gesture of recognition that is yet inexplicit. This results from the iconic-ontological memory of the Divine that our being-ness preserves and which is *a priori* to the explicit/verbal forms of expression. It continues with the response, expressed first through words and names, and also structured as ritual gesture, which is "the relational" of man with God, as Father calls it. In the end the expression is fulfilled with silence in union sharing/participating reciprocally (the apophatic silence of classical mysticism) which is the "encounter in the highest sense of the word." In addition, the gesture-like nuance that Father Ghelasie imparts to apophaticism itself should be observed. Apophatic reality, which St. Dionysius the Areopagite paradoxically calls "the super-luminous darkness (υπερφότος γνόφος)," is called "the gesture of receiving and fulfillment where the mystery can't be expressed in words" in Carpathian mysticism. It has its fulfillment as its very expression. As a Biblical feedback of the gesture paradigm, we could say that (in the paradisiacal state) Adam receives its imprint. This imprint is set in the Garden of Eden – this availability being the mounting (the setting of a precious stone) of man in the quality of "the natural link" of nature (φυσικός συνδεσμός), as St Maximos the Confessor says. This makes his gesture-theocentric orientation possible, the preliminary recognition of God. Then on this basis, he names the creatures. It's not only a noetic event of the reading of the divine reasons (λόγοι) in creation, but truly gesture like utterance. God brings the creatures to Adam as a gift, and he names them in a gesture of Eucharistic response-offering, in a liturgical ritual. This happens even though it is missing a certain fulfillment (to the extent that Adam doesn't find an appropriate helper). In the end, the creation of woman from Adam's rib in his ecstatic sleep, also has a gesture-eucharistic connotation. The Fathers note the mystical symmetry between this episode and the prototype of the Church's birth from the piercing of Christ's side. In addition, the adamic sleep anticipates the atmosphere of gesture-apophatic silence of union with God that Adam, however, didn't realize.

earth dwelling creatures that He made through the word only. Through a special action, the image of man is in itself the Christic Image, headed towards incarnation. Every man is an actualization of Christ's Image in a different modality, in a different form of creation, in a different individuality. So then this iconic image, which is our image of sacrality, in union with the part from our parents (from birth) by nature (see *On the Anthropological Trail*) configures the direct part of the soul and the corporeal. To the extent that the spiritual and the "material" parts of the child can't grow or develop except on the basis of the image breathed by God. Here you find the Archetype of being-ness; this is reality, our identity, where the foundation must be laid⁵⁰...

G. M.: How necessary and practical is it to propose for today's faithful an ascetical practice centered on ritual gesture? I'm asking this because, since we know what ordinarily happens, the faithful are usually proposed with a minimalist recipe for piety. This consists of regular confession, communion at least four times a year, regular participation in the liturgy, without insisting a lot on guidance towards a way of living these liturgical actions. There is even a tendency to advise the faithful to have a certain reservation towards hesychastic practice, the motive being that these would only pertain to the superior or to the advanced...

G. G.: Dear sir, first of all we must specify from the beginning the following item: you are very interested in *Christian mysticism*... Now, there's a lot of talk, even abusive talk, about hesychasm... We shouldn't consider that hesychasm can exhaust everything that Orthodox Christian mysticism means. That's why I prefer to use this last term...

G. M.: It's a more comprehensive term...

⁵⁰ Summing it up, the consequences of the anthropological mysticism of asceticism that is based on the gesture's centrality would be the following. The divine breath (the image of Christic Incarnation), the vocation of man as an altar of incarnation, permits him the initial gesture of recognition (the ritual gesture is the basis for man's expression in word and other forms), the culminating encounter with God in an apophaticism of gesture. The central axis is the connection between Incarnation and altar, then between this and gesture. Sacred gesture is founded then on the mystery of the very Incarnation of the Son of God, which is in this way a kind of gesture Archetype (see below). The human person has as the inner basis of expression the ritual gesture that "super-personalizes" it, putting in plenary evidence its possibilities of being. The gesture is in this way prior to the word, being a fuller expression (as we were saying). In addition, the gesture-word relation can be assimilated, at the anthropological level, by the relation between being and energy.

G. G.: Yes, it is... Hesychasm, truly, is a mysticism consecrated more for those who practice stillness, for those who want to practice a severer asceticism. In the strict sense of the word, Christian mysticism can't be reduced to hesychasm only. This is another thing I attempt to point out. Our Christian mysticism has as its foundation precisely this ritualistic part. The neo-Protestant⁵¹ approach and more recently neo-pagan mysticism try to resurrect an ancient religious "style" and to compete with Christian mysticism. It's not a mere coincidence that they are set against the ritual. We must understand one thing: if we take the ritual out of Christianity, then nothing remains... Christianity is precisely the ritual. Why? Because the center of our religion is liturgical, it is the incarnation of Christ. This is why it could be said that Christianity is nothing other than the Incarnation of Christ. If the ancient mystics dealt with a returning of the created into God, in the Christian sense, mysticism isn't only that, but it's also a much more profound entrance of the Divine into creation, and what's even more, it is an encounter in the common, which is the iconic. God didn't only create us in order to confer a reality that we must annihilate, in order to be absorbed back into Him. God created a reality in order for it to exist and in which He could remain. And what's more, creation can participate in the Divine and – at the same time – it makes an altar, that ark-place where it can receive and keep Him. This is what Christian mysticism means. It's not a spiritualistic mysticism. People make too much out of spiritualistic mysticism. Christian mysticism is iconic, it's a mysticism of the Incarnation of the Divine, and even this Incarnation shouldn't be understood in the spiritualistic sense that it tends to be understood today. Which is (something which I consider false) – that the Divine, having a few principles of information, could create material, which isn't anything other than concentrated mind. And so the Divine, concentrated as spiritual principles gives form to matter after which matter must flow in the opposite direction, from mass to energy and then again into information and in the end, newly again into the Divine.⁵² Without

⁵¹ The Orthodox Church in Romania makes a clear distinction between older divisions of Protestantism and the newer, more recent denominations. More traditional Protestants (Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Anglicans) have Church structure and organization that help them to control themselves and regulate their clergy and faithful. Neo-Protestants are usually independent in nature and centralized around one single "charismatic" leader. Therefore, many forms of abuse are easily found in dogma and practice which in truth are inseparable (trns. note).

⁵² Father Ghelasie criticizes a certain "scientific theology" that hurries to legitimize terminologies and problematics that comes from contemporary scientific fields; though it has arrived today, by following

wanting to hurt anybody, we must say out right that this isn't true Christianity. Christianity is something else. It is the Image of God that makes itself accessible through the mystery of the Incarnation's Christic Image; the mystery of the Christic Image also creates a being-ness of creation that has the capacity to receive God, to respond and to make itself an altar for God. This is why creation is true creation only when it is an Altar, only if it becomes Eucharistic. If it doesn't become Eucharistic, if it doesn't make itself an Altar, it's an empty creation – an illusional joke or a dream of the Absolute as in oriental mysticism... And God's creation can't be a dream or an illusion.

Therefore only Christianity stands in the formation of altar and of iconic. And this, in its turn, can only be made ritualistically; and because of this a new kind of catechism must be understood, which must emphasize the ritualistic aspect more. Christian practice mustn't only be trained towards an abstract mysticism that throws the ritual into more of a formalistic domain, as you've said; true prayer in the Christian understanding is liturgical, ritualistic. If a Christian's prayer isn't ritualistic, then I don't consider it to be authentic Christian prayer. Even more, the *ritualistic* mustn't be understood in the ancient sense, where blood sacrifices predominated, of destruction. In the ancient sense ritual sacrifice meant cutting, destruction and pouring blood out in order to accede beyond – to go into “spiritual” reality. In Christianity it is exactly opposite. After the Christic sacrifice of the cross, blood is no longer sacrificed, but a new gift is brought. The “gift of death” is no longer brought, but rather the gift of partaking, of the Mystical Supper, of joy...

