

The Flames of War and the Burning Bush of Prayer: A Spiritual Response to the Problem of War

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Abstract: This paper attempts to give a spiritual answer to the problem of War from the perspective of Orthodox theology. The Second World War constitutes a representative historical example for understanding the phenomenon of war. As in the case of other countries from the Eastern European space, the effects of the Second World War were felt in the Romanian space until the fall of the communist regime installed by the Soviet occupier. According to the teachings of the Orthodox Church the primordial roots of war are of spiritual nature and a solution, a real cure, can be offered only on this level. The contemporary Romanian spiritual movement 'The Burning Bush of the Mother of God' represents an ecclesiastical movement that has faced the War and its effects in the Romanian space through the spiritual therapy provided by the Church.

Keywords: World War II, spirituality, the unseen war, therapy, hesychasm, Burning Bush

Introduction

War constitutes probably the most terrible form of human conflict that has marked the history of mankind. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 'War, in the popular sense', represents 'a conflict between political groups involving hostilities of considerable

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duration and magnitude.’² Observing the war from a worldly perspective, one can perceive a series of political, military, social, economic, cultural or ideological reasons that could lead to its outbreak or a series of immediate, immanent effects which it can determine. However, the origins and consequences of war go beyond the physical, worldly framework. We believe that a fully satisfactory description of it can only be provided by orthodox theology.

The aim of this article is to highlight the spiritual answer that the contemporary Romanian movement ‘The Burning Bush of the Mother of God’ gave to the problem of war. The relevance of this answer could be understood only if we comprehend the true nature of war, the spiritual etiology of human conflicts. As a point of departure in our attempt we have chosen the case of the Second World War and the immense impact it had on the Romanian territory. After presenting the spiritual diagnosis of war we describe the therapy that the Orthodox Church offers to humanity for an important and substantial solution of conflicts and wars. In the second part of the article we outline the main characteristics and activities of the spiritual movement ‘The Burning Bush of the Mother of God’ and the way it embraced the teachings and the spiritual therapeutics of the Church in order to give an existential answer to the problem of war.

The Second World War and its consequences in the Romanian space

With almost 50,000,000 victims, World War II (1939-1945) remains in history as the cruelest and bloodiest war in human history.³ In a prophetic manner, a great hierarch of the Church, Saint Nikolai Velimirovich, has foreseen and described since the 20s of the previous century, the destructive and total character that would characterize the Second World War in the turbulent history of mankind:

‘the war that will come will aim not only at the victory against the enemy, but at the destruction of the enemy—the

² "Entry on war," Encyclopaedia Britannica, available at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/war>.

³ "Entry on World War II," Encyclopaedia Britannica, available at <https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II>.

complete destruction not only of his fighting men, but of all they have behind the front, of their parents, children, sick, wounded, and those taken prisoners among them, of villages and their cities, their animals and beds, their railways and roads! Devastation that doesn't think and doesn't discriminate! [...] Fire, lead and steel will fall like an unstoppable rain that drowns and gives everything to death.'⁴

If the First World War worked like a strange form of catalyst for the emergence of the two types of totalitarianism that traumatized humanity in the 20th century, Communism and Nazism, the Second World War determined the demise of the second type of totalitarianism and the spread of the first on almost half of the Globe. Towards the end of World War II, Europe would be divided in two, between the capitalist West and the communist East.⁵ 'This war is not as in the past, whoever occupies a territory also imposes on it his own social system. Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach. It cannot be otherwise' - said Stalin to a Yugoslav communist official.⁶ For many of the countries that fell victim to the Soviet Empire, this occupation will have unprecedented consequences on a political, social, cultural, and especially spiritual level.

As for other states in Eastern Europe, for Romania, the Second World War represented a moment of tribulation, a terrible experience that put its very existence as a state at stake. Caught between two totalitarian empires, Romania was forced in 1940 to give away part of its territories to the Soviet Union, to Horthy's fascist Hungary, and to Bulgaria. In 1941, it entered the war against the Soviet Union on the side of the Axis, in order to recover

⁴ Nikolai Velimirovich, *Războiul și Biblia [War and the Bible]*, trans. Adrian Tănăsescu-Vlas (Bucharest: Sofia, 2002), 41.

⁵ Norman Naimark, "The Sovietization of Eastern Europe, 1944–1953," in M. Leffler & O. Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/cambridge-history-of-the-cold-war/sovietization-of-eastern-europe-19441953/A741EADA14C66E9AB80295FE441E93C6>.

⁶ Ibid.

the territories occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940. On August 23, 1944, Romania ceased hostilities on the Eastern Front and in response was attacked by Nazi Germany. The German troops are defeated and successfully expelled from the country's territory, but in the meantime, Romania is occupied by the Red Army.

The Second World War had dark consequences for Romania, both in the short and long term. Besides material destruction and economic losses, besides territorial losses, Romania also paid an expensive tribute in terms of human lives, with its 833.000 victims occupying the 10th place in the world ranking of victims of World War II.⁷ War also brought with it other sufferings and scourges such as disease and famine. In the long term, however, the Romanian people suffered primarily through the installation of the communist totalitarian regime, a fact which meant a break with a past marked by tradition, by a set of European and Christian values. Even though the Soviet army left Romania in 1958, the social status-quo imposed by it in our country ended only with the fall of communism in December 1989. Beyond the promises of progress and well-being, the period of Soviet-communist occupation meant in fact, a terrible period of regress from a social, cultural and axiological point of view. After the dreadful confiscation of freedom, the regime spread its terror among the people by unleashing a systematic repression that resulted in hundreds of thousands of victims and traumatized people.

The spiritual causes of war

Beyond its political-military, social-economic or cultural-ideological coordinates, the war has another coordinate which is not taken into account by the Peace Conferences, by the political leaders, by analysts or historians, a coordinate that gives meaning and explains the essence of the war, which shows its true causes and purposes.⁸ This is the spiritual coordinate, an imponderable element that belongs to the unseen side of the human being. In

⁷ "Entry on World War II Fatalities by Country," World Atlas, available at <https://www.worldatlas.com/world-wars/world-war-ii-fatalities-by-country.html>.

⁸ Velimirovich, *Războiul și Biblia*, 32.

Saint Nikolai Velimirovich's book, 'War and the Bible', war is described as a 'frightening mystery'⁹, 'a monstrosity' that has its roots in the inner part of man, in the soul. In order to outline a spiritual diagnosis of this complex phenomenon of the fallen human nature, we will refer to texts from the Holy Scriptures, the Holy Fathers and writings of some contemporary fathers and saints.

a. One of the most important causes of war is unbelief, the distancing from God. Many troubles and disasters come upon men because of unbelief, but war is perhaps the worst experience which God allows to come upon men for this reason.

'Unbelief is an offense to the Maker and Sustainer of the world, contempt and second crucifixion of Christ the Lord, in whose name the Christian peoples are baptized and to whom they have sworn faith. And any offense brought to God, if it is not quickly repented of, brings distress: drought, floods, disease, disorder, crisis, regress in all respects - and war as the crowning of all disasters.'¹⁰

People's unbelief and sins, according to the Romanian father Haralambie Vasilache, a priest who had suffered and died for Christ in a communist prison, were the main reasons for which God allowed the outbreak of World War II.¹¹ The modern European man, according to Saint Nikolai Velimirovich, had turned to a new idolatry, by replacing faith with a series of idols such as matter, the personal ego, the empire (the state), the nation and culture.¹² War thus appears as a disease, as a pestilence, a natural consequence of the state that man cultivated during peace time by allowing the multiplication of 'viruses', that is, of all the causes that lead to war.¹³

b. War leads, as previously highlighted, to suffering, destruction and death. Death itself is a phenomenon that appeared after the fall of the forefathers Adam and Eve, a phenomenon

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 157.

¹¹ Vasile Vasilache, *În temniță cu Hristos. Amintiri din închisorile comuniste [In prison with Christ. Memories from communist prisons]* (Bucharest: Eikon Publishing House, 2020), 133.

¹² Velimirovich, *Războiul și Biblia*, 158.

