

Hesychasm, the Jesus Prayer and the contemporary spiritual revival of Mount Athos

- Master's Thesis -

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Introduction

The monastic peninsula of Mount Athos¹ in Northern Greece is today one of the most vivid spiritual sites in the Eastern Orthodox world. Its history, according to tradition, stretches back to the beginnings of Christianity. For more than a thousand years², the peninsula has continuously hosted monastic life.

Meanwhile, outside the Holy Mountain, the Eastern Orthodox Church has experienced quite a tumultuous history, including a schism with Rome, the fall of the Byzantine Empire, almost 500 years of *Turcocracy*³ (except for the Russian Church), the emergence of national orthodox churches, two World Wars, persecution from communist regimes and, to some extent, secularization. During all these centuries, men⁴ continued to come to this place in search for stillness and spiritual perfection. Athos is today, alongside Jerusalem, the most popular destination for orthodox pilgrims. This is very much due to the overwhelming historical, artistic, and spiritual richness of the site: one can find true Byzantine fortresses there, hosting chapels that are architectural masterpieces, with beautiful frescoes and numerous holy relics and miracle-working icons.

The charm of Mount Athos doesn't only come from the past, but also from the present; it is not so much caused by old buildings and relics as it is by people. More than two thousand monks, mostly young men, populate the peninsula today, living either in one of the 20 monasteries or in one of the many *sketes*⁵ and countless *cells*⁶. It is their choice for an absolute way of life that makes everything about Mount Athos so special and spectacular. It is the monks' ability to offer pilgrims impeccable hospitality, while not losing focus on their own spiritual progress, which attracts hundreds of people to the Holy Mountain every day. Contemporary Athos is truly bursting with spiritual life.

With all these positive remarks, one may be tempted to believe that things have always been like that. Interestingly enough, only fifty years ago, the state of affairs was quite the opposite: Mount Athos was dying rapidly. The total number of monks had declined from more than 7000 to a little over 1000 in the span of just a few decades, reaching a minimum of 1145 in 1971. Not only had the monks grown fewer, but they had also grown older, becoming less able to work and support themselves. With many houses closing down and being deserted due to shortage of personnel, the landscape

¹ Various terms are employed in literature and throughout this paper to designate the same monastic peninsula: Mount Athos, The Holy Mountain, Holy Mount of Athos, The Mountain, Athos.

² The official foundation of the first monastery, the Great Lavra, is dated in 963, but tradition places the beginnings of religious life on Athos as early as the first century.

³ Turcocracy: the period of Ottoman (Turkish) rule.

⁴ Women have traditionally been prohibited from entering Mount Athos, for both pilgrimage and monastic life.

⁵ Skete: a monastic village or group of houses gathered around a central church, dependent upon a ruling monastery (Speake: 276).

⁶ Cell: apart from the standard meaning, that of a monk's room, a cell might also refer to a separate monastic house with a chapel and several rooms, inhabited by up to seven monks (Speake: 276).

was desolating and predictions were gloomy: the fabulous one thousand years history of the place would soon come to an end, within one generation.

In 1972 the total number of monks rose by one, from 1145 to 1146. Although frail, this was the first growth in decades and it would announce the positive pattern of the years to follow, leading to the spectacular reversal of the Athonite fate and the repopulation of the monasteries with relatively young brotherhoods.

A **preliminary research question** of this thesis concerns the causes of this phenomenon: how was the revival possible, with all the odds apparently against it, and what were its main causes?

The topic is not new and it has been puzzling observers for a while⁷. Beyond the obvious external factors – social, political, and economical – two main causes of the revival have been identified. Firstly, there's the organizational shift undergone by the most important monasteries, from the looser *idiorrhhythmic*⁸ monastic lifestyle, which had served as a survival mode during the centuries of Turcocracy, to the stricter and more traditional *cenobitic*⁹ system (Makarios 2004, 264-72; Speake 2014, 159).

Secondly and equally important is the emergence of an exceptional generation of fathers possessing the gift of *eldership*, from both within (most of them former disciples of Elder Joseph the Hesychast) and outside Athos. Once appointed as abbots of the big monasteries and sketes, through their personal charisma and reputation, they were capable of attracting many young novices, thus reigniting the sparkle of monasticism and injecting fresh blood to the dying Athonite peninsula (Ware 1993, 131; Makarios 2004, 253-64; Speake 2014, 155).

The unanimous consensus seems to be that the revival is nothing else but a return to normality, a very natural step in the cyclical history of the Holy Mountain. Speake (2014, 7) describes it as

‘in no sense a reform, but simply yet another manifestation of the Mountain regenerating itself in the way it has always done – from within.’

But is it really so? While the two above-mentioned reasons make a strong case, they hardly suffice to account for the complexity of the phenomenon. The conversion to cenobitism may have played an important part, but it would be far too simple to give it the full credit, especially since cenobitism, in its traditional form, had its own problems of suitability to the contemporary age, as it will be shown further in the paper. The same

⁷ The most extensive work explicitly dedicated to the Athonite revival is Graham Speake's award winning book, *Mount Athos – Renewal in Paradise*, published by the Yale University Press in 2002 and republished by Denise Harvey in 2014: 'Describing this revival is my first and principal motive for writing this book' (6). Other articles or chapters having the revival as their central topic are Makarios (2004), Maximos (2015) and Ware (1983).

⁸ Idiorrhhythmic system: the system by which monks were allowed to set their own pattern, not being bound by the vows of poverty or obedience to an abbot, and living in separate apartments, retaining their own goods, not eating together nor contributing to a common purse (Speake 2014, 275).

⁹ Cenobitic system: the system by which monks live a common life of worship and eating together, contributing to the common purse, in spiritual obedience to an abbot (Speake 2014, 275).

is true for the *charismatic*¹⁰ elders. They may have provided the initial impulse, but their individual charisma cannot be made fully responsible either. The fact that the revival is still happening, even after their generation has stepped out of the picture, serves as a proof. Furthermore, while fully endorsing the hypothesis of them having a decisive contribution to the revival, the concrete manner in which they were able to make it possible still awaits further investigation.

Both the causes and the very essence of the revival seem therefore to be suffering from a lack of understanding and this constitutes the **research problem** to be explored in the present thesis.

When looking for more satisfactory answers – both through the study of the sources and through a direct observation of the recent Athonite developments – one comes across a parallel revival, that of the practices of hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer. At the beginning of the 20th century they seemed almost lost in oblivion, exiled to the most remote hermitages of the Holy Mountain. However, starting with the 6th decade of the century, remarkably simultaneously with the revival studied in this paper, they gradually came back to light and gained ground, to the extent that they are today central to the Athonite spirituality and praxis, and not only in the hermitages, but in the big monasteries as well.

A reasonable **research hypothesis** is that the two revivals are not independent from one another. It is very likely that they share not only a similar timeline, but also some of the same core causes. The **main question** of the thesis can thus be formulated as follows: what is the connection between the contemporary Athonite revival and the resurgence of hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer?

A deeper analysis will reveal that when the young brotherhoods – formed in the semi-eremitic sketes, around the charismatic figures previously mentioned – moved in the quasi-deserted monasteries, they brought along their hesychast tradition, consisting of a life centered around the elder and the Jesus Prayer. The appropriation and implementation of this semi-eremitical program by the monasteries is, in fact – as it will be argued throughout this paper – the missing link between the generation of the charismatic fathers, the conversion to cenobitism, and the revival that continues up to the present day. The result of this transformation can be seen today in most of the monasteries and big sketes. It is a mixture of communal life and hesychast practices that, until recently, used to be characteristic only to the hermits: a mutated, *hesychastic cenobitism*¹¹.

¹⁰ The word *charismatic* is used here with both its two meanings:

- exercising a compelling charm which inspires devotion in others;
- possessor of spiritual gifts (charismas).

¹¹ The expression, though reversed, belongs to Archimandrite Cherubim Karambelas. He refers to the monks of Konstamonitou as cenobitic hesychasts: 'it [the monastery of Konstamonitou] is hesychastic because of the venerable fathers and brothers who live there. Both the place and their manner of life make them genuine cenobitic hesychasts.' (Karambelas 1992, 591).

The primary **aim of this research** is to contribute to a better understanding of the causes and the nature of the contemporary revival. However, if the hypothesis is confirmed and the Athonite revival is indeed so closely connected to the export of the hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer from the desert to the crowded coenobia, then the phenomenon becomes that much more interesting. In such a case, the Holy Mountain would become the stage where the first phase of a much bigger process takes place, namely the 'globalization of hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer' (Johnson 2010). The relevance of studying how the hesychast practices are transformed when shifted from their primary setting, and how they, in turn, transform their new settings, would then transcend the boundaries of Orthodox Christianity and even those of monasticism, providing a valuable input to the wider debate over the globalization and appropriation of religious traditions.

The structure of the paper will closely follow the flow of the **research questions** and the reasoning of the argumentation. For a good comprehension of the contemporary revival, one must first understand the course of events that led to the state of decay so acutely felt during the 1950s and 1960s. The most relevant questions to be answered are: how did Athonite monasticism come into being; how did the tumultuous history of the peninsula influence the specificity of Athonite monasticism; what are the characteristic features of monasticism on the Holy Mountain; what are hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer and what are their historical connections to Mount Athos; finally, what are the main causes and manifestations of the 20th century decline? The first chapter will try to tap into these questions, by sketching a brief history of monasticism on the Holy Mountain from its foundation to the 20th century (1.1). The main concepts – hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer – are then defined (1.2), followed by an analysis of the causes behind the striking decay of the last century and a description of the Athonite landscape on the brink of extinction (1.3).

The second chapter will present the history of the revival, from both the quantitative (2.1) and the qualitative (2.2) points of view: what do the raw demographic figures tell us; who are the new monks and when have they repopulated the monasteries; what are the most visible manifestations of the revival, both in the material and the spiritual realms? In the last part of the chapter, the main external causes of the phenomenon will be discussed (2.3).

Since all the sources point to Elder Joseph the Hesychast as being the main architect of the revival – though indirectly, through his few disciples – a more consistent analysis will not be possible without answering some key questions regarding the teaching of the Elder and the ethos of his small brotherhood: how does his biography influence his choices of monastic lifestyle; what are the peculiarities of his teaching; how is his approach in leading a monastic brotherhood different from his contemporaries'; where in the teaching passed on to his disciples can the seeds of the later revival be found? All these will be dealt with throughout the third chapter.

The fourth chapter will tackle the core issues of the study. It will start by demonstrating the insufficiency of what are unanimously considered to be the main internal causes (4.1) An alternative answer to the research question will then be formulated, the so-called hesychastic cenobitism, a model that synthetizes the hesychast centrality of the practice of the Jesus Prayer and the cenobitic emphasis on the communal liturgical celebration, both under the overarching concept of the elevation of the role of the spiritual father (4.2). The following subchapters will pursue the transmission of the *Josephine* model from the desert to the coenobia, dealing with the challenges raised by the mixture of the two types of monasticism: is it really possible to maintain a state of continuous prayer and experience true contemplation while still having a relatively active social life (4.3); how can the intense life of private prayer be combined with the busy cenobitic liturgical routine (4.4.1, 4.4.2); how can a model based on stillness and close supervision by the master function in the crowded environment of a coenobium (4.4.3); what are the arguments used by critics against such a model (4.5)?

As far as methodology is concerned, this research makes use of arguments derived from both literature¹² and direct observation made by the author, in his several visits to Athos during the past ten years. Besides the scientific secondary literature used, there are also many sources belonging to the biographical, epistolary or testimonial literary genres: biographies, letters, diaries or transcripts of interviews.

¹² For the sources in Greek, Romanian translations have been used when no English, French or other translation was available or handy.

1. Athos, hesychasm, the Jesus Prayer and the 20th century decay

1.1. Athos from its foundation to the 20th century

The two processes marking the history of the Holy Mountain during the past century – the steep decline of the first half and the impressive revival in the second – seem to be symmetrical and equally spectacular. However, before rushing to analyze their development, it is necessary to firstly understand the basic characteristics of Athonite monasticism, embedded in a brief presentation of its history.

According to tradition, the history of monasticism on Athos – one of the three “fingers” of the Chalkidiki peninsula, in Northern Greece – starts in the first century CE, with the visit of Virgin Mary, whose boat is brought to Athos by a sudden storm, which deflects it from a journey between Palestine and Cyprus. As she sets foot in the port of Clementos, which hosts a temple and an oracle of Apollo, a voice is heard from all the idols of the place and above all from the statue of Apollo, calling the Athonites to descend to the harbor and worship the Mother of Christ, the only true God. All the inhabitants are baptized and the Holy Mother of God proclaims the Mountain to be hers, blessing the place and all the dwellers on it (Sherrard 1960, 5).

The same tradition places the arrival on Athos of the first monks in the 4th century, when emperor Constantine the Great builds there three great churches, on sites that are presently occupied by the monasteries of Vatopedi, Iviron, and the church of the Protaton in Karyes. Ever since, the Virgin is believed to have continued to visit the Holy Mountain and reveal herself as its patron and protector. The Holy Mountain is still considered the garden of the Mother of God (*Panaghia*) (Speake 2014, 22). She is the abbess of the whole mountain and every monastery and skete has one or more miracle-working icons of hers.

Although hermits might have lived on Athos before the ninth century, there is hardly any strong historical evidence supporting it (Amand de Mendieta 1972, 55). The first quasi-reliable source – the chronicler Genesios – mentions a group of Athonite monks in 843, participating in the procession on the streets of Constantinople, which marks the Triumph of Orthodoxy against iconoclasm (Speake 2014, 40). Among the 9th century Athonites known by name are St Euthymios the Younger, John Kolobos and St Peter the Athonite.

The official founder of Athonite monasticism is considered to be St Athanasios the Athonite. In 963, with imperial help from Constantinople, he lays the foundation of the first monastery, the Great Lavra. In spite of its name¹³, the new monastery is fully

¹³ ‘A “lavra” is a cluster of little huts, each occupied by several ascetics, and grouped round a church.’ (Amand de Mendieta 1972, 56). St Athanasios is himself a “lavriot” by formation, starting his monastic profession in the lavra of Mount Kyminas in Bithynia, Asia Minor.

cenobitic, following the model of the Stoudios monastery of St John the Baptist in Constantinople.

This new model, with its imposing buildings, wealth and political connections, is seen at first as a threat and rejected by the hermits, but the conflict is settled by the issuing of an imperial document – the so-called *Tragos* – by emperor John Tzimiskes in 972. The document, signed by Athanasios, as abbot of the Great Lavra, alongside 46 other abbots, represents the first *Typikon*¹⁴, and it regulates monastic and administrative issues. The Holy Mountain is placed under the direct jurisdiction of the emperor. The abbots (*hegumenoï*) have the right to elect their own primate (*protos*), who is then confirmed by the emperor¹⁵.