G. M.: Divine Blood is brought...

G. G.: Not only this, it's not the sacrifice of the cross that is, properly speaking, in the Liturgy, but rather it's the sacrifice of Christ the Resurrected One. In the Eucharist there is truly an *anamneza*⁵³ where the redemption of Sacrifice is present, because of the yet sinful state of creation. [But] it's not the Crucifixion that's at the foundation of our

these sciences, to remarkable discoveries, especially in the microcosmic world, the transference and uncritical interpretation of these results in the philosophical and theological perspective entails the risk of the reiteration of some pantheistic thoughts where the world is seen as “a great chain of Being” hanging from the Absolute. Such a paradigm was and is unacceptable to Christianity, being especially incompatible with iconic mysticism where the accent is placed just as much on the otherness of creation's being as on the real encounter with God. The current danger is that, due to the fear of materialism, religion might migrate (under the incidents of the science of information) towards an evasionist spiritualism. Father contrasts the mystery of “material” with the iconic-eucharistic reality destined to be eternal.

⁵³ Remembrance or recollection.

liturgical, but the offering of Communion. The epiclesis is made by the descent of the Holy Spirit, He also “becomes incarnate” through the Eucharistic Body. What’s more is that there is even a blessing and a coming of the Father. That is why the Liturgy isn’t fulfilled until the Our Father is said. So, the whole Trinity is in the Liturgy, the whole Godhead encounters the whole of creation. I consider, as far as I’ve been able to ascertain, that Christianity’s future is the Eucharistic, liturgical ritual’s future. Magical, occult, spiritualist mysticism can’t be Christian mysticism. Or in the Christian sense (as I’ve said at a different point) there can be no Spirit without the Eucharistic Body of Christ, and neither the body of Christ without the Holy Spirit.

G. M.: Somewhere in *Hesychastic Practice*, you spoke of a gesture, of a movement of spirit beyond ordinary movement. Sacred gesture isn’t an ordinary movement. It’s not a gesture in a technical sense, but implies a mysterious opening up of spirit. If you’d like, could you specify in more detail what this mysterious movement of spirit would consist of?

G. G.: As I’ve previously mentioned, this liturgical sacrality itself implies a response that is higher than our ordinary motions. There is already a sacralized movement in the liturgical. The sacred in the Christian sense, the divine image of the sacred in itself, is the Holy Spirit’s Image. And so along with Him [the Holy Spirit] our spirit is trained at the same time in the spiritualization that the Holy Fathers speak about. This is why I emphasize that Christian mysticism isn’t a mysticism of energy properly speaking, like in regular mysticisms. We don’t train our energy, but rather first of all, we find an integrality that is beyond energy, beyond all of our movements, to which we must transmit that movement of the spirit which is beyond them, and with this integral movement of spirit we can make the ritual’s sacred dialogue.

G. M.: You affirmed in the last interview that Christian virtues are – always – “iconic virtues.” The very re-learning of the sacred gesture is that which, so to speak, reconstitutes the iconic image of Son in us, it transforms us according to the Divine Image. From this it would result that virtues themselves are sacred gestures and come from the common of encounter which is realized through the ritual. How should we understand these things in comparison with the Fathers’ discourses that say that the virtues don’t have the gift of uniting us with God in the manner that only pure prayer

does? May the virtues, as sacred gestures, maintain maximum union with God or are they only a base, a beginning of the ascetic road? And reciprocally, is pure prayer a sacred gesture?

G. G.: Dear sir, in general, my opinion is that you can't separate prayer from the modalities of the virtues that we activate in our response towards God. It is good to maintain an integral vision where prayer, in the mystic sense, consists precisely of our own being-ness' response towards God. So any response before God is a sacred response. Any sacred response means prayer, it is already conversation, it is already the relational. So, I don't think that a clear separation between pure prayer and the virtues can be made. It is possible, at a very special mystic level, to deal with pure prayer (as it is brought to mind in the *Philokalia*), where you arrive at a response of your being's totality, which is above all other responses. It is true that we, being in a continual spiritual growth, climb certain steps of the virtues, until we reach the supreme virtue, which is love, which we could call pure prayer. So there are some steps, but we mustn't make too big of a differentiation...

G. M.: So practically all of the virtues could be assimilated to ritual gestures...

G. G.: ...the connection of the virtues with gestures is something we must dwell on a bit. I consider that any expression towards the sacred is made first of all through gesture. What in fact does gesture properly speaking mean? In the strict Biblical sense, the gesture is altar, making an altar for God. If it were a simple expression of words the gesture would be incomplete. This is why I don't believe that God makes man through word only, because then he would just be a "reflection." He created him through breath. Breath is something more concrete and shows man's vocation to be an altar of the incarnation. Man is an iconic image of altar, and when he expresses himself to God, an altar must be made where God can come to speak with him. Without an altar, in the mystical sense, you can't do anything. Neofite the Hermit considered that the gesture is founded first of all on the condition of altar which each Christian must express. The word follows from this basis, and everything else comes after this foundation. Without an altar, the relationship between God and us would be made in nakedness.⁵⁴ And we know that nakedness only appears in the case where there is sin. The fullness between Divine and

⁵⁴ The Romanian word *gol* means both empty and naked (trans. note).

creation is none other than the altar, and the altar's expression is gesture. The Mystic says, "From my gesture I make an altar and on the altar of my gesture come, O Lord, so that I can speak with You!" If you make an altar out of your gesture, in other words, if you configure for yourself an altar in your own gesture, then you can come into connection with God.⁵⁵

G. M.: The accent that you place, Reverend, on the multiple valences of the ritual gesture reminds me of the Confucian model... Confucius proposed, of course in a completely different spiritual context, the same ontological ritualization of human comportment through the practice, assumed to the maximum level, of rituals. As we know however, the un-confoundable and irreducible essential feature of Christianity is the person. What then is the gesture's role in the personalization of the faithful? Is sacred gesture a personal language *par excellence*? Does it have its origins in the being-ness language, properly speaking, of humanity?

G. G.: Just as we were saying, our created being (since it is the image and likeness of God's being "transposed" into creation's being-ness) has as its basis the person. And person has as its basis of expression the ritual of gesture. Person, in itself, is a gesture-like expression; and in the expression towards someone else [it is] in the modality of words. A distinction must be made, but not a separation: in itself, being-like movement is ritualistic, it is gesture. In comparison with an otherness, it is an expression through word, through which the other person's attention is also drawn into the orientation of your ritual. That is why gesture is an expression in and of itself, and the gesture that is expressed beyond itself is the word. It is true that Confucius, though he lived before Christ and in a different religious context, had this intuition of the gesture's

⁵⁵ Bringing to mind the succession of the steps of gesture asceticism (see footnotes 7 and 8), Father Ghelasie accentuates the dominant note of ritual in Christian mystical experience. This experience is (as we were saying in another section) legitimately seen as an essential ritualization, as a transposition into the dimension of the interiority of the liturgical ritual's formational paradigm. Everything in Christianity begins and ends under the species of ritual. This perspective that Father Ghelasie proposes is not a unilateral hermeneutical grid, nor a metaphorical language, but an ontological one. Making an altar out of the gesture where you bring yourself as the offering, is the perfect, total devotional act. It is the fulfillment of the human in the encounter with the divine. The altar properly speaking, configured in gestures, is the foundation on which the Christian builds his other modes of prayer. He therefore, acquires a prayerful constitution (see further on). It is the notion that draws the natural correlative of the Eucharistic condition that Father speaks to us about in the preceding interview. More precisely, the ascetic effort of the Christian is that of transposing himself into the state of prayerful being, of integral and untouched oblation (without blemish, as it is announced prophetically throughout each step of the Old Testament). God will transfigure him into eucharistic being through the unconsuming combustion of the Holy Spirit.

importance since, as Saint Basil the Great says, pagans were not deprived of the Holy Spirit's rays. We underline that in the Christian Orthodox sense, the gesture is itself the person's foundational feature. Person and gesture are in a certain sense synonyms. Man, through gesture, expresses his own person, and what's even more, he even becomes "super-personified." In other words, gesture expresses the fullness of the persons' beingness. Through words only "a part" is expressed, while through the gesture the integrality...

G. M.: The religious experience of Christianity, whether speaking Biblically, ascetically or liturgically, is full of gestures. Since the eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil until Judas' gesture of stretching out his hand with Christ into the dish, the bent of man's fall depended on poor "administration" of the Eucharistic gesture. In this context, what would gesture-like living of the Eucharist mean? Because it seems as though liturgical actions have been made in order to be lived gesture-like... What do the priest's gestures mean? And those of the faithful? What distinction is there between the two?