¹³ Ibid.

caused by sin according to Saint Apostle Paul: ‘Therefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned in him.’¹⁴ The conflicting state between people is caused by the conflicting state between man and God brought about by sin: ‘man’s sin against man appears as a result of man’s sin against God. Or, in other words [...] man’s war against man appears as a result of man’s war against God.’¹⁵ Sins, as one can see in the Holy Scriptures, can be individual or collective and have individual or collective consequences. Also, the sin is not only the one by deed, but also the one by thought. That is why the origin of sin and implicitly war must be sought in the depths of man, in the center of the soul which is the heart: ‘For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness.’¹⁶

c. War indicates a real problem that exists between people, a lack of mutual love, appreciation, and respect, a dissolution of unity and peace. In their absence, people end up being possessed by various states and passions such as greed, envy, contempt, malice, hatred, or enmity. Sin affects not only the relationship with God, but also the relationship between people: ‘And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold’¹⁷ says our Lord Jesus Christ. Life away from God means moving away from the source of peace and love, which makes inter-human relations stand under the sign of a great vulnerability, with the continuous danger of a conflict break out: ‘Because alienation from God is alienation from peace and love, the man who lives far from God cannot have peace within himself and [is] very likely to resort to hostility as a solution to problems.’¹⁸

¹⁴ Rom. 5, 12.

¹⁵ Ibid., 53.

¹⁶ Mark 7, 21-2.

¹⁷ Matthew 24, 12.

¹⁸ Wassel Ruba, *Η συμβολή του ποιμαντικού έργου της Εκκλησίας για την επίτευξη της ειρήνης στη σύγχρονη κοινωνία [The contribution of the pastoral work of the Church to the achievement of peace in modern society]* (Master thesis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2018), 30.

d. Because of its extension and amplitude, a world war influences an entire historical era, has deep spiritual and social consequences for many generations and around the entire globe. Saint Sophronius of Essex, who witnessed the horrors of the First and Second World Wars, seized the profound spiritual changes that humanity had suffered after the two World Wars. He observed that the world had lost its past tranquility and peace after what he called ‘the first world fratricide.’¹⁹ Saint Nikolai Velimirovich expresses himself similarly, saying: ‘There is nothing more obvious than the fact that this ominous war made people worse and more degenerate, physically and morally, and the political, economic and financial conditions worsened after him.’²⁰ The Second World War, according to Saint Sophronius, made the sense of tragedy and hopelessness grow even more in the world.²¹ The outbreak of a Third World War in the 20th century, however, according to the same father, would have irreparably mutilated the human soul, depriving man of one of the most important powers of the soul which is faith.²² This period inaugurated by the World Wars was named by Rafail Noica²³, a disciple of St. Sophronius from Essex, as the

¹⁹ Rafail Noica, ‘Trăim în perioada eshatologică, a sfârșitului. Cu Primul Război Mondial a început o altă lume’ [‘We live in the eschatological period, of the end. With the First World War another world began’], *Cuvântul ortodox*, April 4, 2014, <http://www.cuvantul-ortodox.ro/parintele-rafail-noica-perioada-eschatologica-sfarsit-perioada-martirica-cultura-filocalica-primul-razboi-mondial-tragedie-iad-nu-asta-este-o-viata-nu-stim-lume-nu-deznadajdui-nu-i-nevoie-tine-bara/>.

²⁰ Velimirovich, *Războiul și Biblia*, 49.

²¹ Noica, ‘Trăim în perioada eshatologică, a sfârșitului.’

²² Ibid.

²³ Rafail Noica (born Răzvan Noica, 1942), the son of the famous Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica and Wendy Muston, is one of the most well-known and appreciated hieromonks and spiritual fathers in the Romanian space in the last decades. With a brief Christian education received during his childhood, he left Romania at the age of 13 with his mother for England. After a period of searching within different Christian denominations, in 1961 he returned to Orthodoxy after providentially meeting Saint Sophronius of Essex. In 1965 he was tonsured a monk at the Essex Monastery, and in 1993 he returned to Romania where he retired to a hermitage in the Apuseni Mountains.

eschatological period in the bimillenary history of the Church.²⁴ After the period of the first three centuries, called ‘martyrical’ and the second, called ‘philokalic’, inaugurated in 313 by Saint Constantine the Great, with the outbreak of the the World Wars of the 20th century, the ‘eschatological’ period begins, a period in which more than ever man has the possibility to end human history by using the available destructive warfare.

The risk of the outbreak of a new world war constituted a constant threat to the world in the post-war period. The countries of Eastern Europe, however, witnessed a different kind of war, a war of the state against the people for the sake of realizing the communist ‘new man’ according to the model imposed by the Soviet occupier. This war, manifested through a systematic repression against the so-called ‘class enemies’, but practically against all citizens, was accompanied by an axiological type of war, characterized by the break with the past, values and tradition and the imposition of certain new values and a new vision of the world, of the communist ideology, a fact that generated a serious moral crisis among the people. The war waged by the communists against the Romanian people was essentially a spiritual one, through the fight against faith, through the camouflaged or sometimes overt repression against the Church, through the attempt to suppress the transcendent from the souls of people, especially those of the young, and through the general imposing of an immanent, earthly ideal.

War and the therapy of conflicts between people in the Church

In a world where news of local wars overwhelm us every day, where the risk of a new conflict of global proportions increases, peace, understanding and harmony between people, communities and states have become more relevant than ever before. If the Church can help us understand identify the primary causes of war, it can also help us by offering the true therapy for the healing of the spiritual diseases that lead to and are caused by war.

a. We have noticed that the sin of unbelief, of distancing from God, brings war as an ultimate consequence. Even peace

²⁴ Noica, ‘Trăim în perioada eshatologică, a sfârșitului.’

concluded without invoking God, Saint Nikolai Velimirovich shows, can lead to war.²⁵ Peace is thus conditioned on people's relationship with God. By returning to God and living according to the divine commandments, man can contribute to the consolidation of peace on earth: 'Is there, hence, salvation for the peoples of Europe and America? Of course there is. [...] Everything is possible if people want [...] to change their spirit, to correct their thoughts, to quench their lusts after nothingness and to be guided towards a good purpose by the One who said: "I am the way."²⁶ The place where we meet Christ, the one who is the 'Way, the Truth and the Life'²⁷ and the 'Light of the world' is the Orthodox Church, which represents His Body extended into history. The authentic life, the life that pleases God, is the life in the Church, the ecclesial experience. In the Church we can find true peace, the peace offered by the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world: 'Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you.'²⁸ The peace that the believer experiences in the Church is also a gift of the Holy Spirit, of the new life that the person baptized in the Church lives.²⁹ Peace with God is thus achieved in the Church and involves commitment to a new life in Christ and in the Holy Spirit.

b. Christianity's response to the threat of war and ultimately to death is the identification and healing of the cause that brought about death in the world, that is, sin. The wound of sin is healed by gaining Christ's peace,³⁰ and through this therapy, the main consequence of sin, death, according to Saint Paul, is abolished on an ontological level. 'The peace of Christ is not, in the final analysis, a moral state, but a spiritual one. It is not conventional pacification, but ontological unification. And since its absence is due to the presence of sin, which is the cause of death, its restoration is accomplished by the elimination of sin.'³¹

²⁵ Velimirovich, *Războiul și Biblia*, 154.

²⁶ Ibid., 201.

²⁷ John 14, 6.

²⁸ John 14, 27.

²⁹ Galatians 5, 22-3.

³⁰ Georgios Mantzaridis, *Morala Creștină [Christian Ethics]*, Volume II, trans. Cornel Constantin Coman (Bucharest: Bizantină, 2006), 203.

³¹ Ibid.

Christianity does not preach the fight against people, but a ‘Gospel of peace,’³² nevertheless, in order to make present this message in the world, Christians must fight against sin, their own passions and, in the last analysis, the devil, the one who causes sin.³³ The Christian is thus requested first of all to gain victory in his own inner war, in the unseen war.³⁴ ‘The fight is predominantly spiritual, and the victorious one gains the crown of salvation [...]. The weapons of this war are: fasting, prayer, justice, piety, gentleness and chastity.’³⁵ Inner peace, the peace of the soul, comes from the reconciliation of man’s soul powers³⁶ and the guarding of his vital center, the spiritual heart of man.³⁷ This spiritual battle cannot be fought alone, but with guidance, with the help of a spiritual father. In this way, the Christian can begin without deceit on the path of spiritual war. Another indispensable aid to Christians for their spiritual life is the Word of the Gospel and the Writings of the Holy Fathers of the Church. For the peace and tranquility of the heart, the guides par excellence are the Fathers of the Desert and the Philokalic Fathers of the Church who propose as main weapons vigilance (nepsis) and the prayer of Jesus. This spiritual culture is called, according to the tradition of the Church, hesychasm.

c. True peace has three coordinates, one vertical, which indicates the peace between man and God, one horizontal, indicating the peace between man and his fellow men and one at the individual level, which refers to the peace of man with himself: ‘There is no real peace, if man does not reconcile with God, with his

³² Ephesians 6, 15.