Following the same model, four more monasteries are founded until the year 1000: Iviron, Vatopedi, Xiropotamou and the Latin monastery of the Amalfitans (Benedictine, absorbed by Great Lavra in 1287).

The 11th century brings not only the foundation of several more monasteries – Karakallou, Philotheou, Esphigmenou, Xenophontos and Konstamonitou – but also the coming of the Slavs and the foundation of a Russian (original Xylourgou, today St. Panteleimonos), a Serbian (Chilandari), and a Bulgarian (Zographou) monastery (Amand de Mendieta 1972, 62-63).

During the 13th century, the fate of the Holy Mountain closely follows the troublesome situation of the Byzantine Empire: the sack of Constantinople in 1204, during the 4th Crusade, the subsequent dismemberment of the empire and the foreign rule of the Latin Empire. The period is marked by the violent persecution (sometimes leading to martyrdom) of the monks who refuse the union with Rome, decided at the Council of Lyons (1274) and by the destructive raids of the Catalan pirates.

The following century is one of reconstruction and renewal. With benefactions from the Byzantine emperor and the Serbian tsar, the existing monasteries are refurbished and seven others are founded (or re-founded) during the 14th and early 15th centuries – Grigoriou, Simonopetra (1347), Pantokratoros (1365), Dionysiou (1366), Koutlousiou and Agiou Pavlou – bringing the total number of monasteries to 19. They all survive till the present day and, apart from the addition of Stavronikita in 1541, the list of monasteries will remain unchanged since the 14th century (Speake 2014, 74).

In terms of politics, Athos maintains close relations with the emperor in Constantinople, but as the Byzantine Empire is crumbling under the pressure of the Ottoman Turks, a delegation of Athonite monks pays homage to Sultan Murad II in

¹⁴ A few more will follow:

- 2nd - 1046, by emperor Constantine IX Monomachos;
- 3rd – c. 1400, by emperor Manuel II Palaiologos;
- 4th – 1406, by the same Manuel II;
- 5th – 1574, by Patriarch Jeremiah II;
- 6th – 1783, by Patriarch Gabriel IV.

¹⁵ Until 1312, when the jurisdiction over the monasteries is transferred to the Patriarch of Constantinople through a chrysobull issued by emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (Speake 2014, 83).

Adrianopolis, in 1424. For four centuries, Athos will share the fate of Greece in submitting to the Ottoman rule, a period known as Turcocracy.

For the Athonites, the Turcocracy means a regular tribute paid to the sultan (they had been paying tax to the Byzantine emperor too) and the presence of a Turkish governor (*aga*) on the Mountain. But it also brings a permanent state of alert: despite the provisions of the submission agreement, which in theory should grant them the sultan's protection in exchange for the tribute, the wealth and treasures of the Athonites prove to be too tempting at times. Exposed to the sultan's capricious behavior, the monks are often left to rely solely on their diplomatic skills when they have to negotiate buying back their confiscated fleet (1433) or estates (1575). Throughout the Turcocracy, the most substantial financial support, nurturing the very survival of Athonite monasticism, will be provided by the rulers of the Danubian principalities (present day Romania) of Wallachia and Moldavia.

A fundamental change, happening roughly at the same time with the installation of Turcocracy, is the gradual abandonment by most of the monasteries of the cenobitic, Stoudite lifestyle, instituted by St Athanasios. Instead, a new form of monastic organization penetrates, the so-called idiorrhythmic one, where individual monks are allowed the freedom of setting their own pattern, and of not being bound by the vow of poverty or the vow of obedience to an abbot. They sometimes get to live in separate apartments, 'often with their own servants and their own worldly goods, neither eating together nor contributing to a common purse' (Speake 2014, 98).

Although receiving imperial and patriarchal sanction through the Typikon of emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (1406) and the one of Patriarch Jeremiah II (1574), the idiorrhythmic movement will nevertheless thrive and soon stretch to the entire monastic peninsula: by the end of the 16th century every monastery becomes idiorrhythmic. The causes of this organizational shift are complex, but they undoubtedly have to do with the political instability of the last decades of the Byzantine Empire and with the even more unpredictable foreign Ottoman rule that follows.

As a reaction against the thriving of idiorrhythmicity and the diminishing of the standards of asceticism in monasteries, a new kind of settlements emerges as early as the end of the 14th century, where it would be easier to practice ascetic life. They are the *sketes* (deriving from *asketerion*, which means a settlement of ascetics), monastic villages consisting of a group of huts gathered around a central church, quite similar to the ancient Egyptian and Judean lavras. The oldest surviving such sketes are Agia Anna (St Anne's, 16th century), Kafsokalyvia (17th century), Nea Skiti (the New Skete), and St Demetrios' (or Lakkou).

The next important moment in the Athonite history is the 18th century, marked by the controversy of the Kollyvades. The dispute starts from liturgical issues¹⁶, but it

¹⁶ The dispute, which divides the monks in two camps, focuses on whether it is lawful to hold memorial services not only on Saturdays, as tradition prescribes, but on other days too, and how often should Holy Communion be taken. *Kollyva* is a concoction of boiled wheat mixed with flour, herbs, nuts, raisins and coated with sugar. It

soon extends to other theological topics, becoming a real clash between the conservatory – advocates of standing firm to the Greek tradition – and the modernists – supporters of secular thought and opening towards western Enlightenment (Kitromilides 1996, 257). The traditionalists eventually emerge victorious and their ideas begin to spread in other parts of Greece, leading to a movement of re-discovery of the Orthodox faith and the Greek language as the bastions of Hellenic identity¹⁷. One of the chief traditions brought back to light by the triumph of the Kollyvades, particularly important for the topic of this paper, is that of hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer, discussed later in this chapter.

Trying to solve the financial and organizational problems of some houses, Patriarch Gabriel IV issues a new Typikon in 1783. As a result, the period between 1784 and 1856 sees the return to cenobitism of 11 out of the 20 ruling monasteries.¹⁸

In 1912, eight decades after the Greek War of Independence, Athos is finally liberated from the Turks and becomes Greek territory for the first time in its history. The current status of the Holy Mountain, as defined by the 1926 Mount Athos Charter, is that of a self-governing part of the Greek state, with all the monks having Greek citizenship. Spiritually, it falls under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The charter also provides for the peaceful coexistence of cenobitic and idiorrhythmic communities.

1.2. Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer

The two terms play a key role in the main arguments proposed in this paper. It is therefore important that, besides the succinct presentation of monastic life on the Holy Mountain already given, this preliminary chapter should also sketch a brief definition of these main concepts, alongside notions of the history of their development, which is so closely connected to the history of Athos itself.

1.2.1. Hesychasm

Hesychasm comes from the Greek *hesychia*, meaning stillness or tranquility. Meyendorff (1974, iii) identifies four uses of the word, which are not mutually exclusive:

is blessed during the Divine Liturgy as an offering for the commemoration of the departed. The two sides involved in the dispute are on the one hand the modernists, who want to allow this blessing to happen on Sundays too for convenience reasons, and on the other hand the traditionalists, who insist on keeping Sunday as a day of rejoicing. They are named Kollyvades to indicate their association with the consumption of kollyva (Speake 2014, 122).

¹⁷ One of the champions of this movement is St Kosmas the Aetolian.

¹⁸ Xenophontos in 1784, Esphigmenou in 1797, Konstamonitou in 1799, Simonopetra in 1801, St Panteleimonos in 1803, Karakalou in 1813, Agiou Pavlou in 1839, Grigoriou in 1840, Zographou in 1849 and Koutloumousiou in 1856.

A general one, referring to ‘the phenomenon of Christian monastic life, based on eremitism, contemplation and pure prayer’.

A more practical one, pointing to the ‘psychosomatic methods of prayer, formally attested only in the late fourteenth century’. Ware (1992), however, argues that the physical techniques are regarded by St Gregory Palamas and other hesychast masters as a mere accessory, by no means indispensable and that it is wrong to call these exercises “the hesychast method of prayer”.

An even more specific and theological usage, designating ‘the system of concepts developed by Gregory Palamas (+1359) to explain and defend the spiritual experience of his fellow-hesychasts, which is based on the distinction in God between the transcendent “essence” and the uncreated “energies” through which God becomes knowable to man in Christ.

A socio-cultural one, the political hesychasm, referring to the ideology and artistic trend originated in Byzantium and spread among the Southern Slavs and Russians.

Throughout this paper, hesychasm is mostly used with one of the first three meanings.

Hesychasm – in its first meaning, that of solitude – traces its origins back to the beginnings of monastic life: the word *hesychia* does occur in the Sayings of the Desert Fathers. The label of “hesychasts” has often been given in the Eastern Church to monks who, after spending long years in cenobitic monasteries, set about to live entirely or almost alone, giving themselves to contemplation and prayer (Amand de Mendieta 1972, 96).

But hesychasm as a spiritual tradition is only developed starting with the 7th century. St John Climacus, author of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, is among the first who explicitly associates hesychia with the name of Jesus and the repetition of short prayers:

‘Hesychia is to stand before God in unceasing worship. Let the remembrance of Jesus be united to your breathing, and then you will know the value of hesychia.’¹⁹

St Symeon the New Theologian revives it in the 11th century and St Gregory of Sinai brings it to Athos around the year 1300, where it is picked up by St Gregory Palamas and his contemporaries.

This is where hesychasm becomes associated with the repeated invocation of the name of Jesus, known as the Jesus Prayer, or Mental Prayer: ‘Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me.’²⁰ According to the Palamite tradition, the ceaseless repetition of this prayer, sometimes combined with some bodily techniques (posture, controlled breathing), enables the one who’s praying to experience visions of the divine, uncreated, Taboric light.

¹⁹ *Ladder 27 (PG 88:III2C)*; tr. Luibheid and Russel, 269-70, cited by Ware 2000, 99.

²⁰ The shorter version is: ‘Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me’, while the longer one is ‘Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner’.

In what will become known as the *hesychastic controversy*, Barlaam of Calabria, a Western monk, challenges the claims and practices of the hesychasts, forcing an extensive theological response from St Gregory Palamas, former abbot of the Athonite monastery of Esphigmenou, who lives as a hermit at the time when the controversy bursts.

The argument starts from the hesychast techniques rebuked by Barlaam, who calls the Athonites navel-gazers because of their bent posture during prayer, but it soon extends to much deeper theological issues. It culminates with questioning the very possibility of humans to have such *materialistic* (as Gregory calls them) visions and experiences of the divine.

After a series of Constantinopolitan councils between 1341 and 1351, the hesychast party is declared victorious and St Gregory Palamas is canonized in 1368, just nine years after his death. As a result, hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer will develop during the following years and they will be exported to the Byzantine Commonwealth and the Orthodox world. The Palamite distinction between the divine energies, which are accessible to humans, and the divine essence, which remains always inaccessible, is arguably the most important development in Orthodox theology after the period of the Ecumenical Councils and, to this day, a crucial difference in terms of dogmatic between the Christian East and West.

During Turcocracy, the hesychast tradition slowly fades away from public attention and is barely kept alive on Athos (Speake 2014, 121). The opportunity to bring it back to light comes with the controversy of the Kolyvades, in the 18th century, through the labors of St Makarios of Corinth and St Nicodemus the Hagiorite. In 1792, they publish in Venice the *Philokalia*, an anthology of ascetical and mystical texts from a period stretched to more than a millennium – 4th to 15th century – focusing on the theory and practice of hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer. The work is aimed at both monks and lay. Although its initial impact is not impressive, its Slavonic translation (Moscow, 1793) will have a massive contribution to the Russian spiritual revival of the 19th century (Ware 1993, 100).

Russians export it to Western Europe in the first half of the 20th century, where Greek theologians pick it up again and re-discover its original Greek version, in the wider trend of returning to the theology of the Church Fathers.

The hesychast tradition therefore, despite having its periods of decline and renewal, is kept alive over the centuries in the Athonite hermitages. The present can definitely be considered a time of renaissance for hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer, as they are central to the life in most Orthodox monasteries (Johnson 2010, 47). Their popularity extends today far beyond the walls of monastic dwellings, to many Orthodox lay people and even to some Christians of Western confessions (Johnson 2010, 2). In the words of Ware (1993, 100),

‘The *Philokalia* has acted as a spiritual “time bomb”, for the true “age of *Philokalia*” has not been the late eighteenth, but the late twentieth century.’

1.2.2. Hesychia and the Jesus Prayer

Although the primary sense of the word is silence, according to Ware 'hesychia means far more than merely refraining from outward speech'. In his article "Silence in prayer: the meaning of hesychia" (2000, 89-110), drawing mainly on patristic sources, he identifies no less than three levels of hesychia, expressed explicitly in an apophthegm of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Abba Arsenius prays to God, asking what to do to be saved, and a voice answers:

'Arsenius, flee, keep silent, be still, for these are the roots of sinlessness'²¹.

Thus the three levels of hesychia are:

- the spatial level: to 'flee from others', externally and physically;
- the level of silence: to 'keep silent', to abstain from outward speech;
- the level of true stillness, or of interior hesychia: to 'be still'.

Hesychasm places a lot of emphasis on the spirituality of the cell (90-92), where the cell is envisaged not only as the exterior framework of hesychia, but 'above all as a workshop of unceasing prayer' (91). Through this lens, hesychia represents therefore much more than a physical and outward condition, it is a state of the soul (92), it is 'to stand before God with the mind in the heart, and to go on standing before Him unceasingly day and night, until the end of life'²².

Although the hesychastic quest is most commonly understood as one of separation from the world, the monastery and the other monks, the real journey, according to Ware (92-96), is that of returning into oneself, 'shutting the door of his mind'. If the hesychast is defined as a solitary living in the desert, it may be said that 'solitude is a state of soul, not a matter of geographical location, and that the real desert lies within the heart' (93).

Not least, hesychia also implies a kind of spiritual poverty (96-98), understood as a passage from multiplicity to unity. The mind is stripped of 'visual images and of humanly devised concepts, and so contemplates in purity the realm of God'. The true hesychast, then, 'is not so much one who refrains from meeting and speaking with others, as one who in his life of prayer renounces all images, words and discursive reasoning' (96-97). Understanding pure silence as spiritual poverty might look like a negative perspective, but the purpose of emptying one's mind is not idleness, but to give room to be 'filled with an all-embracing sense of the divine indwelling' (97). This effort of emptying oneself just to become open to the touch of divine grace is best echoed by the words of the Baptist referring to Jesus: 'He must increase, but I must decrease.'²³

²¹ AP, alphabetical collection, Arsenius I, 2 (88BC); tr. Ward, *Sayings*, 9, cited by Ware 2000, 93.

²² St. Teophan the Recluse, quoted in Igumen Chariton, *The Art of Prayer*, 63, cited by Ware 2000, 59.

²³ Jn 3:30 (The biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version of the New Testament, text edition: 2011).