G. G.: We can't speak of a difference between the priest's gestures and those of the faithful... because, even if each of them is found on his specific level, their ritual gesture is the same. Our liturgical gesture is precisely this openness towards offering and receiving. If there is no gesture of offering and receiving, the ritual isn't produced. Because in the Christian ritual, it is only to the measure that one abandons himself that he will receive. In the measure that the faithful open themselves up and abandon themselves they are making an altar after the likeness of the Church's altar, and the liturgical ritual **takes place on their altar too**. Christ Himself and the Holy Spirit serve the Liturgy on this altar, and at the same time, the serving that the priest performs is extended into the hearts of the faithful. That's why the Liturgy can't be replaced with the private. Only in Church can man truly pray, actualizing his own liturgical in accordance with the Church's liturgical. Since, as I've already said, man can't truly pray unless an altar is made and Christ Himself comes into him with the Body and Blood, or the Eucharist. Saint Paësius the Great said that when he prayed he didn't rise from prayer until Christ came into him, until he felt Him... So, he had arrived at a very high liturgical state. We ordinary people can't have this lofty living where the direct liturgical is produced. But we do have the

way of the Church where it is only in the priest's sacerdotal liturgical that we can become a kind of altar, and the liturgical can be performed on our altar. This is true Christian prayer... If our prayer isn't the kind where you make yourself an altar, it remains unfulfilled; it is only a kind of pre-prayer. You could write a whole book about the mystery of making yourself an altar so that you can pray, so that you can acquire prayer's condition.

Normally, it is considered that prayer is a simple dialogue with God or a simple orientation towards Him. It is this too, but this is only a tendency towards prayer. Living and fulfilling prayer can't happen until you become an altar, and moreover, unless the Eucharistic fulfillment is completed, the iconic common.

G. M.: This generalized ritual that you're talking about could open up towards a new cosmological perspective, towards an iconization of the world. We know that, in general, the contemplation of the divine reasons [λόγοι]⁵⁶ in created things is dealt with as a step towards mystical union with God. What would be the distinctions between a gestical understanding of the world and a contemplation of its reasons?

G. G.: Dear sir, here we have a very profound problem, and again I emphasize a certain truth: man is *super-creation* as shown in *On the Anthropological Trail*. In comparison with nature man doesn't only have some divine reasons [λόγοι], even though he has those too, as it is written, "God took earth from the ground..." So we also have, through this earth, all the reasons that God put into created nature. We have the whole memory of creation. However, man's task is to turn these reasons into a response towards God, to make them a gift on an altar, an altar where he can meet with God. So, as Saint Maximos the Confessor says, man has the fulfillment of the liturgy as a cosmic vocation. If it is only through man that the Son of God, in His mystery, fulfills His liturgical act of the creation of the world,⁵⁷ it is also through man, through his ritual, that the lifting up of creation into God is produced. If God made the *cosmization* of the world, in other words, He made a world so open, and so large... or speaking in parable, if God wrote the Book of creation, which is the entire universe, then man must also write a book...

⁵⁶ In the English translation of the Philokalia this term is given as *inner essences* or *inner principles* of created things {trans. note}.

⁵⁷ In the sense that the Son fulfills the act of the world's creation as a gift for the Father, from the perspective of an iconic assumption of the Incarnation's image.

G. M.: Not just read from the Book of creation...

G. G.: Yes, exactly, he must give a response, inasmuch as we must present ourselves before God with a gift. The Christian Tradition, on the basis of a text from Revelations (21:14), says that a rock on which a name is written is given to each person, and older iconography shows angels and saints with something in their hands which they give to God. So, if God gave us everything, even His Body and Blood, then we too must give Him something. In Romanian folklore they talk about a “beautiful girl born with a book in her hand,” a book in which only the first page is written on; God’s writing is there. Man must write the second page. When you die and you present yourself before God, you have this book in your hands, on the basis of which you will be “judged,” and at the same time you will display your image of response towards the Creator... The mystery of man is constituted and disclosed not just by reading the Book of divine creation, but also by writing your own response (the iconic that I speak of) in that book.

G. M.: So, iconizing the world means writing the Book of your own response...

G. G.: Iconizing the world means giving a sacrality of response. This must be emphasized. If God gave us His Image, which is the sacred Image in itself, we must also give Him our sacred image. I love the parable very much that says that the Son of God presented Himself before the Father with the Book of Life. The Father’s eyes, while opening the Book of Life, fell in a special way on creation’s most sacred countenance,* which is the countenance* of the Mother of God. It is said that, given to this sacred image of creation, the Son said to His Father, “Father, there will be some who will love You so much, just as much as we love each other!” Love is the most sacred image. That’s why the saints are creation’s iconic images; if we speak of *a sacred* that is strictly Divine, we can also speak of a “divine” of creation, of an iconic of creation. Due to this, the common iconic is possible, where the Divine can incarnate Himself into an iconic of creation. This can “clothe” itself in the garment of the Divine iconic that is beyond all of creation’s forms. The mystery of iconization is so great... If the ancient mystics, and the current neo-pagans talk about a spiritualization, of a passage, of a kind of “super-dimensional grace,” in the Christian sense God speaks about Sharing Himself. Some say that for man to desire heaven’s condition is a kind of culmination of egoism, or that desiring a kind of living (existential experience) in distinction from God is somehow inferior. They would

say that the ultimate state, therefore, mustn't be a personalization, but a depersonalization.⁵⁸ This would be true offering: to annihilate yourself as an individual, to absorb yourself into the Divine. In the Christian sense, true offering isn't an annihilation of self, because if you do that, what gift do you have left to give to God? True offering to God is for you to give a gift that can exist, not one that is lost, in the sense of renouncing yourself. True offering is for you to have the gift, to keep it, and yet to integrally abandon it. You don't lose it because in the moment in which you annihilate it, it lost its very value as a gift. And when you have its value, when you know it exists, and you completely abandon it, then it's true offering.⁵⁹ We don't speak of an impersonalization, but rather a "super-personalization" which is precisely the iconic.

G. M.: And the final question, Reverend Father: we know that at the Supper in Emmaus, Christ makes Himself unseen at the moment of the breaking of the bread. Does this mean that His Eucharistic presence excludes His physical presence? Is this Eucharistic presence superior to the presence of the Son's person, with the appearance, with the whole human Image, Whom you can address with gesture? The Eucharistic Body is a Body "without Image," without a Face? Or is man created having a natural need for a visible presence of a divine Person, Who is gestically accessible?

G. G.: Dear sir, first of all the event to which you refer is "historical" so to speak, which proceeds the event of the Son of God's fulfillment – His Ascension and Sitting at

⁵⁸ This is especially true in the case of oriental mysticism, where the state of liberation (moksha, nirvana, kaivalya) can't be conceived as an individualized state of otherness before the Absolute. So, as Father Ghelasie reveals, these mysticisms perceive the very state of heaven as temporary, inferior to that of liberation. However, it must be said that the intuition of the Orient about the trans-individual nature of the final stage is correct. Father Ghelasie, however, affirms that Christian Revelation showed the trans-individual ontological situation as a "super-personalization." In subsidiary (as we were saying in another location) the tendency of current theology is criticized, which identifies person with individual, with the manifest hypostasis of the human; but Father Ghelasie's discourse precisely follows the direction of the person's affirmation as first of all, an enstatic event.

⁵⁹ The mark that Father calls a "super-personalization" of man is that his gift keeps its value in eternity, and he even multiplies it through his very act of self-abandonment and receiving. He does not lose his otherness, but rather he increases it in the continual fluctuation of offering and reception. This is also the sense of the liturgical litanies: "Give them the heavenly in place of the earthly, the eternal instead of the fading!" Through self-sacrifice the offering obtains eternal value and at the same time confers eternal value and identity (super-personality) to the offerer. The gift remains an eternal location for dialogue and encounter because it is simultaneously and paradoxically maintained by the one who offers, in the sense that he guarantees its irreducible identity in *aeternum*, and offered all, because the offerer himself becomes the offering. In equal measure the offering "super-personalizes" the offerer, promoting his uniqueness (*imago ipsi*), and converts it into offering according to the image of the complete Christic sacrifice, fulfilling it as *imago Dei*.