³³ See Ephesians 6, 11-2.

³⁴ Velimirovich, *Războiul și Biblia*, 194-95.

³⁵ Adrian Ignat, ‘Viziunea Sfinților Părinți asupra războiului’ [‘The Vision of the Holy Fathers on War’], *Restructurări dilematice*, Vol. 2 (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2013),

https://www.academia.edu/9758830/VIZIUNEA_SFINTILOR_P%C4%82RIN%C5%A2I_ASUPRA_R%C4%82ZBOIULUI.

³⁶ Ruba, *Η συμβολή του ποιμαντικού έργου της Εκκλησίας για την επίτευξη της ειρήνης στη σύγχρονη κοινωνία*, 40.

³⁷ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și Învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama [The Life and Teaching of Saint Gregory Palama]*, Second Edition (Bucharest: Scriptura Publishing House, 1993), 168.

people, and with himself.’³⁸ Saint Isaac the Syrian emphasizes this interrelation that exists between man, God and the world, the importance and the impact that the work of a single person who gains peace in his soul can have: ‘Make peace with yourself [...] and the heaven and the earth will make peace with you.’³⁹ The saints are the ones who have acquired this real peace within themselves and through their lives act as a landmark for other people, helping them find the way to reconciliation: ‘The presence of a peaceful person becomes the epicenter of the reconciliation of many.’⁴⁰

The church is the space where true unity is achieved between people. Unity among people is ensured by the unity of the mystical Body of Christ which constitutes the Church. ‘Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.’⁴¹ Man enters into the mystical Body of the Church by participating in the Holy Mysteries, through sacramental and liturgical life. True life in Christ, according to Saint Nikolai Cabasilas, is a life closely linked to worship, to the Holy Mysteries.⁴² The unity that Christians achieve in worship is in strong dependence to the confession of faith; there is no true love and unity outside of the truth, outside of Orthodoxy: ‘endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.’⁴³

d. War in the modern era, as we have previously noted, has gained proportions never before seen in any other historical era. Because of the danger of total destruction that threatens mankind from the first half of the Twentieth Century, our age has been characterized as an eschatological one. In this way the *eschatological consciousness* of the Christians of the first centuries is now more relevant than ever before. This awareness has in fact been a constant throughout the ages for Christians, representing a

³⁸ Ruba, *Η συμβολή του ποιμαντικού έργου της Εκκλησίας για την επίτευξη της ειρήνης στη σύγχρονη κοινωνία*, 40.

³⁹ Mantzaridis, *Morala Creștină*, 202.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ 1 Corinthians 12, 27.

⁴² See Nikolai Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, trans. Carmino J. de Catanzaro, introduction by Boris Bobrinskoy (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, 1998).

⁴³ Ephesians 4, 3.

way in which the believer relates both to the imminence of the personal end and to the end of the world: 'But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober.'⁴⁴ Man is called in every era to overcome its historical limitations, to overcome the terror and tyranny of history through the spiritual means that the Church offers, through the experience of eternity in this life.⁴⁵

For the peoples of Eastern Europe, the Second World War and the era inaugurated by it represented a period of challenge and tribulation, both on a social-political and spiritual level. Many have tried to find an answer, a solution to escape from the terror of history, either through a resistance on a human level, or through anchoring in the transcendent, spiritual zone. Those who took refuge in the Church could find true freedom, which is *the inner freedom*: 'Being part of the body of Christ - in the Church - means entering into the communion of freedom.'⁴⁶ By acquiring this freedom, man manages to overcome the feeling of fear and get out of the chain imposed by the terror of history: 'And to the extent that he lives united with Christ, he is freed from the fear of death and is free.'⁴⁷

If the fire of war and hatred, of enmity imposed by all ideologies has devastated the lives and souls of many, there is another kind of fire that can help man to extinguish the latter one and ignite the hope of real peace in the world. This fire is not a material but a spiritual one. It is the fire of the Holy Spirit which Christ, and afterwards the apostles, came to offer to all of humanity: 'I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already

⁴⁴ 1 Thess. 5, 4-6.

⁴⁵ André Scrima, *Ortodoxia și încercarea comunismului [Orthodoxy and the crucible of communism]*, ed. Vlad Alexandrescu, trans. Vlad Alexandrescu, Lucian Petrescu and Miruna Tătaru-Cazaban (Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, 2008), 96.

⁴⁶ Mantzaridis, *Morala Creștină*, 207.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 208.

kindled!’⁴⁸ The war and the repressive actions of the modern totalitarian regimes caused many Christians to reawaken the *missionary, apostolic consciousness*.

‘Communism has awakened, perhaps for the first time after a long period, an apostolic consciousness in the Orthodox Church. Indeed, it is a rediscovery of the apostolate beyond what is called “missionary activity”. The propagation of the fire of Christian life is done first by living in the spiritual structure of the Church, by creating a Christian spirit that surrounds the places, hearts, activities where its witnesses are present.’⁴⁹

This era of persecution also caused the awakening of a third type of *consciousness* in Christians, the *martyrical* one. This consciousness is the fruit of the encounter with Christ, of receiving the peace that manifests itself through the power to forgive and love the enemies⁵⁰. Through their sacrifice, the holy martyrs were the ones who made the Church grow and flourish throughout the ages.⁵¹ The persecution caused by communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the previous century gave birth to a new generation of martyrs. The peaceful mission and love shared by the martyrs of the Church to all fellow men led to the taming and conversion of many persecutors and strengthened the faith of inmates in camps and prisons and of believers in freedom. In the period 1989-1991, the communist regimes forcibly installed in Eastern Europe after the Second World War fell one by one, giving the opportunity for a revival of Orthodoxy in these countries. We believe that this fact represented a fruit of the sacrifice of the new martyrs of the Church. For their sacrifice probably, God prevented the outbreak of a new world war: ‘Father Sophrony used to say [...] in the 80s before Perestroika: if a

⁴⁸ Luke 12, 49.

⁴⁹ André Scrima, *Ortodoxia și încercarea comunismului*, 180.

⁵⁰ Macarie Drăgoi, ‘Cinstirea memoriei martirilor Ortodoxiei în zilele noastre’ [‘Honoring the memory of the martyrs of Orthodoxy in our days’], *Episcopia Scandinavia*, August 9, 2017, <https://episcopiascandinavia.se/cinstirea-memoriei-martirilor-ortodoxiei-in-zilele-noastre/>.

⁵¹ *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești [Church Fathers and Writers]*, vol. 3 (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1981), 109.

third world war breaks out now, faith itself on earth will be not possible. But if not, a great spiritual rebirth will follow.’⁵²

The spiritual movement ‘the Burning Bush’. An ecclesial response to the problem of war

In the Romanian space, the threat of physical destruction brought by the Second World War and afterwards the threat of national, cultural and spiritual destruction with the installation of the communist regime, determined a series of energetic defense reactions from many people with love of the people and the faith, either through political, military, social or cultural means, or through spiritual ones. At this point of the article we will focus our attention on a group of people, laymen and clerics, who tried to offer a solution to their fellow men on a spiritual level to meet both historical dangers that befell upon Romania in the middle of the previous century. It is about the cultural-spiritual movement ‘the Burning Bush of the Mother of God’ that appeared at the end of the Second World War within the Antim monastery in Bucharest. This spiritual movement, with a deeply ecclesial character, had in its center a group of Christian intellectuals and orthodox clerics who sought to get closer to God by fulfilling the hesychast ideal. The group’s name comes from the Old Testament, from the burning and unconsumed bush that Moses saw at the foot of Mount Horeb in Sinai,⁵³ being a symbol, according to the athanasean and Russian tradition, of the unceasing prayer and of the Mother of God. With the Neptic and Philokalic fathers as their guides, the members of the Antim group tried to offer an answer, a real spiritual therapy for the profound and fundamental resolution of conflicts, for healing the diseases that led to war and the wounds and new diseases brought on by it by the communist atheist regime. Instead of the fire of war, they proposed another kind of fire, the peaceful and supernatural fire of the Holy Spirit, which springs from prayer, a fire that does not consume, but completes, as in the image of the Bush from the Sinai desert: ‘The bush that burned and was not consumed. This fire without ashes. A fire that does not consume,

⁵² Noica, ‘Trăim în perioada eshatologică, a sfârșitului.’