What the hesychast is aiming to achieve is, in the words of Ware, entering ‘the secret chamber of his own heart in order that, standing there before God, he may listen to the wordless speech of his Creator’ (97). In its deepest sense, true inner silence is identical to unceasing prayer of the Holy Spirit within us, it is ‘entering into the life and the activity of God’ (98).

Inner, non-discursive prayer is obviously connected with the struggle to attain such a state of soul. And the simpler it is, the more effective it can be as a tool to capture the mind’s attention, keeping it safe from the fragmentation caused by the thoughts.

Although the path towards inner silence can embrace a wide variety of ways of praying, the Jesus Prayer has proven particularly effective and it has gradually become associated with hesychasm.

Firstly, instead of confronting the thoughts, the struggler employs the Jesus Prayer as an ‘oblique method’ of combating them (100): instead of relying on his own power, he turns aside and looks at the Lord Jesus, taking refuge in the power and grace that act through the Divine Name. The repeated invocation helps him detach from the ceaseless chattering, which otherwise subjugates the mind.

Secondly, the simplicity of the Jesus Prayer is crucial in the struggle to move from multiplicity to unity: it helps focusing one’s disintegrated personhood upon a single point, gathering oneself at the feet of the Lord:

‘Our prayer, constantly repeated [. . .] begins as a prayer of the lips, recited with conscious effort. At such a stage, again and again, our attention wanders away; and again and again, firmly but without violence, it has to be brought back to the meaning of what we recite. Then by degrees the prayer grows increasingly inward: it becomes something offered by the mind as well as the lips – perhaps by the mind alone, without any physical framing of words by the mouth. Then there comes a further stage – the prayer descends from the mind into the heart; mind and heart are united in the act of prayer.’ (Ware 2000, 82).

An explanatory note is needed regarding the various names given to this short prayer: Jesus Prayer, Mental Prayer, prayer of the mind, prayer of the heart. Mental prayer or prayer of the mind has a broader meaning, including any form of repetitive short prayer or psalm verse. The latter, prayer of the heart, represents the most advanced stage of the Mental Prayer. As the mind descends and abides in the heart, the prayer of the mind becomes prayer of the heart. It is no longer something recited, but it is actually a part of one’s being, just as the breath and the beating of the heart are (83). In the Orthodox tradition, the words *mind* and *heart* are employed with slightly different meanings than the ones attached to them in the contemporary West, closer to their biblical understanding²⁴.

²⁴ ‘By “mind” or “intellect” (in Greek, *nous*) is meant not only or primarily the reasoning brain, with its power of discursive argumentation, but also and much more fundamentally the power of apprehending religious truth direct insight and contemplative vision. [. . .] Equal care is needed when interpreting the word “heart” (*kardia*). When St Theophan – and the Orthodox spiritual tradition in general – speak about the heart, they understand the word in its Semitic and Biblical sense, as signifying not just the emotions and affections but the primary

Returning to the topic of hesychasm, Archbishop Antony Medvedev's words summarize it best:

'Essentially hesychasm (literally, silence) is a process of interior cleansing, of uprooting passions from within the depths of the soul, of purifying the heart and guarding the mind in order to prevent the re-entry of sinful thoughts which feed the passions and lead to actual sin. The practice of unceasing prayer – which the Scripture demands of us, is fulfilled by the use of the Jesus Prayer, «Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner», developed under the guidance of an Elder (*staretz*) (for obedience is both the beginning and consummation of all Christian spiritual labors). The Jesus Prayer fulfilled in obedience to an Elder is the central weapon in the interior struggle.'²⁵

As for the words of the prayer – “Lord, Jesus Christ, [Son of God], have mercy upon me, [a sinner]” – although they are very few, there exist entire books trying to explain the theology behind them. Very briefly, the prayer is said to contain two main parts or poles. The first one, worshipful, implies the recognition of God's transcendence and role, whereas the second one, penitential, focuses on the acknowledging of one's imperfection and impossibility to be saved through his own powers. The juxtaposition of both these poles is aimed at leading one to profound humility, yet filled by the convinced hope in Christ's redemptive power (Johnson 2010, 22).

The hesychast pathway towards contemplation 'is simple, but not easy' at all, as Fr. T. from Vatopedi once said in a conversation with a group of students. For the struggles to reach a certain degree of success, according to Ware (2000, 101), two conditions should be met.

Firstly, the invocation of the name of the Lord (Jesus Prayer) should be rhythmical and regular, uninterrupted and continuous during long periods of the day. Beginners will need the supervision of a spiritual father. The auxiliary methods (usage of *prayer ropes*²⁶, controlled breathing) can be helpful in establishing the regular rhythm, but are not compulsory.

The second condition derives from the need to have the mind as empty of mental pictures as possible. It is therefore optimal to practice the Jesus Prayer in places with little distractions – such as outward sounds or people interrupting – and in darkness or with the eyes closed, hence the hesychasts' preference for the hermitages and the desert.

Last but not least, the very practitioners of hesychasm today – the Athonite fathers – affirm the Evangelical character and universality of this spiritual pathway. Father Makarios of Simonopetra concludes (Cabas 2007, 51):

'To be a hesychast is, in fact, to be apostolic, evangelical. St Paul was the first hesychast. It would be a mistake to consider hesychasm a “spiritual school”, as

center of our human personhood. The heart signifies the deep self; it is the seat of wisdom and understanding, the place where our moral decisions are made, the inner shrine in which we experience divine grace and the indwelling presence of the Holy Trinity.' (Ware 2000, 61-62).

²⁵ Archbishop Antony Medvedev, *The Young Elder*, cited by Pennington 1984, 131.

²⁶ Prayer ropes: (in Gr. komboskoini) prayer ropes, usually consisting of one hundred or three hundred knots. At each knot (kombos), one says mentally a brief prayer, especially the Jesus Prayer (Cavarnos 1988, 157).

Westerners usually do. It isn't a spiritual school or a trend, it is simply spiritual life, mystical life grounded in the Gospel, in line with the Orthodox monastic tradition. All the hesychast fathers and saints have in common the assimilation of the Evangelical teaching, transformed into a personal experience, which is reflected in one's relationship with God in prayer, especially in Mental Prayer [*noera prosefhi*] – inner prayer of the heart, or better of the mind descended into the heart. Hesychasm is just a slightly more technical designation of the process of cleansing the heart, which is attained through putting into practice the *Beatitudes*: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"²⁷. This is hesychast life.'

1.3. 20th Century Decay

During the mid 20th century, Athos faces one of the most severe crises in its entire existence. More than a demographic decline, which is the easiest to quantify, there is a tough economic decay and arguably a spiritual one. Starting around the beginning of the century, the phenomenon is best observable as a steep drop in the total number of monks. The figures speak for themselves²⁸:

Year	1903	1913	1928	1943	1950	1956	1959	1965	1966	1968	1971
Total no. of monks	7342	6345	4858	2878	2169	1893	1641	1491	1375	1238	1145

As worrying as it may look like, this is not the first time in Athonite history when the monastic community is confronted with such a rapid demographic loss: between 1821 and 1826, the total number of monks had dropped from 2890 to only 590 (Speake 2014, 127). But this drop had a very clear cause: the disastrous political involvement of the Athonites in the Greek War of Independence. Once the Ottoman punitive occupation ended (1830), the Mountain soon started to recover.

The 20th century crisis, however, is much more complex and therefore more frustrating and upsetting. While the external factors are usually ephemeral and only affect the welfare of Athos, never posing a real menace to its existence, the internal roots of the decay are more worrisome because they threaten the very essence of Athonite monasticism.

1.4.1. Economic loss

A severe shock to the economies of the ruling monasteries comes with the loss of most of their external estates, thus their most stable and consistent sources of income, which happens in the course of just a few decades.

During the 19th century, they suffer two expropriations: one by the Bavarian regency in Greece, in 1832, and an even more painful one by the Romanian government,

²⁷ Mt 5:8.

²⁸ Speake 2014, 149; Sidiropoulos 2010, 5; Ware 1983, 56; Manzaridis 1981, 226.

in 1856, which decides to confiscate all their dependencies – *metochia*²⁹ and land – during the country's big agrarian reform.

The final blow comes with the 1923 refugee crisis, known as *The Asia Minor Catastrophe*, when more than a million Greeks from Asia Minor (Turkey), are relocated in Greece. In desperate need of land to accommodate the refugees, the Greek government takes the Athonite estates in Macedonia, Thrace and the islands. The monasteries are promised, in return, an annual financial compensation. Insufficient from the very start, the money is also badly eroded by inflation (Speake 2014, 146).

1.4.2. Human loss

The economical losses, as damaging as they are, cannot account for the abrupt demographic decline: as shown before, the total population is reduced in only seven decades from ca. 7500 to a little over 1100.

Partly responsible for the decrease are the two waves of massive deportation of Russian monks. First, in 1913, 833 Russian monks are arrested and deported by Russian authorities because of a theological controversy concerning the name of God³⁰, which degenerates into political and even military unrest (Speake 2014, 138-40).

The second wave is the repatriation of many Russian monks due to the beginning of the First World War and the need for military recruits. Starting with the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Russia-Athos relationship is completely interrupted, allowing no more Russian novices to join the ranks, except for those coming from the Russian diaspora, like father Sophrony Sakharov. As the Russians represented almost half the Athonite population in 1900³¹, the two waves of deportation and the further prohibition massively contribute to the total demographical decrease.

Moreover, amid the inter-ethnic tensions smoldering since the 1800s³², the Greeks become alarmed by the number of Russians growing to impressive figures at the turn of the century. Thus, when Athos finally becomes Greek territory in 1912 – for the first time in its history – both the Greek secular state and the (Greek) Ecumenical Patriarchate seem to converge on an agenda of increasing the Greek element on the Holy Mountain (on behalf of decreasing the others)³³. The remaining Russian monks, besides being cut off from their fatherland with all its resources (bank accounts, pilgrims,

²⁹ A metochion (pl. Metochia) is a satellite monastic establishment, functioning under the patronage of a big monastery. For hundreds of years until 1856, Romanian princes (through the metochia) have been the steadiest source of financial support for the Athonite monasteries.

³⁰ It becomes known as the heresy of the Glorifiers of the Name.

³¹ 3260 out of a total of 7432, according to Smyrnakis, cited by Speake 2014, 148.

³² See Tachiaos (1964), Fennel (2001).

³³ Philip Sherard, one of the most devoted observers of 20th century Athos, notes that 'the Greek state, for reasons not unconnected with that tendency to destroy Athos as an Orthodox centre and to turn it into a purely Greek concern, either directly prohibits or makes extremely difficult the admission of probationers of non-Greek nationality, as for instance, the Romanians.' (Sherrard 1960, 26).

novices), are heavily taxed by the Greeks. As they grow older and fewer, many cells are being abandoned and sketes are being Hellenized (Speake 2014, 140-1).

All the non-Greek houses in fact experience the same issues.³⁴ The Bulgarians' problems are worsened by church politics: the Ecumenical Patriarchate refuses to formally recognize the re-established Church of Bulgaria for more than 70 years since its proclamation, until 1945 (Speake 2014, 146). Romanians also face a shortage of novices, partly because the Ecumenical Patriarchate keeps delaying its approval of applications coming from Romania (Coman 2015, 129-130, Dionysius 2010, 99).

The following table shows just how dramatic the decrease is, especially for the non-Greek houses³⁵:

	Greek	Russian	Romanian	Bulgarian	Serbian	Georgian	Total
1903	3276	3496	286	307	16	51	7432
1965	1290	62	94	17	28	0	1491

1.4.3. Social context

Unfortunately for the Greeks, they fail to fill the numbers with some of their own, because of various unanticipated issues that affect the Greek society and Church.

Firstly, the Greek civil war (1944-1949), divides the population and leaves deep social scars. Athos itself becomes the scene for warfare when a raiding party of insurgents (including women), attracted by the possibility of easy robbery³⁶, encamps at Karyes in 1948 and exchanges fire with the local police.

Secondly, the Second World War and the Civil War leave the Greek society in a state of accentuated poverty. Youngsters are often forced to work abroad, in Germany or even Australia, to provide for their families (Makarios 2004, 247).

Thirdly, the post-war Greek society is faced with the challenges of secularism and the materialist theories – of either capitalism or Marxism – which make monastic vocation less and less appealing for the youth (Alivisatos 1964, 292).

These factors, combined with the humanitarian disaster of the two World Wars, paint a very gray social landscape, against which Greek religious life in general, and Athonite monasticism in particular, cannot prosper.

When it comes to the Church, it has severe problems of its own. One of them is a general state of weakness, which is even more accentuated in the monastic realm, caused by the centuries of Turcocracy. In the words of Alivisatos (1964, 290), the state of captivity had paralyzed the Greek Church and had abruptly interrupted the

³⁴ In the Greek Athonites' defense, it should be noted that they never appropriate the politics of limiting the numbers of non-Greeks, professed by the Patriarchate and the Greek Foreign Ministry. On the contrary, they denounce the abuses by appealing for support from other Orthodox Churches, other Christian Churches, the European Union and the society of the Friends of Mount Athos (Speake 2014, 167).

³⁵ Amand de Mendieta 1972, 41.

³⁶ 70.000 animals, mostly goats, belonging to the peasants of the Chalkidiki peninsula, are hosted on Athos to be preserved from the guerrillas (Speake 2014, 148).

flourishing of monasticism that had been at place during the 14th and 15th centuries. In the struggle for survival, many internal theological affairs became secondary. Deprived from the necessary theological debates, the Greek Church is left with quite some unsolved issues at the end of the 19th century, which will come to light during the course of the following decades.

Another problem is the division brought by the issue of ecumenism and the liturgical calendar. In short, the Church of Greece adopts the Gregorian calendar³⁷ in 1924. The Athonites refuse the change (to this day they continue to use the Julian calendar), but some of them go even further and join the so-called Zealot movement, which breaks Eucharistic communion with the reformers and refuse to commemorate the name of the Patriarch of Constantinople in their services. In spite of at first only being able to attract monks mostly from the eremitic and semi-eremitic houses of Athos, today one of the *ruling monasteries*³⁸, Esphigmenou, belongs to the Zealot movement.

In the 1960s, several of the ruling monasteries (by 1970 as many as 11, Speake 2014, 146) stop commemorating the patriarch Athenagoras for his involvement in the ecumenical movement, but they don't break communion. This lasts until 1972, when all of them, except for Esphigmenou, resume the practice of commemorating the patriarch³⁹.

Another relevant phenomenon is the proliferation of lay brotherhoods amid the problems and divisions in the official Church. Inspired by Western protestant models, these brotherhoods⁴⁰ are very active in trying to *morally repair* the Greek society. Their message resonates very well with the ideals of the youth and thus they become very powerful para-ecclesial organizations. In the post-war years they take over the missions of preaching and catechization, upon which the Church used to have a monopoly.