the right hand of the Father. And He left us a new modality for Eucharistic offering where He will be with us “until the end of the ages (Matthew 28:20).” Inasmuch as the Eucharistic modality isn’t a replacement of Christ, it is precisely the permanently open door through which we have access to Christ. And what’s even more, through the Eucharist’s Mystery (without which Christ isn’t the true One, but only a passenger, relative [an avatar], a Christ Who united with creation, and then took back what He gave) we have a new possibility. Christ doesn’t hide Himself in the image of Bread and Wine, but rather gives us another possibility. If He came and revealed Himself to us, then we must give Him an image too. If He gave us His Image through the Incarnation, Ascended to the Father and left us His likeness (in other words the Eucharistic presence), we must now take possession of His Image. True saints, when they receive Communion, truly see the Body and Blood. They really see Christ. We partake and the fact that we don’t see Him reveals that we haven’t arrived at giving the image [that is] in us to the Body of Christ. The ultimate fulfillment, like a pre-figuration of the eschaton, is when we give image to the Eucharistic Body of Christ, which we received in Communion. Each one of us communes in part, but if Christ gave us His Image, then we must give Him our image. That’s why He gives us the Body “without Image” so that we can give Him our image.⁶⁰ It is a very great mystery... And I, as a priest, become terrified when I think, “Lord, You gave me Your Image, and I, what image do I give You?” Our task is to give Christ’s image in us (see the Pauline discourses dealing with this topic) so as not to be naked and unworthy.⁶¹ We however, the majority of us, communicate unworthily, and we communicate with God’s gift and mercy because the Savior gives Himself to us freely. To communicate worthily means giving form to the Christic Body, that true image which

⁶⁰ The Eucharistic Body and Blood that we receive at Communion is like “prime material,” like offspring of our being’s eschatological configuration. The Holy Gifts found in us are the Christic Archetype’s seal that we received at conception and we renewed at Baptism which becomes deified in an image of our own nature’s response through the yeast of Bread and Wine. So it could also be said that our Eucharistic condition prepares the eschatological. We could again compare this gradually growing route of human nature that Father Ghelasie deals with in liturgical terms, the iconic condition (prayerful constitution) – eucharistic condition – the eschatological condition, with the maximum ontological gradient, simple existence (τό εἶναι) – good existence (τό εὖ εἶναι) – eternal existence (τό ἀεὶ εἶναι) Ambigua 157. If for Maximus starting out along these lines is made through the exercise of will, which advances from strength (potency) through work to rest, for Father Ghelasie the gradient is fulfilled and expressed in gesture; the gesture of recognition – the gesture of response – the encounter/rest in apophaticism of the gesture.

⁶¹ In this context sin is equated with a disfiguration of the Image of Christ, with giving Him a slap across the cheek.

God intends for each one of us. We humble ourselves in our unworthiness, so that God can “compensate” the unworthiness with His gift. He gives Himself to us beyond our unworthiness...

G. M.: In other words, in this way, in the eschaton will there be a face to face encounter of the Image that Christ gave us and of the one that we gave to Him?

G. G.: Yes, communion will then be a face to face encounter, it will be eternal...

G. M.: And “truer,” as the hymn from the Resurrection Canon says...

G. G.: Exactly, this means “truer” when it will be face to face, countenance* to countenance* though also through a Eucharistic modality, now lived in the complete revelation of the image, God’s as well as mine, realizing the iconic of encounter.

G. M.: I was thinking of something you wrote somewhere in the *Dictionary of Hesychasm*, about the repetition of gesture as an opening of the Doors of Mystery, which produces an entrance into secret things...

G. G.: The gesture, as I was saying before, reminds us of the iconic image, which is precisely this placement face to face. And in the measure in which we *live* the gesture, the face to face state begins to take form* and by taking form* it arrives at fulfillment, at true encounter. Now we stand face to face with God (and this is done through His gift) but it’s not yet the fulfillment of the face to face dialogue, it’s not yet the complete, direct vision. There will be fulfillment when we will have direct vision.

G. M.: We thank you, Reverend Father, for your graciousness in granting me this interview.

*The Holy Monastery of Frăsinei,
April 14th, 1999*

The Mysticism of Death

The mystical passage into ETERNITY. The final journal entries.

*

It is not suffering and sickness which trouble me now, but the approach of “the great Borderland” between the world of birth and the world of ETERNITY. We, creation, are in-between two worlds, that of birth and that of eternity. And between them there is a mystery, the Borderland to Eternity, which each one of us in his due time must pass through. Even if there were no sin, its repercussions, or death, the Borderland would have still existed since it is the Door for passing between the two worlds: the lower world and the world Above. We are created Beings and we can never be confused with GOD, Who gave us being.

*

We are created, born as Creatures with Soul directly from GOD, with a Memorial of creation, of being begotten, from our birth parents. Through this we grow, to the extent that the Potential of birth, of being begotten, is for us the encounter with the Maker, GOD Himself. As long as we develop in the lower world of birth and growth, we have the rays of DIVINITY, but the moment comes when we must show our face before God, and this is done in the world of ETERNITY. Sin, along with death, added tares and destruction to our Being, and so the passage through the Borderland of ETERNITY is all the more difficult and even becomes terrifying. At a suitable time, willingly or unwillingly, you must pass through this Borderland, and it is then that you are put to the great test of Life.

*

When we are in the growth-birth stage of the earthly world we have states of confused and unstable Consciousness, so our personal conscience flails about between the reality of ETERNITY and the reality of temporality. Now however, we, through the image, the model, the likeness of ETERNITY, as Image of the DIVINE Likeness – now this image flails about to find its fulfillment, and so it drives us towards the Borderland of

ETERNITY in order to pass through it. This drive that is within us is the germ of growth that must become the steadfastness of ETERNITY.

*

Death, due to sin, brings us fear, emptiness, powerlessness and fear of passing through the “Borderland of fire”. The Fire of ETERNITY’S Borderland is so consuming that it will burn everything that is corrupt in us. And woe, how bitter it is, that due to sin our Soul and body will be burned of all corruption. We will see ourselves empty and broken, and mutilated. We won’t be able to recognize ourselves. And we will either pass through into ETERNITY’S LIGHT or go in the opposite direction, of the Life of the darkness of death, of brokenness.

*

This is why diseases, sufferings, and trials are necessary in this world, in order for us to grow, to wash ourselves from corruption, so that we will not have the ability for sinning. The saints even asked for and desired these purifications before death. For some, death is like a gentle passage, for others it is very severe. Both passages however, have the role of cleansing. May the mercy of the LORD be, *let it be* over everyone.

*

LORD JESUS, I thrash about in the searchings of my heart! I was not how I should have been. I proved cowardly and unworthy. I am in-between my last hope in Your godly love and my shame. Look at me! I’m ashamed to raise my eyes and my sinful voice, and it is only in the gesture of Worship that I make an effort towards Your Mercifulness. I know that I am now at my last physical and even Spiritual strength, and it is only Your Image of ETERNITY within me that burns my Being with a consuming fire. ETERNITY in me burns me and tortures me, it can no longer stay enclosed, it must open up its uncontainableness and arrive at the encounter beyond the Borderland of this earthly world. This departure of ETERNITY from the Borderland of my being is associated with the death of sin. And behold, I am at the two terrifying trials. There are some that would like to think beautifully about the hour of death. Death’s fear and terror are a shadow of hell, so it is the most terrifying thing, and we long to cast it [death] away from us.

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LORD JESUS, only through my gesture of worship can I fight any longer with the terrifying chill. I recognize that I'm afraid, and I banish this thought and imagination, and it is only with Worship above everything that I have any hope in Your Mercy.

*

Now I feel the great transformation in me, of personal Consciousness, that I am truly Creature and I have the task of passing, to grow the Image of ETERNITY. This consolidation of the ETERNAL Conscience of created Being-ish nature is precisely creation's condition of entering and of living in ETERNITY.

*

The Fire of ETERNITY'S Borderland will leave you burnt, a true Witness that pertains to the ETERNITY of the Conscious differentiation of creatures from their Maker. Without this seal of ETERNITY'S Borderland it is impossible to enter into ETERNITY.

I must pass through a dreadful scorching and await in awe. ETERNITY flails in me, and wants to uncuff itself from my Borderlands, to enter into the unlimited path of ETERNITY. All the more frequently the chill of death, departures, penetrate me, and the fear of death compounds, and terrifying thrills that shake my whole Being are added to them. The association of death with ETERNITY becomes a double passage beyond the great Borderland of life, and a double terror that creates an altogether different kind of suffering. The sufferings of death aren't so much organic or psychological, as much as a suffering from passage through the Borderland of ETERNITY. This has a different condition, and so nothing can ease the pain any longer, except for passing through the great Borderland. Here medicine can't do anything, only faith remains. If many seem to die in indifference and spiritual unfeelingness, in the depths of each soul there will be, *there will be* an unsupportable moment that will produce a great explosion when the departure of ETERNITY will thrash you.