⁵³ Exodus 3, 2.

but completes. A blaze of glory. It is a point and a moment through which the nature suddenly penetrates into the supernature/hyperfysis.⁵⁴

Sandu Tudor, the eschatological consciousness and the discovery of hesychasm between the two World Wars

The group from Antim was led by a famous Romanian journalist and poet from the interwar period, Sandu Tudor. Born in 1896, in a family of faithful parents, he had his first experience of war at a young age. He was mobilized in his last year of high school and at only 20 years old he entered the trenches in the First World War as a second lieutenant of the Romanian Army.⁵⁵ He inherited from his parents a strong and natural faith and had an important support in this sense in the period of high school, from his history and philosophy professor, Ion Niculescu Dacian, but the traumatic experience of the Great War added to this faith an eschatological type of consciousness, through the understanding of the temporary status of this world and the danger of the end that looms over it. This can be seen especially from the title of his personal notes from the period 1914-1944, *Maran atha - The Lord is coming*.⁵⁶

His perception of the ancestral faith is enriched by the experience of the hesychastic spirituality discovered in the summer of 1929 by visiting Mount Athos. There he was guided by the athonite fathers in the mysteries of the hesychastic prayer and of the Holy Mountain. On this occasion he finds out about the method

⁵⁴ Daniil from Rărau (Sandu Tudor), *Acatiste [Akathists]*, eds. Alexandru Dimcea and Gabriela Moldoveanu (Bucharest: Christiana Publishing House, 2009), 187.

⁵⁵ Antonie Plămădeală, *Rugul Aprins [The Burning Bush]* (Sibiu: Publishing House of the Archdiocese of Sibiu, 2002; Electronic edition, Apologeticum, 2006), 7.

⁵⁶ Cleopa Paraschiv, *Ieroschimonahul Daniil – Sandu Tudor și "Rugul Aprins" de la Mănăstirea Antim la Mănăstirea Rarău [Sandu Tudor and 'The Burning Bush' from the Antim Monastery to the Rarău Monastery]* (Vatra Dornei: Panaghia Publishing House, 2007), 233.

of breathing and the use of the stool in prayer,⁵⁷ specific to the Orthodox philokalic tradition. The discovery of the inner man led him to engage, even if he was still in the world, on the path of the Hesychast prayer.

‘There Sandu Tudor understood that our ego is infinite and that in that existential center of our being, which the monks call “heart”, in the sense of “deepness”, there is God and that God is the seal of our personality. The monks focus on that center of God in man when they bow their heads to their chests, saying in the rhythm of their breathing: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”’⁵⁸

Also during this trip to the Holy Mountain, he discovers the icon of the Burning Bush of the Mother of God, which he brings back in Romania, the Mother of God becoming thus the protector and spiritual guide of the young Romanian intellectual. For a period of more than a decade, until the outbreak of the Second World War, Sandu Tudor will be an active intellectual in the Romanian publishing space, showing through his articles and poems a confessional spirit, put at the service of the Church and the city. Unfortunately, the activity in the middle of the world during this period was not without temptations, obstacles and even falls.

The outbreak of World War II and the meeting in Chernivtsi in 1943

In 1943, two years after Romania’s entry into World War II and the approach of the Eastern Front to the country’s borders, Sandu Tudor together with a group of close intellectuals and clerics will initiate in the northern part of the country, at the seat of the Bucovina Metropolis in Chernivtsi, a series of discussions and meetings dedicated to prayer and meditation on spiritual themes. The meetings, held between August 1st and 7th, 1943, with the blessing of Metropolitan Tit Simedrea, were named ‘Seven Days of Vigil.’⁵⁹ These had as their motto the biblical quote: ‘Redeeming the

⁵⁷ Roman Braga, ‘Rugul Aprins,’ in *Pe drumul credinței* [‘The Burning Bush’, in *On the way of faith*] (Rives Junction, USA: HDM Press Inc., 2006), 171-83; at 173.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, at 173-74.

⁵⁹ Plămădeală, *Rugul Aprins*, 12.

time, because the days are evil,'⁶⁰ which highlights the strong eschatological consciousness that animated the organizers. Besides Metropolitan Tit Simedrea and the writer Sandu Tudor, at the meetings participated also important figures of contemporary Romanian culture such as the philosopher Constantin Noica⁶¹, the Byzantinologist Alexandru Elian⁶², the poet and economist Paul

⁶⁰ Ephesians 5, 16.

⁶¹ Constantin Noica, philosopher (born July 12, 1909, Vitănești-Teleorman – December 4, 1987, Sibiu). Graduated from the School of Philology and Philosophy (1928-1931). Member of the well-known interwar group "Criterion" (1932-1934). After a period of specialization in France (1938-1939), he defended his doctoral thesis in philosophy in Bucharest (1939). He was lecturer in philosophy for the Romanian-German Institute in Berlin (1941-1944). He becomes a political prisoner during the period 1958-1964. From his philosophical works: *Pagini despre sufletul românesc* [Pages about the Romanian Soul] - 1944, *Plato: Lysis* - 1969, *Despărțirea de Goethe* [The Separation from Goethe] - 1976, *Sentimentul românesc al ființei* [The Romanian sense of being] - 1978, *Devenirea întru ființă* [The becoming into being] - 1981, *Rugați-vă pentru fratele Alexandru* [Pray for brother Alexander] – 1990. See Constantin Noica, *Sentimentul românesc al ființei* [The Romanian sense of being] (Bucharest: HUMANITAS Publishing House, 1996), 2.

⁶² Alexandru Elian, historian and Byzantine scholar (born October 27, 1910, Bucharest – January 8, 1998, Bucharest). Assistant (1936-1940) and professor (1948-1952) at the Department of Byzantine Studies at the History School of Bucharest, professor of Greek Paleography at the Higher School of Archives (1937 - 1948), Professor of Byzantine Studies at the Theological University Institute in Bucharest (1956-1975), member of the Academy of Romania (1993). Mircea Păcurariu, *Dicționarul Teologilor români* [Dictionary of Romanian Theologians], Second edition (Bucharest: Enciclopedică, 2002), 170.

Sterian⁶³, the sociologist Henri H. Stahl⁶⁴, the chemist and physicist Alexandru Marinescu⁶⁵ or the erudite father Benedict Ghiuș⁶⁶.

⁶³ Paul Sterian, writer, poet, graphic designer, economist, sociologist (born January 1, 1904, Bucharest - September 16, 1984, Bucharest). Degree (1921-1924) at the Faculty of Law of the University of Bucharest and parallel studies at the Faculty of Philology and Philosophy at the same University. PhD in Paris (1926-1928) in law and economics. A second PhD later, at the University of Bucharest, in sociology (1933). He becomes consul of Romania in Washington (1938) and later fulfills various important functions in three ministries during the period 1941-1944. He is imprisoned during the late 1950s. From his theological works: *The Akathist of Saint Paraskeva the New* - 1931. A play called *The Young Men of Ephesus* inspired by the story of the seven children of Ephesus (1938). *The Invisible War. The life of the deification of our holy father Paisios the Great* - 1944. See Marius Vasileanu's foreword to Paul Sterian's book *Războiul nevăzut. Viața de îndumnezeire a sfântului părintelui nostru Paisie cel Mare [The Invisible War. The life of the deification of our holy father Paisius the Great]* (Bucharest: Eikon Publishing House, 2017) and the article by Victor Durnea, 'Cazul Paul Sterian - Ortodox și futurist' [The case of Paul Sterian – orthodox and futurist], in *România literară [Literary Romania]*, vol. 29 (2007), http://www.romlit.ro/cazul_paul_sterian_-_orthodox_i_futurist.

⁶⁴ Henri H. Stahl, political anthropologist, ethnographer, sociologist and social historian (born November 4, 1911, Bucharest – September 9, 1991). He is considered one of the greatest Romanian sociologists of all time. Graduated in Law, Philology and Philosophy in 1921, in the 1930s he became an assistant at the Department of Sociology at the University of Bucharest. He works closely with the head of this department, Professor Dimitrie Gusti, participating in a group of researchers with the aim of developing a series of pioneering monographs about the Romanian villages. After a difficult period, forced retirement, he returned to the Educational system in 1966. Until the end of his life, in 1991, he published a series of scientific books and studies. In 1990, he became a full member of the Romanian Academy, *Enciclopedia României [Encyclopedia of Romania]*, Entry on Henri H. Stahl, http://enciclopediaromaniei.ro/wiki/Henri_H._Stahl.