The thriving of lay brotherhoods is of particular importance for the topic of the Athonite decay, because it is partly responsible for the propagation of anti-monastic feelings. The brotherhoods no longer see monasticism suitable as a realistic religious vocation, so they try to direct the youth towards other forms of religious consecration, which are better embedded in society (Makarios 2004, 247). The Athonites realize the danger and react with criticisms and apologetic publications in defense of monasticism. Father Theocletos from Dionysiou (†2006) tells Cavarnos (1988, 119) in 1965:

‘Zoe has been doing considerable good work. It has been providing valuable religious instruction and moral training to the people – a task which the official Church has not

³⁷ In fact the Revised Julian calendar.

³⁸ The 20 monasteries are called ruling monasteries. Every skete or cell depends administratively on one of them.

³⁹ As of 2016, negotiations have begun between Esphigmenou and the Ecumenical Patriarchate to re-establish Eucharistic communion and the commemoration of the patriarch.

⁴⁰ The most prominent of the brotherhoods, or the “home missionary” movements, is *Zoe* (Gr. *Life*), also known as “The Brotherhood of Theologians”. Started by Fr Eusebius Matthopoulos in 1907, it has a semi-monastic structure, with all members being celibate (though without any permanent vows). It advocates for frequent communion and confession, improved preaching, catechism classes for children, organized youth groups and Bible study circles (Ware 1993, 142)

been performing at all adequately. But the scope of Zoe's teaching and spirituality is rather restricted. [...] And beyond the "good works" of the members of this brotherhood there is spiritual purification (*katharsis*), without which good works are useless. [...] The Zoe Brotherhood has improperly been characterized as monastic. It has in fact been anti-monastic. The anti-monasticism of Zoe has been one of the reasons why young men do not come to Athos to become monks.'

Abbot Vissarion of Grigoriou (†1974) decides to start publishing a periodical about monastic life – *St. Gregory* – in 1964. Father Theocletos of Dionysiou writes a beautiful book, *Between Heaven and Earth* (in Greek: Athens, 1956), in the form of dialogues between a group of pilgrims and some monks, trying to show the continuing vigor of Athonite spirituality. Abbot Gabriel of Dionysiou (†1983) too proceeds on writing a book, *Monastic Life According to the Holy Fathers*, for the same purpose:

'I wrote it prompted by the appearance of several anti-monastic books, particularly one by Metropolitan Philip of Drama, in which he asserts that contemporary Orthodox monasticism serves no purpose and should be reorganized in the direction of social service.' (Cavarnos 1988, 117).

Father Gabriel's words touch a very delicate topic, that of the purpose of monasticism. The Holy Mountain's apparent loss of purpose, of its *raison d'être*⁴¹, is in fact its main problem and probably the most important internal cause of the decline. During the centuries of Turcocracy, the Greek Orthodox Church in general, and Athos in particular, used to act as guardians of Hellenism and of the Greek culture, tradition and identity. Once stripped of this role, the Holy Mountain suddenly appears to the superficial eye as nothing more than an open air Byzantine museum.

The consistent publishing activity is not only an apologetic effort of reasserting the role of Athos and monasticism in the Greek modern society. Possibly more importantly, it targets the Athonites themselves, as a late alarm call to rediscover the true essence of their vocation. But is it too little, too late?

1.4.4. Desolating landscape

The steep decrease in numbers and ageing of the monks means that many small monastic houses simply become deserted, when the last inhabitant dies without having any heirs or when the monks left are too few to support themselves, thus having to move away and join another brotherhood.

As they grow older they become less able to work and therefore poorer. When Fr. Kallistos Ware visits Philotheou in 1968, he finds 17 monks, of which only 3 or 4 are able to work (Ware 1983, 57).

The example of Simonopetra is even more striking, where no new vocation is registered in the monastery in decades, since the interwar period. In the 1970s, when practically no one had joined the brotherhood for the past 40 years, there is no brother

⁴¹ The expression belongs to Speake (2014, 170).

strong enough to carry the dead body of the last abbot to the cemetery (Makarios 2004, 246).

Even when monasteries are not totally deserted, as monks grow fewer their standards of living decrease to a minimal level, which implies the abandonment of entire buildings or other dependencies (fields, vineyards, orchards etc.).

Standards of liturgical practice and spirituality also fall (Speake 2014, 149). The decay is therefore not only quantitative, but also qualitative.

Last but not least, one can truly share in the gloomy atmosphere of mid-century Athos by reading some of the testimonies written by pilgrim observers:

Sociologist Michael Choukas, 1935:

'The next generation of monks may be predestined by human providence to put the final stamp of failure upon the material remnants of this greatest of all human experiments of our millennium – to close up shop and return to their homes and their worldly occupations. To predict that this will happen within the next generation is hazardous – not because it may not happen; but because it may occur sooner.'⁴²

Emmanuel Amand de Mendieta, 1972:

'The authorities of every monastery, and the Holy Community and the Patriarchate at Constantinople, must be aware how near some houses are to complete closure.'⁴³

John Julius Norwich, 1966:

'Athos is dying – and dying fast. In nearly every monastery the writing looms, all too plainly, on the wall. We have suggested why this should be; we have even discussed what may happen when, probably within the lifetime of most readers, the thousand-year history of the Holy Mountain comes to an end. What we have not done is to make any proposals as to how the disaster may be averted. There are none to make. The disease is incurable. There is no hope.'⁴⁴

'Unless a miracle happens – a great nation-wide religious revival, nothing less – the Holy Mountain is doomed.'⁴⁵

⁴² M. Choukas (1935). *Black Angels of Athos*. London, p.296, cited by Speake 2014, 3.

⁴³ Amand de Mendieta 1972, 45.

⁴⁴ J.J. Norwich and R. Sitwell (1966). *Mount Athos*. London, p.14, cited by Speake 2014, 4.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p.98, cited by Speake 2014, 150.

2. The contemporary revival

2.1. History of the revival

When read today, these pessimistic reports from just a few decades ago seem almost unbelievable. In 2014, two Swiss pilgrims, who had previously visited Athos right after their university graduation, were remaking the same trip after exactly 50 years. Standing in the courtyard of a monastery, they were sharing their memories with an astonished young audience: during their first visit, the Russian monastery of Saint Panteleimonos had only a few old monks left, who were struggling to keep the rain water out of the church altar, in order to be able to celebrate the Divine Liturgy.

The crowd's astonishment was very legitimate. They had just witnessed a splendid all-night vigil for the feast of the Pentecost, celebrated by a bishop, accompanied by twenty priests and deacons, with more than two hundred monks and even more lay pilgrims attending the service. Everything had been other-worldly, from the Byzantine frescoes, the golden chandeliers swirling full of candles, to the bright, ornamented vestments, the deacons' synchronized "liturgical dance" while incensing and the angelic psalmody. An enthusiastic first time pilgrim could only remark: 'Given the splendor, it wouldn't have been surprising to see the Byzantine Basileus himself here!'

Those Swiss pilgrims' stories of a world on the brink of collapse, as well as all the testimonies from the mid-20th century, are highly contrasted by the contemporary landscape. Nothing seems to keep clues of such a state of decay that happened only a few decades ago, inside the lifespan of a generation: the 20 ruling monasteries have today tens of monks, the beards are mostly black, Karyes (the administrative capital) is bursting with activity every day and the buildings are under repair, with some already being fully restored.

All this transformation was possible because, in only a few years time, the downtrend had been reversed spectacularly. But before analyzing the causes of this phenomenon, we shall first have a look at the figures.

2.1.1. The figures

As previously said, the downward demographical trend hasn't only implied the decrease in numbers (1145 monks in 1971, compared to more than 7000 at the beginning of the century), but also a process of accentuated ageing of the monastic population, accompanied by a dramatic limitation of the capability of many brotherhoods to support themselves, to perform their monastic duties and even to continue to exist, with some of them becoming extinct.

According to professor Mantzaridis' study (1975), the turnover happens between the years 1971 and 1972, when the total number of monks increases by one. Although

the author does admit that the figures may not be totally accurate⁴⁶, this symbolic increase of one unit proves paradigmatic and will be confirmed as a trend during the following years.

The year 1972 sees the numbers growing for the first time in the century, from 1146 to 1147. After two more years, in 1974 the total number is already at 1200. While this might not be that impressive, the change in the age distribution may be more significant. In 1972, the average age of the monks is 57.4, but in 1974 it already drops to 54.4. In two years time, the number of monks younger than 30 triples, from 12 to 36, while those aged between 30 and 40 also increase significantly, from 87 to 135.

Between 1972 and 1976, approximately 143 monks under 30 years old settle on the Holy Mountain, with 284 more between 1977 and 1986 and 690 between 1987 and 1996. From here on up to the present day, the growth becomes less sensational, but more constant (Makarios 2004, 269).

What exactly happens? Who are these new monks and where do they come from? A close analysis of the sources points to the conclusion that there are two parallel, simultaneous migratory waves: one external and one internal. The external wave consists of the migration of ready-coagulated brotherhoods (usually around a certain abbot) from other parts of Greece. They move to Athos and take over some of the 20 ruling monasteries. The internal wave manifests through the unusual growth of some brotherhoods from the semi-eremitic area of Athos (around some charismatic leaders, former disciples of Elder Joseph the Hesychast) and their subsequent moving to populate and take over some others of the 20 ruling monasteries. In both cases, with the arrival of the new brotherhoods the monasteries also re-convert to cenobitic life, abandoning the idiorhythmic one. Once settled in, the new communities continue to attract young monks at an impressive pace.

2.1.2. The external wave

The first group is that of the fathers from the Transfiguration monastery (from the Meteora complex, in Thesaly). They fly away from the increasingly suffocating tourism and settle in the monastery of Simonopetra in 1973. The group consists of the abbot, father Aimilianos Vafeidis, and about 15 more monks. Simonopetra, with its outstanding location on a rock, resembles a bit their previous abode (Makarios 2004, 266). The numbers grow rapidly to the extent that in 2002, despite the completion of a new wing for accommodating more brothers, they are still unable to accept all the novices, and the waiting list is fairly long. The Simonopetrine brotherhood is well known for its high intellectual level, with some of the fathers being internationally renowned

⁴⁶ Mainly because of the technical difficulties in doing censuses. One of them is that the 1972 census only counts the monks present on Athos that very day, not necessarily the total number of monks living there. The author improves his method and, for the 1974 census, he personally visits each monastery to get a more accurate account (Mantzariadis 1975, 97-98).

theologians, but also for the attention paid to the esthetics of the liturgical celebration, having a consistent contribution to the revival of Byzantine music (Speake 2014, 159).

A second group comes to the monastery of Grigoriou in 1974, led by father Georgios Kapsanis, a former professor of theology at the University of Athens. Helped by father Aimilianos' efforts, he and a dozen of young monks re-populate the monastery. By 1979, the numbers reach more than 50 (Ware 1983, 58). This brotherhood is particularly known for its dynamic mission in Congo. Abbot Giorgios (†2015) is one of the most respected Athonite voices of the past decades and an important figure in the fields of dogmatic theology and ecclesiology (Makarios 2004, 268).

Another year later, a group of 8 monks, under the direction of abbot Christodoulos, comes from a monastery on the island of Euboea and settles in the monastery of Koutloumousiou.

In 1976, a second group migrates from Meteora, led by father Alexios (disciple of father Aimilianos, who had become abbot of the monastery of Transfiguration after the Simonopetrine flight). Abbot Alexios and 17 of his monks move to the monastery of Xenofontos.

In 1979, Docheiariou becomes cenobitic, receiving a group of 10 monks coming from Proussos (Mesolonghi) headed by father Gregorios (a disciple of father Amphilochios of Patmos)

After 1990, young men from the ex-communist countries (Russia, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria) are also able to join the Athonite monasteries easier, contributing significantly to the constant population growth since.

2.1.3. The internal wave

One internal stream has to do with father Vasileios Gontikakis and the monastery of Stavronikita. This monastery is the first of the twenty to show signs of renewal, five years before the arrival of the first external group at Simonopetra.

When John Julius Norwich visits Stavronikita in 1964, the monastery displays a lamentable landscape, hosting only 8 old monks (Speake 2014, 157). Four years later, in 1968, it becomes totally deserted. It is the first monastery to suffer this, but others are expected to imminently endure the same fate.

The abandonment of Stavronikita is an opportunity for the *Holy Community*⁴⁷ to invite father Vasileios Gontikakis – an Athonite hermit in his mid-thirties and a theological graduate from Athens, who had also followed post-graduate studies in Lyons – to take over its abbacy. The offer is accepted, on the condition that the monastery turns cenobitic. Thus Fr. Vasileios moves with five disciples and becomes abbot, while his spiritual father, Fr. Paisios, settles in a cell nearby (Ware 1983, 57). By 1979, the community already numbers 22 monks and 3 novices. The new brotherhood starts the

⁴⁷ The Holy Community (Iera Koinotita) is the governing body of Mount Athos, composed of the representatives of each of the 20 ruling monasteries, who meet in Karyes.

spiritual⁴⁸ and material restoration of the monastery. This is the first case of a monastery being re-populated by young monks, and others will soon follow its example during the next three decades (Makarios 2004, 265).

In 1990, the monastery of Iviron accepts to turn cenobitic, but on the condition that father Vasileios, in turn, would accept to become its abbot. He and 15 monks from Stavronikita move to Iviron that year. Because of his intellectual and oratorical qualities, father Vasileios' contribution to the improvement of the image of Athos, especially among youngsters and intellectuals, is substantial.

Another internal stream of renewal, probably the most consistent of all, comes from the more eremitic Southeastern part of the Holy Mountain: Nea Skiti. After the repose of Elder Joseph the Hesychast († August 15th/28th, 1959), his very few disciples, while continuing to live in Nea Skiti, each initiate their own brotherhood, as their Master had specifically instructed them (Makarios 2004, 258). The disciples that are most relevant for the spiritual revival are: father Ephraim (Moraitis), father Charalambos (Galanopoulos) and father Joseph the Young.

Two of them, while still living the semi-eremitic life in Nea Skiti, are invited to become confessors of two neighboring monasteries: father Ephraim (despite his young age: he is only 32 in 1959, at the repose Elder Joseph) becomes confessor of Aghiou Pavlou (St. Paul's), and father Charalambos confessor of Dionysiou. Meanwhile, their own brotherhoods continue to receive young novices. In 1965, they both have numerous disciples (Makarios 2004, 258).

Because the numbers are growing fast, father Ephraim's brotherhood (20 monks) moves to the skete of Provata in 1967. A few months later, father Charalambos and his disciples (12 monks) move too, settling at Bourazeri, near Karyes. Father Joseph the Young remains with his disciples at Nea Skiti.