*

For a long time there has been discussion of a real death complex, in which in a few minutes and a few seconds your entire life is spread out before you, or you have

extraordinary states that open up other dimensions of ETERNITY for you. The secret of the passage into ETERNITY is a Mystery which takes form* according to the Personality of each separate person. This moment is sealed for ETERNITY and becomes the nucleus of your ETERNAL Consciousness. The Seal of passing into ETERNITY is the Door of entrance into ETERNITY. It itself is your own ETERNITY, the Image of your own ETERNITY according to the Image of the Personality of your Being.

*

I feel a deep embarrassment before my acquaintances and before all of those for whom I, the unworthy one, was spiritual father. Brothers! Don't be scandalized by my weaknesses and nothingness. If I had anything good it was from the Gift of GOD'S mercy. You must understand that I am just Man, a Creature like everyone else. Perhaps you thought I was special, and perhaps you used some of the Gifts that GOD worked through me. Grant me your forgiveness and keep only the good memories.

Some of my closer friends await something more concrete as a kind of testament.

*

Oh, LORD JESUS, what should I leave for others when I've now been proven naked before death and ETERNITY? Do not be disconcerted, you who believed me to be a support in your trials. Keep the advice that I gave you and remember me in your Prayers.

*

Priests and spiritual fathers, even if they aren't saints, through the Gifts of the Spirit, even after death Work in those that are their Spiritual Children. So, have true trust that, as unworthy as I am, if you will follow my good advice you will be helped in continuation. And you help me more through this since Good works at the same time in this world and in ETERNITY.

*

If GOD wants my passage into the other world to be now, we must all submit with Worship to the Will of GOD, Who does everything with His great Mercy. Oh, you, my dearest ones, if you don't wish to be separated from me as I also don't want to be separated, then neither death nor ETERNITY will destroy this ETERNAL remaining together, even beyond the Borderlands of Mystery.

*

So they say that the souls from ETERNITY and even from the shadows of the darkness of death and hell, see their dearest ones clearly, even if they forget about them.

Our fathers and forefathers watch each of us and follow our Lives, and so there is another connection for help. The good virtues of some will also be a dowry of great use for those that follow. I feel, in a special way, HOW in their great love for all Creation, from ETERNITY they help us and Remember us permanently in their Prayers. Memories ETERNAL from the Christian Ritual is so telling in this way. It is, and remains, an ETERNAL Memory, an ETERNAL memory that will never be wiped out. Even if we, those of the earth forget it, those from ETERNITY will never forget, and because of this the Memories are a great Mystery.

*

Do not sorrow with disappointment. GOD put in each one the measure of his own Mystery. What is important is whether I have fulfilled the Growth of Life on Earth, if I am Born for ETERNITY, if I have escaped from bitter death that will now no longer work against me.

*

The saints passed, longed for the passage of ETERNITY in order to be United with CHRIST THE SAVIOR without end. The ETERNITY and temporality of this world aren't contradictory, but reciprocally extend each other.

*

Today, I partook of the BODY and BLOOD OF CHRIST THE SAVIOR, with the ALLWHOLY EUCHARIST, with the BREAD OF ETERNITY. I partook of the MYSTICAL BODY of THE SON of GOD. Now I appreciate the full value of this capital truth of ours, creation. The Being Memories that GOD sealed me with at my creation awakens in me, the moribund. These Memories of my personal Being are my very self. I am the very Image that must now pass through the Borderlands of ETERNITY, and this is why PARTAKING with the Liturgical BODY of GOD, of CHRIST is for me ETERNITY itself. The ancients named it the Divine Light, awakening, Grace, transfiguration. We Christians call it clearly and concisely: THE EUCHARISTIC LITURGICAL BODY of THE LORD CHRIST. He is the COUNTENANCE* of Illumination, awakening, of spiritual vision, transfiguration and even more, of the direct and personal ENCOUNTER, and still more, of Eternity's Life through which we must now pass.

*

The breath of our body stops. The breath of our Soul stops. The Soul, separated from the body, will loose its clothing, which covered the soul's nakedness.

The Soul, in its turn, has its own clothing covering it, but as a sinner this will be without that Life of Being, without that Light.

*

Oh, my Soul, blind and without breath. My Soul has the Superlife of ETERNITY, the SEAL OF THE DIVINE IMAGE, of the Breath of DIVINE when I was created. All the ETERNAL Memories and the Memories of my creation will awaken in my Soul. If I have Partaken with THE BODY of CHRIST, my Soul will no longer be completely naked, but will have the GARMENT of CHRIST. Without the WEDDING GARMENT, the IMAGE-BODY of CHRIST, I can not pass through the Borderland of Eternity, and will be taken in the opposite direction, towards the darkness of death, of the kingdom of non-eternity. Here again is a terrifying truth, death is not annihilation, but is the opposite of eternity, which does not mean temporality, but a product of "contrary eternity." It is something that decomposes forever, without ever terminating the decomposition. There

will be continual dreadful death. If life will be a continual Assimilation of ETERNITY, death will be an eternal emptying of eternity.

*

LORD! What a terrifying truth! Some don't want to think about this, and even refuse this information. This Passage into ETERNITY is not something to be lighthearted about. If we are lighthearted with our life, this is the moment when we will have a serious Conscience, which becomes the FIRMNESS of ETERNITY. In ETERNITY we will no longer be double-minded, and we will no longer make much of our liberty. In ETERNITY there will be nothing but UNION, a unique sense in all directions, without contrary-ness and so the issue of evil will no longer be. Now the evil of sin will be stopped. Those in the darkness of death will also stop evil, but in the manner of a continual burning that produces the torture of evil's non-eternal, which self-destructs.

*

Sin no longer lives in hell, but its burning becomes the suffering of continual death. In eternity you no longer sin since Eternity is stronger than any evil and can not generate evil. In the darkness of death, the consumption of sin in an eternal consuming, it is a remembrance of sin, but in the opposite direction. This is a mystery that only GOD knows and resolves. This burning of death however, how will it be with me? All of us must pass the Borderland of ETERNITY with the burn-wounds from the death of sin, which will be the ETERNAL CONSCIENCE of ETERNAL UNSINNINGNESS.

*

The LORD Himself, CHRIST INCARNATE, the HEAVENLY SON of GOD the INCARNATE, was raised to Heaven into ETERNITY with the wounds of the Cross of sin even in His RESURRECTED BODY. These marks-wounds will be the CONSCIENCE OF ETERNITY that will keep us from every sin and make Eternity possible, which means a complete absence of sin. Death will be the conscience of the

opposite of eternity. DIVINE ETERNITY will be ETERNAL CONSCIOUSNESS of good only.

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Paradoxically, hell, death's contrary, is also the contrary's consumption, an affirmation of the truth. The mystery of hell has not been discussed very much by the mystical theologians. There are some allusions that have a part in reality, but the mystery properly speaking only remains the Mystery of GOD.

*

Life after death is in the silence of death and beyond the utterance of ETERNITY. The silence of death is not allowed to be exposed, and the utterance of ETERNITY is beyond our strength. He who uncovers the pit of death commits an inadmissible and terrifying impiety, and this is why it is avoided. The mind of whosoever rushes into ETERNITY is burned. It is only the hour of death and the hour of each one's passage into ETERNITY that is the moment of these Mysteries' revelations. Oh, terrifying time, but also GOD'S Appearance.

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The battle between life and death is being waged all the more frequently inside of me. The chill of death penetrates me 'til the marrow of my bones. I realize my nothingness all the more. I must accept everything with Worship. Now, only the acceptance of the CROSS and CRUCIFIXION is the true Path.

*

Oh, the CROSS is so heavy and CRUCIFIXION so dreadful. I must completely abandon myself. To let what must be, be; to not ask for changes or miracles. No miracle is possible now, though the complete paradox is that everything is a Miracle of great Mystery. I must receive with complete self-sacrifice the hour of CRUCIFIXION. I too, will call out, "MY LORD! MY LORD! Why have you forsaken me?"

*

LORD, LORD, forgive me, at the crossroad of my life. Don't leave me, LORD! Oh, brothers, don't grow weary by my weakness. Oh, how hard it is, the emptiness of abandonment. It is dreadful, the emptiness of abandonment. You Yourself, LORD JESUS CHRIST cried out while You passed it. It is the hour of ETERNITY'S BIRTH, which due to sin is interwoven with life's opposite, with death. Behold the two moments of Mystery's Borderland. I'm afraid of the final hour, which I'd like to escape, but at the same time hurry on. Waiting is often more difficult. Let what should happen, happen, and GOD, Thy will be done, not mine. Forgive me, LORD! Forgive me! Forgive me! I have all kinds of confusing and mixed visions. Now the worst memories are coming up, as an ultimate destruction.