⁶⁵ Alexandru Mironescu, scientist, professor and philosopher (born July 10, 1907, Tecuci – January 20, 1973, Bucharest). Degree at the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Bucharest (1922-1926) and PhD at Sorbonne (1926-1929). Assistant and then Professor of Chemistry and Physics at the University of Bucharest (1929-1949). He is arrested and imprisoned between the years 1958-1963 due to his participation in the gatherings of

Being open to the general public, these meetings aimed at reaching holiness, a goal that went beyond the oppressive horizon of the 'times', pursuing a direct connection with Eternity.⁶⁷ The word 'vigil' was actually a synonym for the concept of 'vigilance' in the Church's Neptic and Hesychast tradition. People were called to wage war with themselves, that is, the unseen inner war, not with their peers, in order to acquire the purity and peace of the heart:

'Vigilance is the short saying appointed for concentration and spiritual prayer that gives us the opportunity to learn to fully experience the virtues of life in Christ. [...] It wants to be the courage and humility, to find ourselves in *our own unseen war*, which pushes and strives towards the spirit of the great Macarius. The purity of the heart - this is what leads to perfection.'⁶⁸

The conferences had an interdisciplinary character and were dedicated to several spiritual themes related to worship and the prayer of the heart, to the inner man and the ascetic struggle, to the meaning of spiritual guidance, to spiritual perfection or to the

the group of the "Burning Bush" group. He writes numerous poems, studies, essays and novels. Policarp Chițulescu, *Mărturisitori ai luminii isihaste. Rugul Aprins* [*Confessors of the hesychastic light. The Burning Bush*] (Bucharest: BASILICA Publishing House, 2017), 41-3.

⁶⁶ Father Benedict Ghiuș, (born October 21, 1904, Vrancea county – January 8, 1990, Cernica monastery). He studies at the Theological Seminary of Galați (1926-1927), at the Theological Faculties of Bucharest (1926-1927) and Strasbourg (1927-1932), and with a PhD in Theology in Bucharest (1946) with the title: *Doctrina răscumpărării în imnografia Bisericii* [*The doctrine of redemption in the hymnography of the Church*]. He is tonsured into monasticism at New Neamț monastery (1934) and is ordained hieromonk in 1936. Professor at the Bălți Theological Seminary (1938-1940) and priest at the patriarchal cathedral (1940-1944), he becomes an assistant in Mystical Theology at the Faculty of Theology from Bucharest between (1944-1948). He is arrested in 1958 and condemned along with other members of the "Burning Bush" group. After serving again at the Romanian Patriarchy between (1964-1974) he retires to monastery Cernica until the end of his life. Mircea Păcurariu, *Dicționarul Teologilor români*, 202.

⁶⁷ Antonie Plămădeală, *Rugul Aprins*, 26.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 26-7.

eschatological perspective of ecclesial life.⁶⁹ The proposal of these people of culture was therefore a culture of prayer, an engagement in the full life of the Church, an opening to God, a desire to enter into communion with Him by deepening the tradition of the Orthodox Church, through prayer.

In the fire of destruction and despair brought by the Second World War on the Eastern Front, as in other parts of the World, God will show his presence through different means for the support of the faithful to get through the ordeal of the war, but also for their spiritual strengthening to be able to pass through the difficult years that will come. Certain events will take place that will be crucial for the Orthodox Christians from Eastern Europe in the aftermaths of World War II. One of these events was for example the restoration of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1943. After over two decades of persecution and even the threat of extinction, the Russian Orthodox Church gained a new status⁷⁰ within the atheist Soviet state, becoming a precedent and a model regarding the State-Church relations that would be copied in other countries in Eastern Europe where communist regimes would be installed.

In December 1943, with the withdrawal of the Romanian Armies from the Eastern Front, an important figure of the hesychast tradition, father John Kulygin, known as father John the Stranger, a representative of the Optina spirituality, will arrive in Romania, along with the bishop Nikolai of Rostov, and will be received by Patriarch Nicodim in the Cernica monastery near Bucharest.⁷¹ His presence will prove crucial in the following years for the spiritual movement that was established in August 1943 at the Chernivtsi meeting.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁰ This status would of course be shaken at several points in the following decades, both within the Soviet Union and in communist Romania.

⁷¹ Adrian Nicolae Petcu, 'O cronologie a Rugului Aprins,' *Tabor* ['A chronology of the Burning Bush', in *Tabor Journal*] (Cluj Napoca: Mitropolia Clujului, Maramureşului şi Sălajului, 2013), 102-108; at 103.

The test of faith in the War. Saved by the Mother of God in World War II

Unfortunately, after the spiritual meeting in Chernivtsi, some participants, such as the poet Sandu Tudor, will have to return to the front. Being now called to fight for the second time in a World War, he ends up going through an experience from which he would not have escaped alive, had he not received help from Above, after praying.

‘During the war, at a school for military apprentices, he caught the platoon leader in charge of the canteen halving the students’ food. Sandu didn’t really joke about such things; severe remarks and threats... He was sleeping there at the school in a very small room. One evening, entering the room where the icon of the Burning Bush was, he has the idea to move the bed from the back of the room and place it on the other side. That night, a flurry of gunfire breaks the window and hits the very place where the bed had been; sixteen bullets were counted next to the window. Sandu was safe and sound...’⁷²

The episode experienced by Sandu Tudor is a testimony of the providential help that prayer can offer, of the care that the Mother of God shows for those who pray with faith to her and her Son. This moment, together with other events in his personal life, will lead Sandu Tudor to make a crucial decision by embracing the monastic path: ‘Demobilized in September 1944, he comes to Bucharest and, seeing his third marriage fail, he decides to start a new life, to which he gives himself with his whole being.’⁷³ From the fall of 1944, he began to attend the Antim monastery services in the center of Bucharest daily.

⁷² Alexandru Mironescu, *Floarea de Foc [The Fire Flower]* (Bucharest: Elion Publishing House, 2001), 192.

⁷³ Gheorghe Vasilescu, *Taina Rugului Aprins. Scrieri și documente inedite [The Mystery of the Burning Bush. Unpublished writings and documents]* ed. Gheorghe Vasilescu (Bucharest: Anastasia Publishing House, 1999), 8.

Antim monastery at the end of the Second World War. A hesychast missionary center in the heart of the capital

Towards the end of the War, in 1945, after the occupation of the Romanian territory by the Soviet Army and the reincorporation of the northeastern part of the country into the Soviet Union, the group of intellectuals who participated in the Conferences in Chernivtsi would find in the Antim Monastery in the center of Bucharest a new place of refuge and spiritual strengthening. Animated by an apostolic, missionary consciousness, they will want to help the Romanian society in a moment of great threat by preaching an old, but more relevant than ever solution – Orthodoxy. The leader of the group, Sandu Tudor, wrote then:

‘We are at a crossroads. A historical era has closed. A saving initiative is required... The initiative is favorable, more than ever, for a strong spiritual movement, to revive Romanian creative authenticity. All we have left is the use of deeper means, of the spiritual and true powers of the nation... This renaissance movement can only be according to Romanian nature and tradition: Orthodoxy.’⁷⁴

For the development of this movement, the first need was of the formation of an initial group,⁷⁵ an elite body of the Church that could further spread the light of the Orthodox Christian teaching strengthened by the power of the personal example of a life transfigured by the deep, authentic ecclesial experience.

The group of intellectuals which met at Chernivtsi will expand so that, besides scholars from various fields and disciplines such as literature, philosophy, physics, chemistry, medicine, plastic arts, architecture etc., important military figures as well as students from various faculties in Bucharest (Theology, Mathematics, Arts, History, Law, etc.) will also join the Antim meetings. The clergy of the monastery, numbering more than 40

⁷⁴ Daniil from Rarău (Sandu Tudor), *Ce e omul?* [What is man?], Second edition, eds. Alexandru Dimcea, Hristofora Moldoveanu (Bucharest: Christiana Publishing House, 2017), 18.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

monks,⁷⁶ hierodeacons and hieromonks, many of them coming from the territories which were incorporated into the Soviet Union, will gradually join this group, significantly contributing to the raising of the spiritual level of the conferences, the discussions and the meetings at Antim.

Some of the main lay members of the Burning Bush movement were the famous interwar poets Sandu Tudor and Vasile Voiculescu, Benedict Ghiuș, the chemist Alexandru Mironescu, the logician Anton Dimitriu with his assistant Andrei Scrima⁷⁷, the

⁷⁶ Vasile Vasilachi, *De la Antim la Pocrov. Mărturii [From Antim to Pokrov. Testimonies]* (Bucharest: Eikon Publishing House, 2015), 31.