But the new settings will also soon be outgrown. In 1973, the brotherhood at Provata is invited to move to the monastery of Philotheou, which turns cenobitical, and father Ephraim becomes abbot. The numbers grow even faster, showing a total of 80 brothers in 1976. Thus, in 1980, the monastery of Philotheou starts sending groups of monks to revive some others of the 20 monasteries: Xiropotamou (1980, abbot: father Ephraim Koutsibos), Konstamonitou (1980, abbot: father Agathon) and Karakallou (1981, abbot: father Philotheos).

In 1989, father Ephraim leaves Philotheou and Mount Athos, setting about on a new mission in the United States and Canada, where he founds no less than 15 monasteries⁴⁹. His disciple and successor as abbot of Philotheou, father Ephraim the

⁴⁸ 'In his twenty-two years (1968-1990) as abbot, a life-giving breeze of renewal and a particular intensity of stillness and watchfulness (hesychia and nepsis) which characterize Athonite spirituality, has been treasured by thousands of visitors and pilgrims who through their personal experience in a very simple and humble way "taste and see that the Lord is good."' , J. Hadjinicolau, Editor's Note (Vasileios 1996, 5).

⁴⁹ 7 for men, 8 for women: one in California, two in Pennsylvania, two in Florida, two in North Carolina, two in the Chicago area, one in Texas, one in Arizona, one in Washington, one in Michigan and two in Canada.

young (Dikaios), leaves the monastery in 2000, after 11 years of abbacy, and settles with a group of monks at the cenobitic skete of St. Andrew, with the mission to revive it.

In 1979, father Charalambos, who had been living with his brotherhood at Bourazeri since 1967, is invited to join the monastery of Dionysiou with 20 of his monks and to become its abbot.

The third of Elder Joseph's disciples, father Joseph the Young, who had remained at Nea Skiti (with a 3 years break, spent in his native Cyprus), moves with his disciples to Vatopedi, in 1987. Father Ephraim (Koutsou), a disciple of his, is appointed abbot. Today, the Vatopedi brotherhood consists of more than 150 monks (of various nationalities: Greek, Cypriot, Romanian, Russian, Australian, French, British, Dutch, American, Brazilian, Georgian etc.).

The case of Stavronikita is the only one where a monastery becomes entirely deserted before being repopulated. In all the other cases, the newly arrived groups find a few monks left from the previous brotherhoods still living in the monasteries. The transition from one administration to another, and, most importantly, from one monastic lifestyle to another, doesn't always happen smoothly and trouble-free. The challenges of this process will be given a more detailed analysis in the following chapters.

Last but not least, when documenting the Athonite revival, the recently canonized Saint Paisios the Hagiorite (†1994), previously mentioned as spiritual father of abbot Vasileios Gontikakis, deserves a special mentioning. Alongside the main actors of the revival of the monasteries, he is probably the most prominent Athonite figure of the second half of the 20th century.

In spite of his continuous search for the silence of the desert, his reputation of a great confessor, charismatic foreseer and holy man makes him very popular and sought after. As of 1979, when he settles at the Nativity cell, near Karyes and Stavronikita, he begins to receive a lot of pilgrims daily (sometimes more than one hundred). Of particular importance is the way he cultivates the spiritual relationship with laypeople. This form of spiritual direction for laymen, which used to be quasi-unknown at this extent on Athos before him, makes St. Paisios a spiritual father for the entire Greek people, comparable in magnitude to what St. Seraphim of Sarov or the Optina Elders represent for the Russians (Makarios 2004, 263-264).

2.1.4. Chronology

Year	Event	Total no. of monks
1959	The repose of Elder Joseph the Hesychast	1641
1965	Fr. Ephraim and Fr. Charalambos already have numerous disciples	1491
1967	Fr. Ephraim and his disciples move to Provata. Fr. Charalambos' brotherhood moves to Bourazeri	
1968	Stavronikita turns cenobitic (under Fr. Vasileios)	1238
1971		1145
1972		1146
1973	Fr. Aimilianos' group moves to Simonopetra ; Fr. Ephraim's brotherhood moves to Philotheou	
1974	Fr. Georgios repopulates Grigoriou	1200
1975	Fr. Christodoulos' group comes to Koutloumousiou	
1976	Fr. Alexios comes with a 2 nd group from Meteora to Xenofontos	1206
1979	Fr. Charalampus becomes abbot of Dionysiou ; Fr. Gregorios' group moves to Docheiariou	
1980	Two groups leave Philotheou: Fr. Ephraim Koutsibos' group moves to Xiropotamou Fr. Agathon's group goes to Konstamonitou Great Lavra turns cenobitic	1191
1981	A 3 rd group leaves Philotheou for Karakallou , under Fr. Philotheos	
1987	Fr. Joseph the Young's brotherhood moves to Vatopedi	
1990	Fr. Vasileios moves from Stavronikita to newly cenobitic Ivion ; Vatopedi and Chilandari turn cenobitic too.	1290
1992	Pantokrator (the last idiorrhythmic monastery) converts to cenobitism	
2000	Fr. Aimilianos retires from abbacy; Fr. Ephraim (Dikaïos) moves to the skete of St. Andrew	1610
2011		1811 ⁵⁰

⁵⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/CensusHub2/intermediate.do?&method=forwardResult&result_view=sdmx).

2.2. Manifestation of the revival

More than being just an increase in numbers, the current revival is a complex process, with manifestations at all levels, many of them visible to the naked eye.

First and foremost, all 20 of the ruling monasteries and the big sketes are being repopulated by brotherhoods with a much more promising average age. Besides the numbers, 'the quality of the new monks [is] more noteworthy than their quantity', as Ware (1983, 57) points out. In his article from 1983, he estimates the number of university graduates to more than a hundred, compared to no more than 12-15 in 1965 (57). While the Athonite recruits used to be mainly teenagers coming from a peasant milieu, with no more than an elementary education, the novices of the latter decades are usually in their mid twenties, coming from an urban setting, often after completing university (60).

Secondly, there is an obvious material progress. Historical buildings and frescoes are being restored and new buildings are being built (with excellent facilities) to accommodate more pilgrims.

A functional network of roads now connects all the monasteries with their harbors and with one another. Despite the disadvantages this brings in terms of silence, the transport infrastructure plays a key part in the economy of Athos and in that of each monastic community, from the small semi-eremitic cells to the big monasteries. It facilitates both the export of the specific goods produced by a brotherhood (honey, olive oil, icons, incense etc.), and the import of food and everything else necessary.

More importantly, the transport infrastructure – both on land and on sea – is crucial for pilgrims. One can depart from Thessaloniki early in the morning, arrive at the Athonite harbor of Daphne at noon, and from there reach – by bus or boat – any monastery or skete by the time of vespers. Groups of pilgrims can rent taxi minibuses and visit all the monasteries in four days⁵¹.

The material rejuvenation is also manifested in the improvement of liturgical standards. The revival of Byzantine liturgical music is particularly impressive. With the talent and enthusiasm of the young, educated new monks, icon-painting workshops are once again fully functional and the demand for their finished products is higher than ever, both from within and from outside of Athos. The Holy Mountain has therefore once again become a reference point – or perhaps THE reference point – in the Orthodox world as far as liturgical and artistic standards are concerned.

But the revival is not only material, it is also spiritual. Monastic life is lived to its fullest in both coenobia and hermitages. More or less freed from material concerns in the past few decades, monks are now able to dedicate themselves to their vocation, which is a life of prayer.

⁵¹ The legal duration of a pilgrimage is four days, but it can be extended through an application at the offices in Karyes.

The spiritual aspect of the revival is far more difficult to evaluate. Who is to judge the spiritual progress of men who are the avant-garde of Orthodox monasticism? And how does one measure the degree of “spiritual success” of a person or a community?

However, something can be easily noticed: it is the increased popularity of the Holy Mountain in Greece and abroad. Hundreds of pilgrims a day take the boat from Ouranoupolis or Ierissos with the destination Athos. Many of them have friendly connections with one or more brotherhoods, and they do the *Hagiorite*⁵² pilgrimage on a regular basis. Some of them even have an Athonite spiritual father, to whom they confess regularly or with whom they keep correspondence.

The big monasteries host dozens and sometimes more than a hundred pilgrims every night. Some of them organize chat sessions in the evening, where a spiritual father appointed by the abbot, or even the abbot himself, gives the pilgrims a short talk on spiritual life, where they can also ask questions.

Athonite abbots are often invited to give lectures not only in Greece, but also in other Orthodox countries. They usually bring along a holy relic from their monastery, which makes the whole event even more popular.⁵³

Moreover, during the past few decades, literature written by or about the Athonites has flourished. There are countless brochures, websites and blogs dedicated to life on Athos. Some of the most renowned contemporary Orthodox theologians are Athonite monks. The Holy Mountain has thus become a theological authority once again, it ‘has acquired once more an articulate voice, heard with respect outside its own boundaries, and once more it is acting as a beacon and power-house for Orthodoxy as a whole.’ (Ware 1983, 57).

But the most consistent part of the spiritual revival, though on a deeper level, is the resurgence of the Jesus Prayer. In the words of Speake (2014, 186)

‘The injunction of Saint Paul, echoed by Elder Joseph the Hesychast and other Athonite teachers, to “pray without ceasing” is eagerly followed by monks today.’

Mental Prayer is seen as the main occupation of the monks, even of those living in cenobitic monasteries. The difference is striking when compared to the attitude towards the Prayer during the first decades of the 20th century: even in hermitages, only a handful of monks still dared to practice it. Nowadays, it can be heard even in the most crowded monasteries.

The Prayer is practiced both in private, inside the cells - most monks spend at least two or three hours in prayer every night (Speake 2014, 200) – and publicly, during church services or while going about their daily routine. The latter is particularly visible for the observer because most monks use prayer ropes (Speake 2014, 187).

⁵² Hagiorite: referring to the Holy Mountain (Hagion Oros), Athonite.

⁵³ In 2011, more than 1.5 million Russians come to venerate the Cincture of the Theotokos, brought by abbot Ephraim (Koutsou) of Vatopedi (<http://pemptousia.com/2011/11/more-than-1-500-000-russian-pilgrims-have-worshipped-with-keen-desire-the-holy-belt-in-russia/>).

Not least, practicing the Jesus Prayer doesn't have to be an individual endeavor. In sketes and hermitages, parts of the Divine Office during weekdays are replaced by group sessions of the Jesus Prayer, where monks take turns in reciting it loudly, while the others are silent. In monasteries too, simple tasks like peeling vegetables are often performed collectively by monks – joined sometimes by pilgrims – working together in silence and taking turns in reciting the Jesus Prayer.

As it will be further shown, the Athonite revival and the resurgence of the Jesus Prayer are closely connected to each other.

2.3 External causes

The choice for classifying the causes as external and internal is not necessarily based, as it would be expected, on the origins of the causes – from outside and from within the Holy Mountain. It is rather based on their scope, on whether they deal with the external, more visible, aspects of the revival or with the internal, more spiritual manifestations of the phenomenon.

The external factors are mostly connected with the changes in the social and economical Greek landscape occurring at the time of the revival.

a. Firstly, the country manages to gradually escape poverty during the 1970s. When the emigrating flux stops, more youngsters have the opportunity to deepen their spiritual life and eventually choose a monastic vocation (Makarios 2004, 271-2). Moreover, the improvement in the Greek economy is, to a certain extent, reflected on the Holy Mountain too, being partly responsible for the developments in infrastructure listed in the previous subchapter (2.2).

b. Secondly, sustained efforts for transcending the gap between Athos and the “world” are made from both ends, though for different reasons. For their part, the Athonites engage in a more active relationship with the clergy and the faithful of the Greek Church. Many abbots and spiritual fathers show increasingly more willingness to go outside the Mountain for missionary purposes. Especially during the Great Lent, they travel to various parts of Greece, at the invitation of bishops or parish priests, to give spiritual lectures and to hear the confessions of the faithful (Coman 2015, 120). The new attitude of openness towards the world is also illustrated by the emergence of Athonite periodicals and the multiplication of spiritual books authored by the monks. This could not have been possible fifty years earlier, when most of the Athonites used to be illiterate peasants.

Cavarnos (1988, 17) remarks that throughout history, ‘most of the famous scholars on Athos flourished in the 14th and 18th centuries’⁵⁴, therefore during and

⁵⁴ 14th century: St. Nikephoros the Solitary, Theoleptos of Philadelphia, St. Gregory Palamas, St. Philotheos the Patriarch, St. Callistos Xanthopoulos, Ignatios Xanthopoulos;
18th century: Dionysios of Fournas, Neophytos Kafsokalyvitis, Theocletos Karatzas, Kaisarios Dapontes and St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite.

immediate after the most severe crises in the existence of the Holy Mountain: the hesychastic controversy in the 14th century and the movement of the Kollyvades in the 18th. It is therefore not by chance that the mid 20th century crisis gives birth to such prominent theologians and writers as Fr. Vasileios Gontikakis, Fr. Aimilianos Vafeidis, Fr. Georgios Kapsanis, Fr. Gabriel and Fr. Theocletos of Dionyssiou or Fr. Sophrony Sakharov. The latter, Elder Sophrony (1896-1993), a Russian monk coming from the Parisian diaspora, plays a key role in the popularization of the Holy Mountain through the publication in English⁵⁵ of the spectacular spiritual biography of his mentor, St Silouan the Athonite (1866-1938). As far as the Athonite revival is concerned, the emergence of so many valuable monastic books is both an important cause, and a manifestation of the phenomenon (Ware 2012, 194).

The Athonites' efforts are met by a new attitude of openness and interest, triggered by the evident reengagement of postwar Greek theologians with the Greek Church Fathers (Russel 2006, 77), and especially with the theology of Saint Gregory Palamas⁵⁶. This reengagement is mainly influenced by the Russian émigré theologians⁵⁷ (Payne 2006, 268) and Western patristic scholars, materializing in the publication of new editions of the writings of the Church Fathers – especially of the *neptic*⁵⁸ fathers – and culminating with the republication of the *Philokalia* (1957). The patristic renaissance is part of a larger effort made by the 20th century Orthodox theology to rediscover its true identity and to return to its roots, liberating itself from the so-called *Babylonian captivity* of Western scholasticism (Cabas 2007, 48). The similarity of this movement with that of the Kollyvades in the 18th century is remarkable: they both trigger a revival of hesychasm and they are both powered by a return to patristic theology. Because of the new preoccupation with Gregory Palamas and the hesychast fathers, Mount Athos too becomes interesting, especially when the word spreads about contemporary monks living the Palamite hesychasm to its fullest.

Furthermore, since roughly the 1960s, the rising popularity of the Holy Mountain is helped by the decreasing popularity of the lay brotherhoods, which start being perceived as alien to the Orthodox ethos. Parish priests used to share in the anti-monastic trend, influenced by the lay brotherhoods. When their spiritual children would

⁵⁵ First mimeographed edition in 1948 in English, followed by a more professional second edition in 1952. First Greek translation: 1974.