*

Oh, sin, sin, how bitter your destruction is! You want to take my last drop of life and corrupt me and destroy me.

Oh, horrible sin! Oh, horrible sin! You evil spirits who laid me waste my whole life, let your ultimate destruction come now.

*

LORD, LORD, I know that I couldn't fight against the passions. I know that I was weak. I know that the evil spirits deceived me.

LORD, LORD, shelter me, shelter me from the great laying of waste. Let death not be, let death not be an incrimination, my incrimination.

LORD, LORD, now I understand how bitter sin is in me. All the structures of the Soul and body will be broken. The very cells of the body will burn. The ashes from the burning will give off the stench of death. Corruption in me will give off an even uglier stench. They say that you suffocate in the smoke from corruption's burning and that is how you give up your soul.

LORD, LORD JESUS, how can I enter into Eternity with the putrid measure of my sin?

*

Holy Mother of God, have mercy on me!
My holy angel, be near to me!
My Saint whose name I bear, do not abandon me!

*

Crossing the Borderland of death and ETERNITY'S Mystery will show me for what I am, completely, my Name, my Person, my Being, everything will reveal the image that I'll have. The Image of Man is the Mystery of THE IMAGE OF THE SON of GOD, and this IMAGE is SELF-SACRIFICING LOVE. It is THE WORD of the Mystery of THE IMAGE OF THE GODHEAD breathed into me.

*

Could it be that I have a Likeness with the IMAGE of the SON of GOD? Death will empty me of Image and ETERNITY will clothe me in Image. The opposite eternity, that of death, will be the Image's ceaseless destruction. ETERNITY will be the Image's unending growth, of the Son's Image, of the Creature of God, Likeness of THE IMAGE OF THE SON OF GOD.

*

LORD JESUS, THE SON OF GOD, do I have anything in common with Your IMAGE?

LORD, LORD JESUS, have Mercy on me and CLOTHE ME with YOUR IMAGE, so as not to be naked and disfigured. At the creation of my Soul, You, THE SON OF GOD, LORD JESUS, you offered me YOUR IMAGE, THE IMAGE OF YOUR DIVINE LOVE. This SEAL OF SON was the DIVINE model for my very Person, my appearance, the Seal of Son, my very Being.

*

Forgive me. I had the task of being Born, of Growing, of bearing FRUIT, and so, of crossing into ETERNITY. Simultaneously with my creation, THE ALLHOLY SPIRIT SEALED HIS DIVINE LOVE in the depths of my Being. Because of This it is known that my created Being is born of water – the SEAL of the Baptism of THE GODLY SON,

and from the SPIRIT – the SEAL of the descent of DIVINE LOVE into the depths of Being, and of their UNION into the SEAL OF THE FATHER OF GOD, the Heart of the Mystery of Being properly speaking.

*

Oh, it is bitter for me! I abused and destroyed THE SEAL OF THE IMAGE OF SON. I darkened with the passions of death the SEAL OF THE IMAGE of the HOLY SPIRIT in me. And so I did not build the Union of Heart and ALTAR in my Being where I should have worshipped, and where the BLESSING OF THE FATHER OF GOD should have been.

*

Without the IMAGE OF THE ALLHOLY DIVINE TRINITY, I can not cross the Borderland of Eternity. But I will pass into the opposite, of death, and of death's darkness with the disfigured image, without the LIGHT OF THE SPIRIT in my depths, and without THE ETERNAL HOLINESS OF THE FATHER.

*

Have mercy on me, LORD JESUS CHRIST, SON OF GOD. Have mercy on me ALL HOLY, HOLY SPIRIT. Have Mercy on me HEAVENLY FATHER. I am created by DIVINE LOVE, don't let LOVE abandon me – conquer all of my sin, let LOVE conquer it.

*

Behold me, I am naked at the Borderland between ETERNITY and death. My only riches will be my LOVE, THE DIVINE IMAGE'S likeness. I need to be dressed with LOVE as in a jeweled vestment, but I, like a sinner, LORD, LORD JESUS, I PARTOOK with Your HEAVENLY BODY. Dress me with Your BODY. ALL HOLY, HOLY SPIRIT, likewise, give me back the LIGHT OF LIFE and ETERNITY.

*

HEAVENLY FATHER, my Heart is not an altar where I receive You, but CHRIST'S BODY AND THE ALLHOLY SPIRIT'S LIGHT will make a small little corner in the Heart where Your BLESSING is.

LORD, LORD, forgive me at the crossroads of my life...

*

LORD, give me Your Mercy. LORD, give me the cry of the thief on the CROSS, who was able to receive Your FORGIVENESS. From now on, only the last VENERATION remains for me. I no longer make myself out to be a philosopher. I'm afraid to think of hell. I don't have the daring or the obnoxiousness to think of the Heavenly, I only BOW towards Your Mercy, LORD.

*

Holy Mother of God, I know that you have a little drop of LOVE for me, even though I have disappointed you so much!

My Angel, I am ashamed by your lifetime's insistence for me to do well, while I didn't listen to you!

My Saint whose name I bear, I don't have Your virtues, and I made a mockery out of your Name!

Oh, All you saints, be help for me now!

Oh, Heavenly Image of Monk, which I bore unworthily and without attention!

Oh, oh, Lord, oh, what Image will I have at the Borderland between ETERNITY and death?

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I will be completely empty. It is not allowable for me to be hopeless because it contradicts the MERCIFUL DIVINE LOVE in this hour. I am struggling between Life and death. Life is stronger than death, and ETERNITY is stronger than all, and the Mercifulness of GOD, covers everything. These paradoxes of Mystery all exist at the same time. No one can say anything until the crossing of the Borderland of Mystery. There will yet be a Breath, a Word, like at my earthly Birth. My entrance into ETERNITY will be.

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LORD, THE IMAGE of Your Likeness, how broken and darkened it will be, since I have passed through the liberty of sin. Now, behold, I enter into eternal freedom without sin.

*

Oh, unspoken Mystery, LORD, Glory to Thee. I WORSHIP You, LORD. I thank You for all the good things, and I ask Your forgiveness for all the evil. Forgive me, LORD! Forgive me! Forgive me! So much has remained for me to ask Your forgiveness for, and to WORSHIP with an ETERNAL KNEELING.

*

Yet again, my brothers, I ask you, prove your understanding and forgiveness, and don't be sad, let us submit to the LORD'S Will. Have faith, only faith will rejoice in Life ETERNAL. Rejoice for ETERNITY'S JOY.

*

I'm not worthy of ETERNITY, I am worthy of death, but with the ETERNAL hope of Life I too, *I too* await the great hour; and I beg the Good LORD to give me a little drop of ETERNITY'S JOY, even unworthy as I am.

*

Oh, Love of Creature and DIVINE LOVE, You cross over everything.
Oh, JOY of ETERNITY...

Fanaticism and Holiness

Father N.,

Theodore from Abrud greets you with all due respect. Having a little free time and a good disposition, after a few hours of rest and after taking a meal, in the quiet of an evening that is easy and peaceful, I have decided to write to you, in my specific manner, a sincere epistle with an effort of thought and synthesis in order to share some observations, opinions and convictions with you, which I've acquired through the battle and fire of many circumstances.

I consider myself close to being one of your friends and because of this I have dared to speak to you with familiarity, with easiness unhindered by formality or so-called respect for "good manners."

I can say that our meeting in Campeni (and then our small excursion from Geoagiu) which recently took place were two occasions (the first being my small vacation to Crasna) when we were able to observe the discussions which we had in more detail. I've always had an analytical inclination when someone attempts to draw close to me, to get to know him. And then afterwards, when connections of friendship are established, I make spiritual bonds, and then in spite of many negative parts, unexpected weaknesses or whatever else comes along the way, they are unable to influence my friendly love any longer. I don't know what to call this trait of mine...

So, I never forget a friend, even if he gets separated from me, even if the cruelties of life put us in opposition... I can't uproot him from my soul, and my sadness tortures me, when the storm wants to lay waste, and evil tries to sow weeds with thorns, and from unfounded considerations, from demonic pride, stupidly criticizes, in order to separate us...