⁷⁷ Andrei Scrima (1925, Gheorgheni- 2000 Bucharest), later known in the West as André Scrima, studied Philosophy at the University of Bucharest between 1944 and 1948. During this period, he was an honorary assistant to the professor of logic and history of philosophy, Anton Dumitriu. Between 1945 and 1956 he was an active member of the spiritual group "the Burning Bush". In 1948 he started undergraduate studies in Theology at the Theological Institute of Bucharest, with Father Prof. Dumitru Staniloae as his undergraduate supervisor. He retired in 1950 to Neamț Monastery in northern Romania where he became a novice and taught at the Superior Monastic Seminary in Neamț until 1952. In 1952 he left for Bucharest where he worked at the Patriarchate Library. He was tonsured a monk at the Slatina Monastery, during the abbotship of Father Cleopa. At a certain moment he brought his former logic professor Anton Dumitriu to the Slatina community to stay for period of time. As a translator of Patriarch Justinian Marina, he will had opportunity to receive a doctoral scholarship in India at the University of Benares in 1956. In 1959, he organizes the monastic community of Deir-el-Harf (Beirut, Lebanon). Between 1963 and 1965, he attends the sessions of the Second Vatican Council as the personal representative of the ecumenical patriarch Athenagoras I and mediates the subsequent meeting in Jerusalem between the ecumenical patriarch and the pope. He is a founding member (and vice-president between 1966-1968) of the International Academy of Religious Sciences in Brussels. In the same period, he was a professor of philosophy and religious sciences at the Dominican Studies Center "Le Saulchoir" in France (Essone) (1966-1968), and between 1968 and 1989 he teaches as a professor at the French University of Beirut. In these years he served as an abbot of the monastery of Deir-El-Harf, in Lebanon, on behalf of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. He returned to Romania after 1990 where he came in contact with some of the most well known figures of the Romanian

philosopher Mircea Vulcănescu, the byzantinologist Alexandru Elian, the painter and writer Olga Greceanu⁷⁸, the mathematicians Octav Onicescu and Dan Barbilian (known also as a poet under the pen name of Ion Barbu), the physicist Mihai Neculce, the architect Constantin Joja, the musician and composer Paul Constantinescu, the sculptor Mac Constantinescu, the literary critics Vladimir Streinu and Șerban Cioculescu and other important personalities of the interwar and post-war Romanian culture. Among the brothers of the monastery we mention Sofian Boghiu, Felix Dubneac and Nicodim Bujor and from the main student members we note here Roman Braga, Leonida Plămădeală (the future Metropolitan Antonie of Ardeal), Șerban Mironescu, Nicolae Bordașiu and others.

The general public in Bucharest will have the opportunity, as in Chernivtsi, to attend the meetings of the group, the Antim monastery thus becoming, for three years (1945-1948), a real spiritual center in the heart of the Romanian capital.

There were essentially three types of activities taking place during the Antim meetings. The most known were the conferences, which were held weekly on Thursday and Sunday afternoons in the library of the monastery.⁷⁹ The Thursday conferences were

Intelligentsia and collaborated with several cultural institutions. Among his writings, we mention here: 'L'avènement philocalique dans l'orthodoxie roumaine' (*Istina*, 1958, nr. 3-4, Paris), 'Réflexions sur les rythmes et la fonction de la tradition athonite', 'Les Roumains et le Mont Athos,' (in the volume *Le Millénaire du Mont Athos, 963-1963. Etudes et melanges*, II, Chevetogne, 1965). 'The Hesychastic Tradition: an Orthodox-Christian Way of Contemplation' (in the volume *Contemplation and Action in World Religions*, A Rothko Chapel Book, Houston, 1977-1978). See André Scrima, *Timpul Rugului Aprins. Maestrul spiritual în tradiția răsăriteană [The Time of the Burning Bush. The Spiritual Master in the Eastern Tradition]*, Preface Andrei Pleșu, Editor Anca Manolescu (Bucharest: Humanitas Publishing House, 2012), and Maxim Morariu, 'Părintele Andrei Scrima,' Sept. 9, 2020, <https://radiorenasterea.ro/parintele-andrei-scrima/>.

⁷⁸ Representative of the neobyzantine style in Romanian contemporary painting. For more details about the lives of the members of the Burning Bush movement see Policarp Chițulescu, *Mărturisitori ai luminii isihaste. Rugul Aprins [Confessors of the hesychastic light. The Burning Bush]* (Bucharest: BASILICA Publishing House, 2017).

⁷⁹ Plămădeală, *Rugul Aprins*, 14.

addressed to the narrow circle of members of the Antim group, while the Sunday conferences were open to the general Bucharest public, being followed by discussions held in an apologetic and at the same time irenic spirit, devoid of polemics towards other confessions or cults.⁸⁰ The topics of the speeches and discussions on Thursday evening varied, from pure theological, to cultural-artistic or scientific themes.⁸¹ In the cases when the topic did not have direct links with the religious field, the aim was to facilitate the meeting and communion between people in the forecourt of the church.

In order to deepen the Orthodox faith, the coordinators of the movement chose the hesychast path of the Church's tradition. From the very first conferences, the importance given to orthodox hesychastic anthropology as a necessary premise on the road to self-knowledge and God-knowledge can be observed. The first of these conferences, titled 'Journey to the place of the heart', was held by the main coordinator of the group from Antim, Sandu Tudor, who meanwhile became a brother of the monastery. In one of his later writings, Sandu Tudor will note about this topic: 'Do not look anywhere outside, look only within yourself. He is not far from anyone. Just find the holy place in your heart. There you will talk with God. Here is the chamber of God's reception, in which the Lord says we must enter and lock ourselves, when we want to pray. It is the Holy of Holies of the human soul.'⁸²

The second conference was that of Alexandru Mironescu, entitled 'Self-discovery', and the third was the conference of Father Benedict Ghiuș, the second mentor of the movement from Antim, with the title 'Inner life in the light of the Liturgy.'⁸³

These meetings were accompanied by an intense liturgical life within the Antim monastery. Collective prayer was intertwined with personal prayer. Every day at the Antim monastery the Holy Liturgy and the daily cycle of services were celebrated and also

⁸⁰ Vasilescu, *Taina Rugului Aprins*, 14.

⁸¹ Vasilachi, *De la Antim la Pocrov. Mărturii*, 230-31.

⁸² Daniil Tudor (Sandu Tudor), *Caiete 2. Sfințita Rugăciune [Notebooks 2. The Holy Prayer]* (Bucharest: Christiana Publishing House, 2009), 191.

⁸³ Daniil Tudor (Sandu Tudor), *Scrieri 1 [Writings 1]* (Bucharest: Christiana Medical Philanthropic Association, 1999), 11.

every week night vigils were held. The members of the group from Antim prepared for the participation in the joint services through the secret, individual work of the monological prayer, through 'silent prayer exercises, sometimes under guidance and with some explanations'⁸⁴, in a secluded setting in one of the chapels of the monastery.

The spiritual guidance of Fr. John the Stranger. The Akathist Hymn of the Burning Bush of the Mother of God

In the beginning, on the path of spiritual ascent, inner war and hesychastic prayer, the members of the Antim group had as guides only a limited number of ascetic and philokalic texts available at that time. It was in those first years after the war when father Dumitru Stăniloae, who would later join the meetings from Antim, began the translation of the Romanian Philokalia. For the consolidation of the movement from the Antim monastery, an experienced spiritual guide was now needed, a bearer of the heart's prayer who would guide them safely along this path called by the philokalic fathers 'the art of the arts'. The work of the Divine Providence will be felt afterwards with the coming at Antim monastery, at the end of 1945, of the Russian father John Kulygin, bearer of the hesychastic tradition from the Optina monastery from Russia.

The hesychast program from Antim was thus enriched with a method of transmission of the Prayer specific to the Russian spiritual tradition, a tradition which was rooted in the Paisianism of the Neamț monastery in Romania. In addition to the tradition of saying the prayer, besides useful words and testimonies about the spiritual life in the Russian space, Father John contributed to the meetings at Antim by offering to the group two leading texts containing the teachings of old and also more recent Fathers of the Church about the work of the mind and the prayer of the heart, the *Sbornic* from the Valaam monastery and *The Russian Pilgrim*⁸⁵.

⁸⁴ Plămădeală, *Rugul Aprins*, 14.