⁵⁶ 'Saint Gregory is not well known to the common pious, and his study by theologians is scant compared to the tomes that have been dedicated to the other Fathers. In Greece, it was not until the recent past that anyone showed any critical attention toward a collection of the Saint's writings. And, greatly owing to his rejection by the West and the proverbial "Western captivity" of many Orthodox theologians, some Greek theologians have only a rudimentary familiarity with Saint Gregory and his importance to Orthodox thought. (Happily, the state of Palamite studies in the Slavic traditions is better developed and more profound.)', Chrysostomos 1998, 53.

⁵⁷ The most prominent representatives are Vladimir Lossky, John Meyendorff, Alexander Schmemmann and George Florovsky.

⁵⁸ '*Nepsis* is vigilance of the *nous* and watchfulness at the gates of the heart, so that every thought that moves in it can be controlled. *Neptic* is an adjective pertaining to the method used for *nepsis*.' (Kapsanis, n.d., Glossary).

ask for the blessing to join a monastery, they would often deny it, trying to influence them to change their mind. This is not the case any more (Makarios 2004, 271-2).

c. Not least, a third possible main cause of the revival is the accentuated degree of secularization suffered by Greek society starting with the second half of the 20th century. Paradoxically enough, secularization has been listed among the causes of the decay, earlier in the paper. But Mantzaridis (1981, 229-231) makes an interesting case showing how, while secularization may negatively affect traditional religiosity, it may also produce – as a side effect – minority groups with a more acute feeling of emptiness and in search for deeper meanings of life. These individuals are very likely to turn even more radically towards the traditional forms of religion. In his argumentation, Mantzaridis makes an exemplifying parallel with the very emergence of Christian monasticism in the fourth century, which constituted, in his view, the same kind of radical reaction against a secularizing society.

However significant all these factors may be for the outward aspects of the revival, their role in the internal, spiritual revival is minimal. The analysis of the more relevant, internal causes will start in the huts and cells of the eremitic side of Athos, with a look at the biography of Elder Joseph the Hesychast, as well as the peculiarity of his teaching and the monastic lifestyle of his brotherhood.

3. The seeds of revival: Elder Joseph the Hesychast and the ethos of his brotherhood

Elder Joseph is one of the most powerful spiritual figures of the Holy Mountain in the 20th century. Despite living a relatively short life (reposed at 61), hidden from public attention in the Athonite desert and with no more than a small handful of disciples, he is rightfully considered to be indirectly responsible for a large part of the contemporary revival. No less than 6 of the 20 monasteries are populated today by brotherhoods that hold Elder Joseph as their “grand” or “grand-grand” spiritual father, being descendants of the 2nd or 3rd grade of the small monastic family formed around Elder Joseph during the 1950s. Apart from these six, some other of the twenty monasteries and many more smaller houses have already been highly influenced by Elder Joseph’s example and teaching. In order to better understand the internal causes of the current revival, it is reasonable to assume that his spiritual biography, his teaching and the ethos of his brotherhood may represent a good place to start looking for clues.

3.1. Biography

Born in 1898 on the island of Paros with the name of Francis, he comes to Mount Athos in 1921, at the age of 23, fired up by the reading of spiritual literature⁵⁹ and almost desperately looking for a master in the art of the Jesus Prayer. He does not rush to join a particular brotherhood, but prefers to take his time to look for the most suitable place for him (Joseph of Vatopedi 2002, 27-29).

The general attitude toward the Jesus Prayer on Athos is quite hostile at the time, even amongst dwellers of the eremitic part. Most of the Athonites regard it as a form of spiritual deceit (Ephraim 2010, 37), as the Elder himself records in a letter:

‘Today there is so much preoccupation for the worldly, material matters and so much ignorance for the spiritual vigilance, to the extent that most of the monks not only have no desire of exploring or doing it [the Jesus Prayer], but when they hear someone speaking of it, they maliciously fight against him, regarding him as a fool, because his way doesn’t resemble their own.’ (Elder Joseph the Hesychast 2003, 73).

The only master he finds is elder Kallinikos the Hesychast (1853-1930), living in the skete of Katounakia. Although a very experienced hermit and a true hesychast, elder Kallinikos is not willing to risk his hesychia by accepting disciples (Makarios 2004, 254, Joseph of Vatopedi 2002, 26-27), so young Francis has to resume his search.

⁵⁹ More precisely, of the Neon Eklogion, by Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite (Ephraim 2010, 26), a piece of spiritual literature from the lives of the saints genre.

He keeps on looking for an experienced elder and in the mean time tries the Jesus Prayer by himself, with great ascetical efforts and deprivations⁶⁰. While painfully⁶¹ holding vigil in the desert of Vigla, he receives a vision of the divine light, and the Jesus Prayer starts flowing spontaneously from/in his heart, a process that will continue for the rest of his life.

Following the advice of father Daniel (from the skete of Katounakia, †1929), he joins efforts with another young hermit, father Arsenios (†1983), who has similar interests and spiritual goals, in a fellowship that will continue for the rest of their lives. Together, they rummage the Mountain in search for an experienced spiritual guide:

‘Our burning desire was to find a spiritual man, who would know from experience the things that we were looking for. [. . .]Everywhere we went we found pious monks, elders who comforted and encouraged us, but that was all. We haven’t managed to find a man who would have *the prayer* and contemplation truly interiorized in himself.’ (Joseph of Vatopedi 2008, 29).

The same Fr. Daniel advises the two young hermits to begin their spiritual quest by pledging obedience to an elder for a few years, before starting a monastic life on their own. According to Athonite *tradition*, when a monk or a group of monks “buries” an elder (obeys an elder and serves him until his repose), they inherit his grace and blessing. Consequently, the two find father Ephraim (“The Cooper”), in another cell at the skete of Katounakia, and start their discipleship in obedience to him. Elder Ephraim is a simple monk, but he is open enough to allow them to introduce him to the Jesus Prayer (Joseph of Vatopedi 2008, 25). In this, he shows great meekness, because it is rather unusual for an elder to step back and accept to learn something new from his disciples.

It is very relevant for the topic of this research to ascertain again the state of decay in which the practice of the Jesus Prayer can be found at the time, even among the hermits: not only that Fr. Joseph and Fr. Arsenios are unable to find someone to teach them the Palamite hesychasm and the Prayer, but it is quite an achievement for them to find an elder who does not fiercely oppose these practices (Makarios 2004, 255).

Elder Ephraim the Cooper allows them to retreat in quietness and practice the Prayer for a few hours a day. He even starts practicing it himself. However, the conditions are not ideal for it, both because of the geographical position (a relatively busy pathway passes right through their yard) and because of the disturbingly noisy, and very burdensome at times, barrel making, which is the main economical activity of their elder. A few years later, in 1923, they convince the elder to move to a more remote and praying-suitable place, the skete of St. Basil.

⁶⁰ ‘He used to fast a lot and hold vigil. At night he would stand up or walk a little saying the Jesus Prayer and thus he would force himself, as much as it was possible, to fight against sleep.’ (Ephraim 2010, 39)

⁶¹ ‘I tremble when I remember the tears and pain of my soul, the shouts that used to tear the mountains when I cried day and night.’ (Ephraim 2010, 35).

After elder Ephraim's repose in 1929, Fr. Joseph becomes the leader, albeit being a few years younger than Fr. Arsenios. Free from any concern, they start the very ascetic program they had been longing for. They earn their living by making brooms out of the little branches collected from the forest, and giving them to the monasteries in exchange for dry bread.

Eight difficult years follow for Fr. Joseph, as he faces a continuous war of the flesh. But after eight years of bloody struggles against temptation, he finally finds the man he had been looking for: Fr. Daniel, from the skete of Kerasia. He teaches Joseph and Arsenios how to efficiently resist temptation and gives them important guidelines for the daily spiritual schedule, a program they would eventually pass on to their disciples (Ephraim 2010, 69).

Because the skete of St. Basil had also become less suitable for the hesychast life, the small brotherhood⁶² moves to the skete of Mikri Aghia Anna (Little Saint Anna) in 1938. Here they can apply their ascetic schedule more rigorously.

In the mornings they carve wooden crosses while reciting the Jesus Prayer. In the afternoon, each monk prays the Vespers in his own cell, by reciting a certain number of Jesus Prayers⁶³, and then rests for 3 or 4 hours. At sunset, each of them begins the personal vigil of minimum 6 hours, which consists of mainly praying the Jesus Prayer – aloud or silently – most of the times while standing or doing prostrations to avoid falling asleep. Because none of them is a priest, they cannot celebrate the Divine Liturgy in their own house, but have to visit a nearby cell, which they do a few times a week. The days they don't attend the Divine Liturgy they pray more or read some spiritual literature, after which they rest for 2 more hours until morning, when they start all over again. Visitors are received only in the morning. No deviation from this schedule is allowed, not even in exceptional cases.⁶⁴

Many novices try to join the small group, but none manages to cope with the harsh conditions and the Elder's rigor. Father Ephraim Moraitis, one of his later disciples, recounts him saying:

'If somebody can't keep up, they should go somewhere else.' (Ephraim 2010, 265).

In 1947, two young novices finally manage to permanently join the brotherhood: Ephraim (age 20) and Joseph the Young (age 26). Later, in 1950, father Charalambos (age 40) adds to the group.

Because of the extreme poverty, the young disciples are forced to go and work for the big monasteries in order to provide for the brotherhood. But even during the most difficult periods, three basic principles are observed: the strict observance of the rule of prayer and silence, the attention to the smallest details of daily life (everything must

⁶² Composed of Fr. Joseph, Fr. Arsenios and Fr. Athanasios, Fr. Joseph's younger sibling, who had joined in 1933.

⁶³ For the equivalence between each of the seven praises and a number of repetitions of the Jesus Prayer, see Amand de Mendieta 1972, 301.

⁶⁴ Detailed descriptions of their monastic program in Makarios 2004, 256; Cavarnos 1988, 71.

facilitate prayer and concentration) and the daily confession of every thought to the Elder.

In 1953, when the harsh ascetical conditions start taking their toll, most of the brothers already accuse severe health problems. Elder Joseph decides to move his brotherhood to a place with a milder climate and better access to fresh water. The abbot of the monastery of Agiou Pavlou invites them to occupy four houses at Nea Skiti near the sea, and they accept the invitation. The youngsters quickly recover their health and, as a result, start praying more *efficiently*. The issue of the relation between external conditions and prayer efficacy is also very relevant for the topic of this paper and will be explored later in the paper.

Elder Joseph's health, however, is too severely damaged to ever fully recover. In 1958, when Cavarnos visits him, he has no doubt that the Elder is in his seventies (Cavarnos 1959, 203). He had in fact barely turned 60.

In 1959, on the feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God⁶⁵, Elder Joseph the Hesychast peacefully reposes, after accurately predicting the date of his departure weeks in advance.

Although it is customary for the disciples to be freed from any duty when their elder reposes – as Fr. Joseph and Fr. Arsenios themselves had become free after burying their elder – Elder Joseph insists on regulating what will happen to his flock after his departure. The disciples are commanded not to stay together any longer, but to spread and each to start his own brotherhood (Ephraim 2010, 409-410; 417). This will prove crucial for the monastic revival that is about to happen to the Mountain, as he prophetically tells father Arsenios:

‘Look, it is now, during our old age, that God has brought us these young monks. Mark my words: they will soon be the pillars of the Holy Mountain.’ (Joseph of Dionysiou, 50).

3.2. Particularity

Unlike its Western counterpart, Orthodox monasticism is not organized into orders, so one would expect much more uniformity in terms of spirituality and organization. However, there exist local colors, historical trends and personal touches. As previously shown, Athonite monasticism has always had a certain distinctiveness.

Zooming in one level further, even within Mount Athos there is a surprising diversity of vocation: life in a monastery vs. eremitic life; coenobitism vs. idiorrhythmy; openness towards the world (missionary vocation, extended hospitality for pilgrims) vs. seclusion; frequent communion vs. rare communion; emphasis on physical work vs. emphasis on the liturgy vs. emphasis on private prayer; pompous, impeccable liturgical

⁶⁵ August 15th according to the Julian calendar observed on Athos.

celebration vs. simple, humble celebration; involvement in church politics (ecumenism, the calendar etc.) vs. distance from any worldly affair.

While there are various circumstances shaping the choice of a brotherhood in each of the above, the decisive factor remains the figure of the elder, his stance and preference for one way or another. Disciples cultivate total obedience and idealization of their abbot, so they often tend to mimic his teaching and behavior to the point of total appropriation. Therefore, as abbots/elders naturally have diverse personalities and opinions – ‘there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit’⁶⁶ – so does each brotherhood often have its own peculiar flavor⁶⁷. The following subchapters will focus on studying precisely the peculiarity of Elder Joseph’s brotherhood, which totally reflects his teaching and views on monastic life.

3.2.1. Jesus Prayer

First and foremost, Elder Joseph insists on the importance of the Jesus Prayer. In a conversation with Cavarnos, he encourages everybody, especially his young monks, to try the Prayer and test it through direct experience:

‘Of all forms of prayer this is the safest and best, provided it is combined with inner attention, so that the mind does not wonder off, and that one follows the instructions of an experienced spiritual guide. At first, this prayer should be said orally. Later, it should be said mentally, though even then it should be said orally when one cannot concentrate too well on it. As we practice this prayer, it becomes an inner activity that goes unceasingly. And it gives results. You need not accept this assertion on trust. Your own experience will prove it. Experience proves the prayer of Jesus to be very effective as a means of purifying the heart and mind, of opening up the mind and revealing to it untold treasures.’ (Cavarnos 1959, 204-205).

Even when prayer seems ineffective, perseverance is the key. He tells his novice:

‘Persist in this *work*. Keep hitting and it will break. You’ll have to break the shell of the old self⁶⁸. [. . .] You’ll then have a growing desire to taste more *fruit*.’ (Ephraim 2010, 225-226).

When he refers to prayer as work, he really equates prayer with a kind of work, labor, and even profession⁶⁹:

‘The Jesus Prayer used to be the Elder’s main occupation. He put all his energy in cultivating this prayer. All his activities were organized so that his mind would be free to pray. [. . .] He practiced prayer systematically and diligently. [. . .] The entire day functioned as a preparation for the night prayer.’ (259-260).

⁶⁶ 1 Cor 12:4.

⁶⁷ ‘Each [spiritual] Father has to some extent his own way. One who has grown in the coenobium will know and teach that way. Another will perhaps emphasize the Jesus Prayer more.’ (Pennington 1984, 57).

⁶⁸ Eph 4:22.

⁶⁹ ‘Mental prayer was more than a monastic duty, it was the main occupation of our brotherhood. It was our weapon, our shield and our continuous struggle.’ (Ephraim 2010, 225).

3.2.2. The private vigil at night

The vigil is the central part of the daily schedule, the one thing that Elder Joseph does not want to make any compromise about⁷⁰. Private prayer in the cell is not just something that has to be done, something that is added at the end of the day to all the other activities. It is seen as *the* activity, so everything else comes second. Father Ephraim recalls:

‘The entire day used to be a preparation for the vigil. Everything was done with the purpose of facilitating our nightly prayer.’ (Ephraim 2010, 258).