In this world, friendship is the most uplifting thing, the most beautiful thing, and that which gives the greatest joy, relaxation and optimism to the soul.

Words of encouragement from a friend are like balm. The comfort of a friend is more uplifting than music that raises you up again, like a pillar of strength. Oh, but I've

had the sad occasion when a friend is lacking sincerity, full of reservations and only an apparent friend... But let us leave behind these wanderings from the subject I'd like to relate.

Sincerely speaking, I was surprised at a certain moment that seemed significant to me (your rapport with Father Arseny), when you brought into discussion your educational blessing that you gave to some young faithful people at Campeni for viewing some films... and then your hesitant look with many overtones, when the subject came up about my diet...

I found therefore, a fitting occasion when I could analyze (an analysis made in the distant past) this father Arseny, named the "hermit" from the Keys of Ramets. Maybe you smile... You know him well enough, you were at the same monastery... I don't contest that! I, however, would like to share my opinions, the observations that I've made, and the true sense that I seek to reveal following the examinations that I subject everything to.

This issue is complicated enough because it must be eternally followed in rapport with the ancient – new, so as to become current again and therefore valid.

In order to study a man in his entire milieu, you must first understand him. You shouldn't judge things according to yourself. You should intuit his specific spirit. You should extricate yourself from the prejudices that calibrate your field of vision. And the criticism that you are urged on to give shouldn't be according to your own feelings, but according to universally acknowledged proofs, and according to a larger understanding.

Man always has two images, the apparent and the foundational. The apparent one is manifested in his activity. It's the one defined by its specific form, while the foundational one is hidden, inexhaustible, uncontainable, the fact that made all the ancient philosophers say, "the hardest thing is to know yourself." The role of this foundation is so complex, that most of the time you don't understand it, or you miss interpret it.

In the category of faith, of piety, in religion, this foundation is multiplied, and this is why a religious person must search in his depths, and not in appearance (since the appearance, in most cases, masks the foundation of religious people too).

In appearance, father Arseny is the renowned sober monk, incorruptible, a rigorous and extreme ascetic, the preaching psychologist of a life of the cleansing of sins

– intolerant even, who doesn't want to depart from the norms and rules of tradition, a fact that therefore, gives him the air of a fanatic (even though this term doesn't apply to him).

For the masses he is renowned as being a saint, to whom everything is possible, who discovers mysteries in miraculous ways. Like an excellent spiritual physician, he knows the appropriate remedy for all kinds of wounds... you must only listen to him, to do what he says.

However, to his colleagues (priests and monks), this appearance is striking and is subjected to criticism because of their tendency to search for a foundation [in their desire to look beyond appearances]. But something sad intervenes: what can you see in the depths of being if you don't have the necessary light, and if you don't know how to receive the light? And something else also intervenes: a tendency to modernize truth, which has become for most people a prejudice that is more fanatical than so-called fanaticism.

Look at how difficult it is to study a man who maintains himself in the (old) traditions in an effort to bring them up to date, to modernize them, who strikes at the modernism of the majority who consider that being modern means that everything should be new and not an actualization of the ancient light, which will always be light unto ages of ages.

The process and tendency towards modernizing the spiritual (with its religious profile) is a complicated psychological action, a problem that merits every effort to be penetrated, and for its deepest secrets to be understood.

Many pose the problem of "bringing religion up to date and modernizing it" as a new form, given however, that it has the same foundation because Christ is the End of the law (as Saint Paul says). And nothing can be erased, and regarding additions, likewise nothing [can be erased] outside of the small changes in the form of the exterior cult.

The essential in our modern epic regarding religion is however, the absence of religious living, which afterwards as an excuse, brings in so-called modernism in order to live in a civilized way, in other words, more materialistically and in negligence of a more intimate religious living. From this follows the lack of knowing how to live religiously and to be modern at the same time, which is the key problem. Because currently there are

different surroundings and after all, isn't there a need for new forms of spiritual rules, something new in order to be at peace with the modern epoch?

Look then at where the opinions and affirmations of many modern religious people come from, which is that if you respect the Ancient forms of religious living, the traditional of the Holy Fathers, you are Old fashioned and fanatical.

The ancient religious form along with its entire milieu shouldn't be misunderstood.

There are many that don't exclude this ancient form, but seek to simplify it and cut so much off of it that you can't recognize it anymore. Or they recognize it as a relic that you worship in front of, but which is inaccessible to the modern era, in other words, impossible to bring to fulfillment in the new conditions, and in the end to conform to the new more accessible modern forms.

This is what the center of Arseny's character consists of. A proverb says, "You will know a man according to his desires and aspirations, and his face is a reflection of the heart that beats in his breast."

Father Arseny, from his youth had a sensitive soul, very sensitive, with a true vocation for his calling. He viewed his life with an awakened conscience, ceaselessly awake, with a perpetual tendency to move forward.

The complicated process in a monk's soul is characterized by the refinement or in the "controversy" between spirit and matter, faith and apostasy, life and death, a truth that delimits the field of monastic conscience and life in well defined forms. This is why few arrive at Holiness. It's not that many can't live up to these requirements, it's that they don't even attempt to raise themselves up to them through continuous battle.

Many don't fight with daily and rational effort, moderate in the beginning, until you know your inner man, in order to know from which side to attack the problem, in order to know your possibilities, the forces which you use (and not a blind enthusiasm). Because of this many of the daring people went bankrupt and the requirements gained the renown of inaccessibility.

Of course we won't bring into discussion the "gifts" of God, but all of those who arrived at a high level of religious spirituality had the will, faith and unshakable firmness to follow the

chosen road (of their particular self-sacrifice) in a regulated life, enthusiastically and in full consciousness.

A compromise with one's own self has happened for the majority of monks (and even the faithful laymen). And it happens by enclosing yourself in your own opinions, with the specific prejudices of your character and temperament, a personal philosophy that ties you up, and you remain in the same place. And what's worse is, you consider and ask the same thing from others.

This happens all the more nowadays when it is believed that the one who isn't like you, who doesn't live like you, is abnormal. He is made out to be crazy etc...

We must arrive at the understanding that not all people are the same (not from the point of view that some are superior and others inferior), but different in their spiritual structure, which calls for something from their specific characteristics. (For example: a monk must abstain more and more soberly in comparison with others who have a different temperament. He has on the other hand, a different sensitivity that requires a double or tenfold effort to be normalized. It is something that few understand. In some of our monasteries when they ask the same thing from everyone, those who have some different necessities are considered abnormal, or as making themselves out to be smarter or even as fanatics if they attempt a more rigorous diet in order to maintain their spiritual and even physical health.

Here is another point for understanding father Arseny's personality. This monk, with his special gift and sensitivity, realized that the nucleus of monastic life is precisely this. In other words: the vast modality of the dynamics of spiritual movements that require certain norms for living, if there is to be determination and fancy for a conscientious and honorable monastic (and laymen's life with its condescensions).

A more modern opinion exists, however, which is that this spiritual structure is no longer needed, in current conditions, for those rules (they are called in religious nomenclature canons).

The ancient canons, in the end, would no longer be valid as if they were surpassed by new social requirements, and those that try to respect them therefore, show evidence of fanaticism, of close-mindedness. This again is a problem that must be understood.

The word “fanatic” means: a man of stupid rigorism who, even if he “narrow mindedly” and strictly respects real laws, misses their true understanding, the ensemble of their sensibilities. Nevertheless, the word “fanatic” is sometimes used without rhyme or reason, without its true definition being known.

With this occasion I’m reminded of a discussion with father Michael, who told me at a certain point, “I don’t think you’re a fanatic, you don’t get scandalized; you understand that you must be like a bee and only collect what is good from all the flowers.” In other words, the fanatic doesn’t want to understand anything outside of his rigorism. He doesn’t accept anything in a different form and in a scandalous way, with thunder and lightning strikes with his fists with curses and threats.

The fanatic is spiritually narrow, short sighted, without vision and instead of any “fire of the heart” that melts evil by divine love, he exclusively anathematizes evil.

Father Arseny, even if he is a rigorist, isn’t a fanatic! He is a rigorist with understanding, by spiritual science, from the knowledge of things, to such an extent that the ugly word “fanatic,” which isn’t fitting, is transformed into “spiritual perfection.”