⁸⁵ See *Sbornicul. Culegere despre Rugăciunea lui Iisus*, Vol. I. *Lucrarea minții. Despre rugăciunea lui Iisus* [*Sbornic. Collection on the Jesus Prayer*,

The *Sbornic* will prove both to the early members of the Burning Heart and to their spiritual disciples afterwards a veritable manual of the heart prayer, a thorough means of attaining deliverance from sin and the freedom of the heart. The book describes the methods used by the Neptic Fathers of the Church to fulfill the urge of Saint Apostle Paul from *I Thessalonians* 5, 16 regarding the unceasing prayer. It shows also the steps and the spiritual fruits of this prayer. As authentic fruits of the unceasing prayer of the heart are mentioned the inner burning and joy brought by the grace of the Holy Spirit with which the soul is united.

Sandu Tudor will describe this state of the soul with very vivid words:

‘To pray properly, in spirit and in truth, means to burn endlessly in the light of God’s glory. To pray endlessly to God means to set yourself on fire in all ways, and for all the reasons of your life, to be yourself only flame and ember and again flame for Him. The Lord is the Comforter. To burn unceasingly consuming yourself for Him, passing through the whole wheel of all possibilities, to thus fulfill in your burning the crown of fiery love of God.’⁸⁶

The Mother of God will be chosen as the spiritual protector of the group, who in the Russian Hesychast tradition is seen as a symbol of the unceasing prayer.⁸⁷ A second Icon of the Mother of God ‘the Burning Bush’, brought by father John from Russia, will accompany every meeting of the members from Antim from now on.⁸⁸ At the beginning of 1946, some of the members of the Burning Bush group made several approaches to the authorities for the establishment of the association with the name ‘The Burning Bush of the Mother of God’, and in the same year Sandu Tudor started writing an Akathist Hymn dedicated to the Mother of God, inspired

Vol. I. The Work of the Mind. About the Jesus prayer] (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea Publishing House, 2000).

⁸⁶ Tudor, *Caiete 2. Sfințita Rugăciune* [Notebooks 2. The Holy Prayer], 13.

⁸⁷ Vasilescu, *Taina Rugului Aprins*, 9.

⁸⁸ Nicolae Bordașiu, Interview granted on October 17, 2016, Personal archive.

by the teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas regarding the Theotokos, who is described as a model and initiator of hesychasm.

This Akathist will represent a constant reading in the meetings of the Burning Bush group until the arrest of its leading members in 1958, having both a didactic, theological role, and also a spiritual one, constituting a real nourishment for the soul in those years of spiritual drought brought by the communist atheism.

According to the poet Sandu Tudor, the kontakia and the oikoi of the Akathist form a cycle of hymnological icons,⁸⁹ Hymnology is seen as a theology in act. The Akathist is actually a mystical treatise⁹⁰ thought out in a completely original form. It describes a scale with 24 steps that includes 3 octaves associated with each of the 3 great steps in the ascent towards Christian perfection described by the great mystics of the Orthodox Church: the stage of purification, of the enlightenment and that of union.⁹¹ The Akathist is compared with the Ladder of Jacob from the Old Testament and has here a double perspective, indicating on the one hand the effort of the prayerer to undergo, through the help of the Holy Spirit, the three specific stages of the mystical theology of the Church, and on the other, the process by which the divine grace descends over the prayerer.

The process of purification begins with the struggle against passions, temptations and with the quieting of thoughts. Throughout all these stages, the Most Holy Theotokos helps as a true Mother and Spiritual Guide: 'How to find rest from thoughts?/ Virgin Mother, Most Holy Virgin!/ How to break from the lines of passions, the endless temptations that surround us?/ Make yourself for us the longed for "saying", "the good mastery of spiritualization". Through it, let's overcome our enslaved nature, until we obtain the freedom from passions.'⁹² The Mother of God becomes for us

⁸⁹ About hymnological icons see the study of Constantin Jinga, 'Icoana imnologică,' in *Ieroschimonahul Daniil Sandu Tudor. Omul și opera* ['The hymnological icon,' in *Hieroschemamonk Daniil Sandu Tudor. The man and the work*] (București: Christiana Publishing House, 2005), 201.

⁹⁰ Daniil from Rărau (Sandu Tudor), 'Acatistul Rugului Aprins,' in *Acatiste* ['The Akathist of the Burning Bush,' in *Akathists*], The cited edition, 188.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 158.

‘vigilance’ (nepsis), spiritual ‘attention’ and above all the ‘salt of repentance’, indispensable weapons in the effort of purification according to Ascetic Fathers of the Church:

‘To You again, here I have rushed!/ I am torn by the world, crushed by thoughts./ [...] the idol of dust, my thought/ does not allow me respite to conquer myself,/ to make from prayer the baptismal font of God/ for the breaking of the heart that I yearn for./ Therefore help me, my Helper/ and give me the gift of tears, the salt of repentance/ so that I wash away with them the spirit of incapableness.’⁹³

As an initiator of hesychasm in the history of salvation, the Mother of God proves to be the best guide in the mastery of hesychasm. Sandu Tudor calls her ‘the very craft of hesychia’. In this sense, the Mother of God is also a source of ‘endless prayer’. Each of the oikoi of this Akathist Hymn ends with the ephymnion: ‘Rejoice, bride, weaver of endless prayer’.

Through the cleansing of passions, the soul reaches a ‘peace freed from all the dust of thought’⁹⁴ and a state of ‘luminous apathy’⁹⁵. Having reached the stage of enlightenment, the soul praises the Mother of God with thankfulness: ‘Rejoice, enlightenment from the heart that art unrevealable.’⁹⁶ The prayer then starts being uttered constantly in the soul of the prayerer, like a ‘timepiece’. Incessant prayer is actually a charisma offered by God that manifests itself as a continuous ‘inner hymn’⁹⁷.

After reaching the stage of perfection, the soul is likened to a Burning Bush.⁹⁸ The life of Lord Christ becomes now the life of the prayerer: ‘I am waiting for the divine hearing, sight and speech to fill me. In me from now on let only these be uttered./ And my Beloved, Himself, the heavenly Jesus,/ may He see, speak and understand/ through my very sight, hearing and whole will./ Christ

⁹³ Ibid., 177.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 181.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 158.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 181.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 170.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 192.

so live/ through all my power/ for the Lord Himself to shout through me: Alleluia!’⁹⁹

The hesychast ascension leads the soul to the ‘pure Gnosis’¹⁰⁰ that the Mother of God experienced in the Holy of Holies.¹⁰¹ Full of the gift of the Holy Spirit, the soul lives completely in the communion of the Holy Trinity: ‘And you will reach so high-resonant and appropriate/ like a trumpet of praise in which angels have spoken./ And you will be tender in feelings like the flower of righteous Jesse/ which trembles in expectation of The Three.’¹⁰²

The intensification of the hesychastic life within the Antim monastery with the arrival of the Russian father will lead to the creation of a special spiritual atmosphere. ‘The father’s appearance among us was a capital, decisive event; his presence triggered a kind of celebration, a spiritual feast.’¹⁰³ Although he was a foreigner, father John helped the people of Antim to understand more deeply the mystery of the unity and ecumenicity of the Church of Christ. Having found true communion with God in the hesychast tradition of Optina monastery, he had the possibility to teach people the road to realizing true communion between one another.

The road to true sobornicity (togetherness) and ecumenical communion, Sandu Tudor would later say, has its origins in a hesychast type of life, in the chamber of the heart of the hesychasts: ‘There, in the chamber of your prayer, the true, sobornic life takes shape and begins, [...], there we also find the other yous: our brothers; only from such a fruitful self-conquest, the “Sobornic Church”¹⁰⁴ is founded, the ecumenical communion, the union and unity of all in Christ.’¹⁰⁵ Through sobornicity peace with the other

⁹⁹ Ibid., 179.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 183.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 180.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Șerban Mironescu, ‘Rugul Aprins, un mod de a retrăi ortodoxia,’ in *Memoria, Revista gândirii arestate* [‘The Burning Bush, a way to relive orthodoxy,’ in *Memoria, The Journal of the Arrested Thinking*], no. 62, 1/ (2008) (Bucharest: Memoria Cultural Foundation), 60-7; at 64.

¹⁰⁴ The expression ‘Sobornic Church’ appears in the translation from Romanian and the Slavonic languages of the expression ‘katholike Ekklesia’ (‘catholic Church’) from the Nicene Creed.

¹⁰⁵ Tudor, *Caiete 2. Sfînțita Rugăciune* [Notebooks 2. *The Holy Prayer*], 80.

is achieved inside the community and the communion of the Church and it represents a vital stage for realizing true peace in society among people.