But what exactly does the vigil entail? At sunset all the brothers gather for a coffee, but only for energizing purposes. Any kind of socialization is forbidden, in order to prevent the mind from dispersing⁷¹. Each then goes to his cell. The vigil starts with the opening prayers, then the monk has to light up his mind by thinking of death, hell, heaven, Christ’s crucifixion, lives of the saints etc. There is no prescription of a fixed structure, it all depends on what works for each individual. The purpose is to meditate a little until one gets fired up for prayer.

When the monk feels ready, he starts praying the Jesus Prayer, with or without a prayer rope, for as long as he can. When he starts feeling asleep he goes outside the cell or does some prostrations. When the mind gets tired from concentrating on the prayer, he can pause praying for a bit and try reading from the Bible, from the lives of the saints or from the writings of the hesychast fathers. Then he starts meditating again on his own sinfulness and gets back to the Jesus Prayer. In total, the vigil takes between 8 and 10 hours every night.⁷²

This is the basic structure, but its content may vary. Elder Joseph is open to trying ‘any kind of prayer’, and even original, self-composed prayers (260-261).

Why is the vigil so important? Because it offers the possibility of experiencing states of prayer and contemplation so high that human language is unable to express:

‘My holy Elder insisted a lot upon doing this all-important vigil, which cleanses the mind; it makes it seer of God and it gives it the ability to ascend as high as the Third Heaven and touch in a mysterious spiritual way the unspeakable realities of eternal life. And thus he was leading us, through vigil and mental prayer, to foretasting the kingdom of God, the heavenly Jerusalem, impatiently waiting for the moment of departure, when we will become for ever partakers of this kingdom.’ (266).

3.2.3. Praying aloud

Another very characteristic feature of the Josephine brotherhood is that the Jesus Prayer is very often said aloud during daytime schedule, when working or traveling.

⁷⁰ ‘Whether or not we had managed to get any sleep in the afternoon, we had to do the vigil. We could not say: I’m tired, I should rest a little today, because I worked so much and I’m exhausted. The elder would not tolerate, under any circumstance, to make the slightest change in our program’ (Ephraim 2010, 265).

⁷¹ In fr. Ephraim’s words: to be able to use the *foam of the mind* in prayer (Ephraim 2010, 258).

⁷² The minimum limit set by Elder Joseph is 8 hours.

This practice is particularly helpful during novitiate, when one has just recently left the world: continuously repeating the prayer with a loud voice helps the mind in its struggle to leave everything worldly behind and *gather in itself*:

‘There’s nothing else I want from you except for this. I will cook the food and serve you in any way. The only thing I expect from you is that day and night you pray, keep silence, repent and cry. As we come from the world, our mind is loaded with passions, superstitions, and perverted thoughts, soaked with egoism and vain glory. [. . .] We may try to keep the mind away from all these, but we won’t manage to. Why? Because we’re weak, and the mind disperses very easily. Therefore, since the mind is unable to retain the prayer, we struggle to say it with our mouth, according to the Church Fathers and the tradition of our Elders, to be thus capable, through hearing the words of the prayer, to save the mind from dispersing. Thus, little by little, the prayer shall sweeten the mind and pull it from the worldly nourishment, enclosing it inside the heart so it will shout without ceasing the Name of Jesus.’ (268).

There is no contradiction between the loud repetition of the Jesus Prayer and the eremitic need for silence: on the contrary, the two are actually equated. As shown in the first chapter, hesychia shouldn’t be understood literally, as complete silence, but rather as not saying anything unnecessary and distracting. In this light, the continual utterance of the Jesus Prayer means exactly that: abstaining from any vain talk.

Although Elder Joseph invokes the Church Fathers and the Athonite tradition in favor of this practice, the state of affairs in Athos at the time is quite the opposite: many of his Athonite contemporaries are puzzled and even scandalized by this way of mumbling the Jesus Prayer half-aloud, and go as far as accusing him and his disciples of hypocrisy and delusion (269).

Praying aloud is essential for novices, but the practice is not at all confined to them. A brother who already has many years of monastic profession is severely rebuked by Elder Joseph for thinking that he is too experienced to keep saying the prayer with his mouth (275).

Besides being a necessary step in the process of learning and internalizing the Jesus Prayer, the loud utterance can also play a relevant role in community life. Once it’s obvious that a certain brother is praying, one will think twice before interrupting him for something futile. Furthermore, hearing a brother’s loud prayer may even bring one back from daydreaming and remind him that he should be praying too.

Many Athonite monasteries today have already adopted this practice. In Vatopedi, the young monk who escorted us from the reception room to the guesthouse repeated the Prayer aloud all along. When another monk called his name and asked him something, he stopped, answered the question and then moved on with his prayer.

When more monks are working together on something that does not require too much discussion, they take turns in saying the prayer aloud. Pilgrims sometimes join these activities and are also invited to take part in saying the prayer, when appointed by the senior monk of the group.

3.2.4. Bold and goal-oriented prayer

It is noteworthy that Elder Joseph does not argue for a vague state of prayer with uncertain outcomes⁷³, but for a specific form of prayer, the Mental Prayer (Jesus Prayer), and with very concrete and even tangible results. This is rooted in his firm belief that the Prayer *works*, though not by itself or independent from the spiritual state of the person. This belief pervades all his credo and teaching⁷⁴.

True prayer is also daring, and it requires courage:

‘Cyclical inner prayer never fears any error. [...] I’ve been very bold and dared to dive in any kind of prayer. I’ve tried them all.’ (Elder Joseph the Hesychast 2003, 176).

3.2.5. Transfer of grace

Instead of giving many lectures on the Prayer, he prefers to help his disciples in the process by praying for them. Charismatic elders are believed to have very powerful prayers and this is what makes them so popular, alongside a certain capacity of communicating holiness, through their counseling, and sometimes through their mere presence. It is believed that holy people who have managed to cleanse themselves of the passions, and who live a contemplative, spiritual life have gained a kind of daring towards God, and their prayers are more powerful and effective. It is the same logic as in the veneration of saints: charismatic elders are in fact regarded as living saints and their prayers are ardently sought by many faithful both during their lives and especially after their passing.

So what happens when such a holy man as Elder Joseph the Hesychast, whose heart has become a permanent dwelling of the Lord through the unceasing prayer, concentrates and prays for someone? It is, of course, difficult if not impossible to tap scientifically into this question. But it must be recorded that all his young disciples testify about indescribable experiences that have been granted to them as a direct result of their Elder’s prayers:

Father Ephraim:

‘One day, as I was carving seals⁷⁵ and I was praying the Jesus Prayer aloud, because of the prayers of my Elder my soul has suddenly felt such a state that was undoubtedly no different from what Adam had felt in paradise before the fall. It was something that cannot be expressed in words.’ (Ephraim 2010, 279).

⁷³ ‘Prayer that lacks attention and deep spiritual feel is nothing else but waste of time, effort without reward.’ (Elder Joseph the Hesychast 2003, 38).

⁷⁴ ‘There comes a time, as a person is practicing mental prayer with all his thoughts gathered together, invoking the sweet name of our Lord Jesus, when suddenly the mind is illuminated or rather is caught by a boundless immaterial light, white as snow, and a subtle fragrance pervades all his members; and he transcends himself, stands in another creation transfigured. He no longer prays then, nor thinks, but only contemplates and marvels at the Divine magnificence.’ (Cavarnos 1988, 71).

⁷⁵ Wooden carved seals used to stamp the liturgical bread.

'Many times my Elder's prayers have truly helped me acquire the spiritual feel of divine presence.' (267)

Father Charalambos:

Elder Joseph once sends him to a cave nearby without too much explaining, but assuring him he will 'taste heaven'. Fr. Charalambos (who is not even tonsured as a monk yet) obeys, only to find a narrow, wild place, which resembles hell rather than heaven. He starts praying.

'My heart soon fired up and my eyes started crying abundantly. They were tears of worship and gratitude. That's where I received my first ever vision. It was then when I understood the words of the Holy Fathers, who say that in such a state your mind stops working and is being carried by the Holy Spirit wherever He wants to take it, even in heaven. After a while I came back to my natural state but again got *kidnapped* to other heavenly places. This has repeated two or three times. Then something happened to me similar to what the Apostles "suffered" on Mount Tabor and I said: «It is good for us to be here!⁷⁶ This place, where my Elder has sent me, truly is heaven!»'.

After two or three days he is called back to the skete.

'I went to the Elder with my head bowed, but the transfiguration of my face was so obvious that he asked me:
«Charalambos, I want you to tell me the truth. Did you find heaven where I sent you?»
I answered with my head bowed and full of tears:
«Yes, my Elder, it truly is heaven.»
Then the abbot couldn't hold back any more so he embraced and kissed me.' (Joseph of Dionysiou 2005, 57-58).

Father Joseph the Young:

Just as he joins the brotherhood, the Elder assigns him to the same nightly vigil as the others.

'The second evening, after giving me some advice, he asked me how do I pray and if I feel anything unusual while doing it. I didn't know what to say, because I hadn't felt anything else apart from the gratitude that one finds when he struggles to do something he thinks it pleases God. Back then I did not know *this way of prayer* and I hadn't tried it yet. He then started talking to me about prayer, suited to my level of understanding, especially about the Jesus Prayer and how much it can elevate that who manages to acquire and keep it, in terms of virtue and grace. In the end he told me with delight:
«Go now, and tonight I shall send you a *little package* and you shall see how sweet our Lord Jesus is.»
[. . .] In the evening, as soon as I started my vigil, [. . .] I suddenly felt filled with love for Christ, a love that gradually grew to a point where I was unable to keep praying. I could only cry silently, seeing my sinfulness in a way I cannot express. This state lasted for about two hours, after which I slowly came back to the previous state and I

⁷⁶ Mt. 17:4.

was wondering what had just happened. Then I remembered what he had told me. [...] I asked myself: «Would it be possible for me to remain in that state?» [...] When the time came to see the Elder, I went to his cell and found him outside. Before I said anything, before I even bowed for his blessing, he said: «Did you *see* what you previously couldn't understand?» I fell at his feet and started thanking him: «Yes, I did, Elder, yes, I did! I saw what our generation doesn't even know it exists.» [...] Some other times, when I was working for the monasteries to provide for the brotherhood, he used to write me comforting letters, advising me to struggle and keep my vigilance. In the end he wrote me: «Make sure you don't let the little packages that I send you come back.» (Joseph of Vatopedi 2008, 63-6).

What can be made of all these accounts? Elder Joseph wholeheartedly dedicates himself to helping and guiding each of his disciples. The timing of these mystical experiences, the *little packages*, is not by chance during the early stages of novitiate, when the youngsters need some strong pillars for the spiritual edifice they're just about to build. While the Elder's ability to provoke such experiences is certainly a charisma and a topic to be further explored by mystical theology, the effect on the receivers is undoubtedly powerful and life changing. Elder Joseph gives them a taste of 'how sweet our Lord Jesus is', in order to hook them up forever and motivate them for the fierce spiritual battles that will follow.

It is here where the first clue of the contemporary revival could lie: a more goal-oriented approach to religious life. Elder Joseph and his monks no longer regard the mystical experiences found in the Lives of the Saints, in the Philokalia or in other spiritual writings as things of the past, achievable only in a *golden age*, but as spiritual goods that are available here and now.

This is not to say that they are only interested in such experiences. As it will be seen, they live monastic life in fullness, and no aspect of it is neglected. But having *tasted* – even only partially – right from the start of their vocation, the divine Taboric light, which all the hesychast literature speaks about, they now have a compass to guide them through.

These recipients of grace will later on become themselves abbots and spiritual fathers, and they too will pray and transfer some unutterable joy to their disciples. Father Charalambos, for instance, will do it not only with novices, but even with mere pilgrims. Young men would come to his cell for confession and spiritual advice, but he would invite them to join in the brotherhood's schedule of private night vigil. Because of his prayers, they would encounter life-changing experiences and many of them would become monks (Joseph of Dionysiou 2005, 260-261). They surely form a consistent part of that "internal wave" mentioned earlier, which reinvigors the Athonite monasteries starting with the 1970s.

This kind of spiritual boldness, to dare to believe that the Kingdom of God can be *tasted* in this life, is one of the trademarks of most of the Athonite monasticism today, even though Elder Joseph's epoch slowly begins to be regarded as a golden age too.

3.2.6. Fasting and the mechanics of divine grace

‘Ever since I became a monk, I have never indulged myself with enough bread nor sleep.’ (Joseph of Vatopedi 2002, 180).

Not much can be added to these words of the Elder. Fasting is not an end in itself (Ephraim 2010, 250), but Elder Joseph finds it as an absolutely necessary condition for living spiritual life at the highest level.

There are two dimensions of fasting that can be identified. Firstly, there’s the canonic rule for any Orthodox monk, which Elder Joseph and his brotherhood fully observe: they never eat meat and, during fast days (considerably more than half the days in a year), they abstain from dairy, fish, oil and wine⁷⁷. During the first years, when he and Fr. Arsenios live as hermits, they take fasting to an even higher level: they fast during all weekdays and their food consists mainly in dry breadcrumbs, which are also carefully weighted⁷⁸. Later, when disciples start joining in, the rule of fasting is relaxed a little (but only for the disciples, not for him and Fr. Arsenios), so that the young can cope with it.

But there’s also a second, more profound dimension of fasting, that can be traced in the words of Elder Joseph quoted above. More than the quantity or selection of food, fasting means a predisposition of not indulging oneself too much.

The reason for it has nothing to do with ethics – at least in the traditional understanding of the word – as it would be expected: there is nothing unethical, no gluttony, in eating for example 150 grams of dry bread a day instead of 75. The Elder’s rigor in holding so tight to fasting of any kind (food, sleep etc.), as well as everything else in his behavior, is motivated by a very profound understanding and experience of the *mechanics of divine grace*.

By living spiritual life at that intensity, Elder Joseph is able to measure the slightest effects of everything he does, says or even thinks on his interior life of prayer and contemplation. Sometimes, a mere word or thought of pride is enough to make him lose grace. The experience of feeling abandoned by divine grace is unanimously described⁷⁹ as the most painful a human can endure. Thus he learns the hard way how any self-gratification can prove disastrous for the inner life.