Father Arseny, when he threatens sinners with hell and rebukes the idle and lazy, does it out of a feeling heart, out of love, out of understanding and not with the coldness of a fanatic. He holds quite a bit to his ascetic life, sober, harsh, without deviation, yet without a rule beaten on the table with a fist, but rather with an eternal strike towards perfection. And more intimately, the secret of great men, this is done as an eternal sacrifice offered from the divine love that fills his heart.

Here is something that is not very well understood by modern people, some even refuse to understand. “What do you mean?” they ask, “Continual sacrifice, this way only existed in the ancients! It’s fanaticism!” Look at those who are small in understanding, in penetration and knowledge of things in themselves.

The lives of the great monastic saints Pachomius, Anthony the Great, Macarius, Evthemius, Arsenius, Sava, Poemen etc. – they’d like to say, are only some obsolete histories of the past, unreal today. And not only that, the one who lives them today, who continues them in the modern epoch is “abnormal,” is a fanatic!

Some of today’s monasteries (I have had the occasion to see) are even enemies set against outdated “mysticism.”

Father Arseny conducted his life for decades according to the model of the great monastic saints. In his sincere and special zeal he wanted to reveal to others the great hidden mysteries of a truly miraculous life that brings joy and happiness to those thirsty for heaven, consumed in the flames of divine love, purely spiritual.

They are great mysteries, the secret of monasticism, complex and uncontainable, as delicate as glass that can be shattered by the most gentle knock or fall. The aspiration to be a true monk isn't fanaticism, in other words, eternal asceticism and battle to conquer the evil inside and outside of yourself, is then concomitant with making yourself a chosen vessel of the Holy Spirit. It's not a proud desire to love God and to rise up towards Him. It is with humility that you surrender completely to God! Monasticism is truly a "heavenly gift that melts all other gifts."

Well maybe someone will say that father Arseny, in his special sensitivity, follows the lives of the monastic saints and praises him that he can, and that he has the divine gift. But one could still say that he doesn't agree with his rigorism in a certain regard which smacks too old-fashioned. That is, "the unchanging respect of the ancient canons in new, modern conditions."

This point has led him to be viewed by many with reservation and to be considered a fanatic. And moreover, his position as a kind of Thebaiden Avva, which even impresses a lot of people by its mysterious aspect, along with his overwhelming influence, has also contributed to this view.

I have discussed this aspect of father Arseny at length and I have permitted myself to pose all these questions as if from a contrary position.

I remained amazed by the responses that were given. They, to the greatest measure, disarmed me. Did the Holy Fathers (when they formulated from grace and divine inspiration and from observations of the most intimate actions) have in mind only certain people limited in time, when they gave rules for the monasteries and the typicon of the true steps towards heaven?

And then, in which aspect is the ancient man's soul differentiated from the new? The Holy Fathers studied the soul very much. They discovered its movements, inclinations and possibilities which can truly be called natural law, just like the immutable laws of universal gravity and attraction, of electricity and magnetism since

discovered laws, if they are not respected, are denatured and the phenomenon no longer takes place in itself. Can I change things so that there is no longer day or night? It's a law, right?

The soul has some laws too, and if they aren't respected, it becomes perverted. Maybe in our modern epoch the phenomenon is different? No, no way! Only the décor of the scenery has changed. What can't be changed however, is the true fire of the spiritual epic poem.

On a global level there is discussion about the "instability of the Holy Father's canons," along with many controversies and misunderstandings. We must be understanding, but not be lax and pass over the "bar" as they say today.

The so-called golden age of Christianity (beginning with the Holy Apostles and just about ending with the three great hierarchs; Basil the Great, John the Golden Mouthed and Gregory the Theologian), was when Christianity, in its battle against itself and with those outside of it, succeeded to come out into the light in all its radiance. It had in view the thirsting aspiration of true Christian life, when children became martyrs and virgins, the holy women... We, the people of today, are not worthy to stand ten steps below them.

Were they not flesh and bone in those times too? On the other hand, they had faith and much love for holy things, with the excellent self-sacrifice which is missing in us, modern people.

The withholding of the Holy Communication for one, two, seven years for different falls and sins was the supreme punishment. In other words, it meant the loss of and true distancing from intimacy with the Lord Jesus. Today, if we are forbidden by a canon, it doesn't bother us. For some it's even convenient. Then, can we correct our coldness with more indulgent canons?

This is where father Arseny answered me, "Those that truly love Christ must love Him according to the example of the Holy Fathers. And only then will they arrive at holiness, when they rise to their level through uncontainable love, true penance (through the respective canons) and through true self-sacrifice."

He told me personally how as a priest he placed a few good Christians under the canons as they are in the books and he was able to deduce an amazing thing. They viewed

the things of God in their true radiance and not just as some ordinary things, as they are seen today.

If as an example, Holy Communion would only be in one single place in the whole world, how much extraordinary desire would there be for many in order to arrive there at least once in a lifetime, to become worthy (to partake) of the holy things.

So, the Holy Fathers, through their more stern cannons wanted (through truly psychological observation and divine inspiration) to re-establish the yearning for holy things, carefulness to be worthy of receiving the holy things.

Many that don't otherwise know such a spirit of things consider Arseny a fanatic. Personally, I had an intuition of the true sense of his sobriety. He isn't "closed" since in certain instances he accepts some people more gently (as according to saint Paul), as children that must first be fed with spiritual milk, and only after that with the dry bread of spiritual perfection.

So, this is what understanding consists of: don't scare off those who you want to bring to the Lord at the beginning. But slowly, they must arrive at the level of the holy Fathers. Otherwise Christian perfection doesn't exist. This is not accepted by many, because they are afraid to renounce themselves in complete self-surrender to Christ to the extent that they prefer a new form of salvation, of dualism: God and the world... with its sins...

This is why father Arseny sometimes opposes this balance between the sinful world and God, because it casts the true radiance of Christianity into the shadows. The one who truly wants to be a Christian will never be, unless he does it according to the model of the Holy Fathers!

I tried to make him give his opinion about a few small concessions that others had made for those who must be brought to the knowledge of God. And because of this we were reminded of you and of the "blessings" in Campeni from an educational perspective for those few young faithful to attend a few films, which shouldn't be too extravagant.

Well! There are a lot of difficult situations in spirituality!

Father Arseny however, has battle tactics, which are more like those of the Holy Fathers. They consist of the explanation and minute revelation of true Christian life and its clarification towards that to which it inclines. The power of the Holy Spirit and the

grace of the spiritual father intervenes here and can make true miracles of conversion. It is because of this that many priests today are seen to be powerless with their spiritual gift, appealing in the ultimate instance to human methods, in other words, to education.

And here father Arseny, if he's not understood, could be misinterpreted.

Without a doubt a spiritual father should have a lot of practical, educational knowledge. However, the measure of a priest is Yearning for Holiness, the Holy light which can kindle anew the fire that has been put out in the souls of the fallen.

A faithful man or woman resistantly opposes your spiritual advice and you, as a priest, must be stronger with your longing for God, with asceticism and continual perseverance, as the Holy Fathers prayed all night for those who were unfaithful.

Look at why father Arseny is harsh in this regard: not from a blind fanaticism (as some call it), but from a profound consciousness of certain truths.

I mean, some spiritual fathers, being poor and lazy in spiritual progress, in order to be excused from the effort of rising, make indulgences with Christians – in order to be indulgent with themselves.

The law of the spiritual is to be harsh and intolerant with yourself, so as to have the strength and power to be indulgent and tolerant with others (this is a psychological secret). It is only in this way that you can be indulgent, only through the understanding gained from your experience. It is a truth which is, practically speaking well understood, that those who are lax are on the contrary, most of the time, intolerant in a stupid way precisely when they ought to be indulgent.

One psychologist said, "The secret of strong people is that they unceasingly constrain themselves," an extraordinary truth. It is only in this way that the understanding is gained to know how to behave in all the variety of situations, according to circumstances, being at the same time faithful to your beliefs and mission.

Father Arseny, in his sincerity and in his monastic life that he carried out conscientiously, has this very complex which I've just dissected above. His simple way of being a loving soul and of thirsting for perfection must be understood in order to see him in his true radiance.

So father Arseny isn't a fanatic, but a monastic that honors his order, who bares the holiness of the Holy Fathers and has the unending light of true Christianity in its pure excellence.

He is one who I admire, with the unspeakable joy of seeing a prototype of a true monastic and Christian life. He embodies an encounter of heavenly faith and love, in the thirst for and ascension to the pure light which the Lord Christ gives.