Unfortunately, father John the Stranger will be the first to be persecuted by the new occupation regime, being arrested and deported to the USSR at the beginning of 1947. Anticipating this, the spiritual father of the Antim group prepared and left as spiritual successors Father Benedict Ghiuș, Fr. Sofian Boghiu and brother Sandu Tudor. This spiritual heritage will represent the basis for spreading the hesychastic light of the Burning Bush during the period of persecution that will begin with the full establishment of the communist regime in Romania.

Experiencing the freedom of grace in communist prisons. The legacy of the Burning Bush

Starting in 1948, after the abolition of the monarchy and the proclamation of the Romanian People's Republic, the communist regime launched a systematic persecution against all those considered enemies of the regime. Moreover, towards the end of the 50s, the regime started an open war with the Orthodox Church, by arresting a large number of clerics and believers and by issuing the famous decree 410 that led to the decimation of Romanian monasticism.

Almost all the members of the Antim community would be subjected one by one to communist persecution during the period 1948-1964. Resistance in the fire of tribulation, in this external war waged against Christians, depended on the effort made by each one in his inner war against sin and passion, in order to obtain personal enlightenment and holiness. The hardest challenge was the prison experience. Sandu Tudor, who became Father Agaton after his entering into monasticism, and later Father Daniel, after his tonsure in the big scheme, was imprisoned twice in the communist Gulag, in the period 1950-1952, respectively 1958-1962. Ioanichie Bălan said that 'Prison was, for Father Daniil and for all those who suffered in the name of Christ, the highest school of repentance and

spiritual growth in their lives.’¹⁰⁶ Many have managed to cross the road from the mind to the heart in prison and receive the prayer of the heart as a gift from God.¹⁰⁷ In the absence of physical freedom, they managed to acquire the inner freedom offered by God. After overcoming their own spiritual battle, the members of the Burning Bush were able to spread the light of peace in the hearts of the other prisoners, becoming the apostles of true freedom in Christ: ‘Sandu Tudor passed through the prisons like a meteor. He ignited the hearts and left them light.’¹⁰⁸

Towards the end of the 50s, the main figures of the Burning Bush movement are imprisoned. Even if their endeavor was of spiritual nature, they were accused by the communist authorities of plotting against the regime: ‘You wanted to set fire to communism with your Burning Bush,’¹⁰⁹ said a questioner to the leader of the movement, Sandu Tudor. The fire of prayer that the members of the Burning Bush had lit was not directed against the communist authorities, but was intended to become a light that can ‘shine before others’¹¹⁰ in the spiritual darkness that befell upon the country with the coming of the new regime. With their imprisonment the light of this hesychastic spiritual movement would shine among hundreds and thousands of inmates in the communist prisons. ‘The arrival of the fathers from Burning Bush in the prison was like a revival, like a spiritual revitalization for all the inmates.’¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Ioanichie Bălan, *Patericul Românesc [The Romanian Patericon]*, 5th Ed. (Sihăstria Monastery Publishing House, 2005), 618.

¹⁰⁷ Dinu Cruga, *Trepte duhovnicești. Interviu cu Părintele Roman Braga [Spiritual steps. Interview with Father Roman Braga]* (Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea Publishing House, 2016), 64.

¹⁰⁸ Nicolae Grebenea, *Amintiri din întuneric [Memories from the Darkness]*, Vol. I (București: Blassco, 2018), 404.

<http://www.marturisitorii.ro/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Nicolae-Grebenea-Amintiri-din-intuneric.pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ Silviu Aroneț, ‘Starețul Daniil Tudor - Floarea de foc a Ortodoxiei,’ *Din temnițe spre Sinaxare* [‘Elder Daniil Tudor – The fire flower of Orthodoxy,’ in *From the prisons to the Synaxaria*], 5th Edition, ed. Danion Vasile (Bucharest: Areopag Publishing House, 2023), 115-25; at 123.

¹¹⁰ Matthew 5, 16.

¹¹¹ Bordașiu, Interview granted on October 17, 2016.

A bright example of the communist prisons is the martyrdom of Mircea Vulcănescu, one of the members of the Burning Bush movement, who died in Aiud prison, sacrificing his health to save one of his fellow prisoners and leaving as a testament for the following generations the irenic urge 'Do not avenge us!'¹¹², a calling that could only spring from a heart in which the peace of Christ had settled.

The coordinator of the Burning Bush movement, Daniil Sandu Tudor, would fulfill the path of his life through martyrdom, passing away on the night of November 17, 1962, at the prison of Aiud, following violent beatings from the prison administration. However, the gentle flame of the Burning Bush movement did not go out with this moment. After the great release of the political prisoners in 1964, the remaining members of the movement passed on this spiritual inheritance inconspicuously through samizdat writings, through friendship and spiritual ties and through keeping the memory of those who passed away in Christ in the prisons. Spiritual families were created around the fathers of the Burning Bush. Until the end of the communist period countless souls will be helped in this way to acquire the light and peace of Christ.

Conclusions

As we have seen in this article, war represents a complex phenomenon that has its roots in the spiritual realm. The Orthodox Theology shows that the war is a result of the problematic relationship between man and God, between man and the other fellow people, between man and his own self because of sin.

The Romanian space, which has witnessed the horrors of World War II and of the Communist regime imposed by the Soviet occupier, has also witnessed the emergence of a spiritual movement that has attempted to face war through the means offered by the tradition of the Orthodox Church.

¹¹² Monica Patriche, 'Să nu ne răzbunați!', *Ziarul Lumina* ['Do not avenge us!', in *Lumina Newspaper*], Electronic edition, January 9, 2009, <https://ziarulumina.ro/educatie-si-cultura/interviu/sa-nu-ne-razbunati-49647.html>.

'The Burning Bush of the Mother of God' was a Romanian hesychast movement constituted from intellectuals, clerics and monks, who had tried to provide an answer, a real spiritual therapy for a real solution of conflicts, for healing the diseases that led to war and the wounds and new diseases brought by the communist atheist regime, by existentially assuming the ecclesial way of life.

The contact with war, with the terror of history, was an occasion for the members of the Burning Bush to cultivate an eschatological consciousness. Some members of this group, like father Daniil Sandu Tudor, who experienced as a young officer the horrors of the First World War, have acquired an eschatological awareness before the outbreak of the Second World War. This awareness lit up in his soul a missionary consciousness, an authentic philanthropic approach towards his fellow men in the spirit of the Orthodox Church. After his visit to Mount Athos in 1929 Sandu Tudor has seen hesychasm as the way that the Romanian people could be helped to face the problems and the terror of history and to acquire spiritual progress. After the breakout of the Second World War, many of his friends joined him in his spiritual endeavor. Thus, the Burning Bush spiritual movement was established at the Antim Monastery in Bucharest at the beginning of 1945, after a first meeting at Chernivtsi in August 1943.

Through the hesychast experience the members of the Burning Bush movement had worked, on a personal and collective level, on restoring their relationship with God, with their own selves and with their neighbors, with their fellow men. Initially, their support consisted of texts of the Neptic and the Philokalic Fathers of the Church. Through the help of the Divine Providence, they had the occasion to encounter afterwards an authentic spiritual father, John Kulygin, from the renowned Russian monastery of Optina, who initiated them in the art of the prayer of the heart. Father John the Stranger helped the peaceful community from Antim to grow and become a representative example of the ecumenicity of the Orthodox Church. Paradoxically, the unity and togetherness of the pleroma of the Church starts from the mysterious work of purification through prayer in the hearts of the hesychasts. In the path towards purification and the endless prayer the members of

the Antim movement took as a Spiritual Guide the Mother of God, the Theotokos, which represented a model for all the hesychasts.

The persecution brought about by the Communist regime determined the members of the Burning Bush to deepen also a martyrical consciousness. Many of them were sent to prison, a place of torture and isolation, but a place where they have gained true inner freedom in Christ through the Jesus prayer. They have spread the gentle fire of the grace of the Holy Spirit and enlightened other fellow inmates and also converted and brought peace to their persecutors. Through martyrdom some of the members of the Burning Bush testified about the peace of Christ that had settled in their souls and this peace became like a testament for the following generations. The spiritual inheritance of the Burning Bush movement was passed away, after the great release of the prisoners in 1964, mainly through the spiritual families created around the main figures of the movement and through the careful spread of spiritual writings. In a period where atheism reigned over the country the members of the Burning Bush movement preached discreetly through their own lives the message of peace and unity between people in Christ.

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