Learning how to keep the grace longer is described as similar to learning an art, “the art of arts”, a process that could take a lifetime and which is learned best through

⁷⁷ ‘The specific rules of fasting of the contemporary Orthodox Church might be summarized as follows. All Wednesdays and Fridays (as well as Mondays for monastics – including Bishops, who are part of the monastic ranks) throughout the year are normally fast days, on which fish, meat, dairy products, wine, and oil are prohibited. However, when significant Feast Days fall on a Wednesday or Friday (or, in the case of monastic practice, on a Monday), fish, wine and oil or wine *and* oil may be permitted. [. . .] Likewise, when these days fall within a fast-free week or during a fast-free period, the normal prohibitions do not apply. [. . .] In addition to these fasts, contemporary Orthodox Christians also observe four long periods of fasting during the year, those of Great Lent, or the Great Fast; the Dormition, or Assumption, Fast; the Nativity, or Advent, Fast; and the Fast of the Holy Apostles.’ (Akakios 1990, 35).

⁷⁸ During Great Lent, they only eat 75 grams of flour, which they bake with water (Ephraim 2010, 335).

⁷⁹ See especially the testimonies of St Silouan the Athonite (Sophrony 1991).

direct experience. Spiritual literature can be useful, but an experienced spiritual father who can teach it is usually a necessity. This is what father Joseph is searching for in the early stages of his monastic life, but without any success. He is thus forced to experiment and see for himself what works and what doesn't.

Severe fasting is one thing he finds very helpful in the contemplative life. Especially during the first years of his vocation, when he struggles to get rid of the bodily passions, he finds a useful tool in very harsh fasting. We know of the painful eight years when the war of the flesh continually bothers him, day and night, until he is on the verge of despair. One can only imagine how useful of a weapon fasting can be under such circumstances.

But he is flexible enough to understand that it may not work for everyone. This is why, towards the end of his life, he realizes that fasting too harsh can actually be detrimental for some physically weaker disciples of his, leaving them exhausted and unable to sustain the concentration of the long night vigils. He therefore relaxes the brotherhood's diet to a prayer-wise optimal level.

When asked by one of his pupils in the final years of his life why he keeps fasting so much, since he had already achieved the level of dispassionateness, he replies:

'I fast for you, my children, so that God would grant His grace to you too.' (Ephraim 2010, 282).

3.2.7. Frequent communion

The issue of frequency of communion has been a polemical one in the Orthodox Church, at least during the past few centuries. It is generally agreed that the main purpose of performing Divine Liturgy is the communion of the faithful. But the ideal of constant readiness for the reception of Holy Mysteries became difficult to attain for most Christians. For piety reasons, the tendency swung towards the hieratic extreme, where people consider themselves unworthy to frequently receive the Holy Mystery.

When communion became less frequent – sometimes only two or three times a year – it also became more of an event, which of course needed more preparation. The most usual and handy form of such preparation, and an attempt to compensate for the unworthiness, was fasting a few days before Eucharist. In practice, this made communion even less frequent.

Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite attempted with some degree of success to combat these traditions in the 18th century⁸⁰, but at the beginning of the 20th century, when Fr. Joseph begins monastic life, monks on Athos had already returned to fasting at least three days before communion. Most of the monks are communicating on Saturdays, after three consecutive days of fasting⁸¹.

⁸⁰ With his book *Concerning Frequent Communion of the Immaculate Mysteries of Christ*, Nicodemus (2006).

⁸¹ Lay Orthodox normally fast on Wednesdays and Fridays and monks add Mondays to those two. In this case, they would also add Thursdays, to get those three consecutive days before communion

Young fathers Arsenios and Joseph read the writings of St Nicodemus and decide that one day of fasting before communion is enough, so they start communicating three times a week, on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, after each fasting day. The reason for not communicating on Sunday, the day of the Resurrection and in fact the day most suitable for communion, is to avoid scandalizing their neighbors. Communicating on Sundays would imply either fasting on Saturdays, which is canonically forbidden, or communicating without fasting, which would mean lack of piety and reverence for the Mystery in their neighbors' eyes. It must be indicated that, although the Josephine brotherhood would fast only one day before communion, they would hold an eight hours vigil every night, which apparently equates two days of fast (Joseph of Dionysiou 2005, 229).

The decisive step towards four communions a week, including Sundays, can only be taken during the next monastic generation, when Fr. Charalambos and his brotherhood move to Bourazeri (1967) and find a more auspicious spiritual climate. To be able to communicate on Sundays, in order to reconcile the need for fasting one day before and the prohibition on fasting on Saturdays, Fr. Charalambos comes up with a brilliant solution: he decides that during Saturdays the first meal (around 8 A.M.) is non-fasting, whereas the second and last one (in the afternoon) is fasting. This way, monks don't violate the prohibition, while still fasting for about 24 hours before Sunday's Eucharist.

Frequent communion is common in all of the Athonite monasteries today (Joseph of Dionysiou 2005, 230). It is difficult to estimate the effect of this practice on the individual or the community, because every Holy Mystery is believed to be carrying a very consistent spiritual load. The *effects* of the Holy Mysteries are always difficult to bring in a scientific analysis, but the Eucharistic theology does speak of the Holy Communion as being one of the principal ways of accessing divine grace. Furthermore, frequent communion is believed to be a very *effective* "medicine" and even a necessity in helping both monks and lay people in their struggle against passions. What frequent communion surely brings to a monastic community is that it makes monks more attentive to their spiritual life and gives them a more acute feeling of humbleness and participation to the sacramental life of the church.

As for Elder Joseph's revolutionary decision to make communion more frequent – three times more frequent, to be precise – it is yet another example of his fresh and bold approach to spiritual life. He thirsts for God and is ready to do whatever possible to *force* His grace. His Eucharistic enthusiasm – just like his enthusiasm for the Jesus Prayer – is received with caution and even hostility by his contemporaries, but his persistence would eventually prevail and lead to the current state of affairs.

3.2.8. Obedience and humility

Obedience is generally regarded as the starting point of the spiritual ascent. From obedience comes humility⁸² and from humility come dispassion, awareness of sin, thirst for God's grace, prayer and the other virtues. But obedience is the key because it depends solely on one's will and it is seen as a necessary foundation for any spiritual edifice.

Elder Joseph places a particularly huge emphasis on obedience. It is the only prerequisite he demands from his prospect disciples, but nevertheless one so difficult to attain. Because of his tireless zeal he makes a tough decision, informed by discernment, to be uncompromising in this respect, that is, not to even bother with disobedient disciples. Most of them are therefore rejected right from the first few days, after failing some basic tests. This is also the reason for having so few disciples, probably a case of quality over quantity. He thus gains a reputation of being very demanding and someone difficult to live with, when he in fact asks for one thing only: obedience at the absolute level.

'I want to make real monks, not broths' (Ephraim 2010, 181)

He teaches that obedience is the key issue in one's relationship with his elder, which, in turn, is a prototype of one's relationship with God. The obedient disciple comforts his elder and thus comforts God. Full obedience is therefore the only thing a monk should ever look for⁸³.

Although his reputation is that of a hesychast and a teacher of the Jesus Prayer, he doesn't start the training of his disciples with that, but, to their surprise, with obedience. He often says:

'Prayer comes from obedience and not the other way around.' (227).

The testimonies written by his disciples are full of stories very similar to those found in the literature on the Desert Fathers, where novices are taught the importance of being obedient even when it sounds counter-intuitive, absurd or foolish.

Obedience is not an end in itself, it is just a necessary step in acquiring humility and keeping safe from pride and delusion. When one is obedient, he is an imitator of Christ. Moreover, obedience to a spiritual father will serve as a strong anchor in the painful moments when divine grace pedagogically *hides* itself from the monk:

'When grace leaves for a while with the purpose of strengthening us, the spiritual father acts as a substitute for grace. He supports and guides us, heating our zeal until [. . .] grace will cover us again. [. . .] Some good monks, because of not possessing the right medicine against their weaknesses [obedience to a spiritual father], when they reach the point of being deserted by grace, they fall and get lost and this is how

⁸² 'From obedience comes humility, and from humility comes dispassion', St. John of the Ladder, Step 4: 71.

⁸³ 'This is the basic teaching of Athonite monasticism: have you comforted your elder? Then you have comforted God himself. Have you not comforted your elder? Then neither have you comforted God.' (Ephraim 2010, 226).

countless souls are being lost, although they had shown a strong will and a lot of zeal in the beginning.' (Elder Joseph the Hesychast 2003, 363-364).

Another method used by Elder Joseph to teach his monks obedience and humility is that of being very harsh, especially verbally. Fr. Ephraim, for example, recalls never having been called by his name by Elder Joseph, but only by depreciative nicknames. The same goes for Fr. Charalambos (Joseph of Dionysiou 2005, 50). This is Elder Joseph by day, the tough abbot. By night, however, during confession, he becomes the loving and tender father, who comforts his spiritual children (Ephraim 2010, 285). This form of double-personality, in no case a novelty in monastic literature, is in fact rather difficult for the abbot because it implies an unnatural disguise of his love and gentleness for pedagogical reasons.

Last but not least, from the organizational point of view, obedience is a key factor in the life of a monastic community. It places all the decision power and the responsibility that comes with it in the hands of one person: the abbot. It also ensures that the abbot's vision is more easily implemented and that the entire brotherhood ends up being a reflection of that vision. Although it seems to be very constrictive for the monks, it is actually liberating: as long as they obey their master, they are freed from any responsibility or concern. This feeling usually takes a huge load of their shoulders and keeps them safe from depression and despair.

The monasteries today, those that are *granddaughters* of Elder Joseph's small brotherhood, try to hang on to this principle of strict and absolute obedience. However, it is much more difficult to apply it in a big coenobium. In Vatopedi, which numbers more than one hundred monks, obedience is sometimes delegated, but still nothing ever happens without the abbot's blessing.

3.2.9. Charismatic eldership

Surrendering one's will forever into the hands of a master may be a basic principle of Orthodox monasticism⁸⁴, but in practice it is extremely difficult to be totally obedient, especially when the elder has some spiritual weaknesses that are obvious for the brotherhood. But the contrary is also true: the more evident the virtues of the elder, the easier for the disciple to follow and totally entrust himself to him.

Elder Joseph's case is, of course, the latter. But there's something more than his virtues and vast experience that inspires and motivates his spiritual children. Throughout his biographies there are numerous testimonies of his spiritual charismas, especially those of foresight and discernment (Ephraim 2010, 237-240).

Firstly, he seems to have the ability to *read* one's heart and give solutions to his most intimate problems and concerns. This charisma is manifested in his relationship

⁸⁴ The vow of obedience to the abbot is one of the three vows taken during tonsure, alongside the vow of chastity and the one of voluntary poverty.

with both his lay spiritual children, with whom he holds correspondence, but how much more with his own monks, during the daily confession and spiritual talk.

Secondly, the charismas of foresight and *spiritual notification* are of particular importance in the relationship with the disciples who have no doubt that all his decisions are based upon signs from above, the spiritual notifications:

‘The Elder would always act only after receiving notification in prayer; [...] Sometimes we would ask him about a certain thing we intended to do in the future, and he would promise to only give an answer the next day, after he prayed.’ (239-240).

It’s not easy and beyond the scope of this paper to explain exactly how this notification works. Elder Joseph himself explains it as an internal process, a thin disposition felt in the heart towards one option or the other, received after one had prayed intensely to get an answer.⁸⁵

These manifested charismas prove to be very important in motivating the disciples in their monastic struggles, because they are a living proof of everything that can be read in the spiritual literature:

‘His prayers used to have so much power and daring in front of God, that they were able to attract the grace of the Holy Spirit and give some of it to us too. [...] We were hearing and reading about the achievements of the great saints, which had happened *in those days*, but God has in fact honored us to see nowadays *with our own eyes*, from close by, the struggles and battles of this holy man. And they are with nothing inferior to those of the saints of ancient times. We, his disciples, have personally seen the triumphs of our Elder, things of which we were used to only read in the books.’ (279).

To summarize, Elder Joseph’s teaching is very simple and it is inspired by his own biography: through the reading of spiritual literature, one discovers a new, more profound existential dimension and he tries for himself to access those realities so vividly described by saints. He thus completely throws himself – almost naively, most of the times unsystematically and self-taught – into all kinds of efforts and spiritual exercises to test the things he reads about. The Jesus Prayer is the most common of these, due to its simplicity and attested results. Being granted, through divine grace, a foretaste of the *Kingdom*, he gradually immerses into the new realm, unloading all the unnecessary social bonds and obligations.

The further he gets the more he feels the burden of his passions and the difficulty of keeping the mind away from worldly concerns. At this point, Christian ethics can prove somewhat helpful, not as an exterior set of rules that have to be obeyed, but as a necessary compass to help him advance on the spiritual path.

⁸⁵ ‘He used to tell us that whenever someone wants to find out God’s will (in case they’re unable to contact their spiritual father), they must totally abandon any thoughts of their own and pray three times. After that, they should do that thing towards which their heart is more inclined because that will be according to God’s will. Those who are more advanced and have acquired daring in their prayer, they hear very clearly the notification and sometimes this comes as a voice or a vision.’ (Ephraim 2010, 240).

When all possibilities are exhausted, still *wounded by divine love*, but unable to internalize the Jesus Prayer and achieve more than sparkles of the uncreated light, it becomes obvious that he needs two things in order to make progress: firstly, a total depart from the world to free the mind from any material concern; secondly, a skillful master who knows from his own experience the subtleties of spiritual life lived at the highest level.

A new life starts, marked by deprivations and pains of all kinds, which are nothing when compared to the suffering of feeling deserted by grace. The monk learns what favors grace and what casts it away and thus organizes his life accordingly. Discipline, obedience, fasting, silence, control of the thoughts, regular confession and communion are all prerequisites of this life.

Work is also important, but only as to provide the means of survival and to give the mind some rest from the intensive concentration of the night vigils. He learns little by little how to keep grace for longer time and matures in the repeating cycle of tasting grace – losing it – and struggling to get it back again, while becoming more aware of his own unworthiness and of God’s love and grandeur.

When the time comes, his elder passes away and he inherits his blessing. He may then become a spiritual father in his turn for monks from the younger generations. This is what Elder Joseph sees as the essence of monasticism:

‘My children, it is easy for anyone in the world to come here, take the habit and become a monk. But this is not the true monastic life. For someone to be a true monk, he must leave the world in search for an experienced master, who can discern the truth from delusion. He then must pledge obedience and remain unconditionally faithful, *living* the Mental Prayer. If he does not cleanse himself from all the passions and does not acquire the *continuous work* of the Mental Prayer, he cannot call himself a monk. If he does not learn how to pray unceasingly, or at least close to that standard, he cannot be considered a true monk. He has only become monk on the outside, but not on the inside.’ (274).

4. The touch of hesychasm: towards a new kind of cenobitism

4.1. Internal causes: the charismatic elders and the conversion to cenobitism

The most important internal triggers of the spiritual revival are considered to be the emergence of an exceptional generation of charismatic fathers, possessing the gift of *eldership*, and an organizational reform, namely the conversion to cenobitism of the last nine monasteries that were still following the idiorrhythmic rule. The significance of these two factors could hardly be overestimated. However easy it may seem at a first glance to declare the case closed, their accountability for the renewal is rather limited. As it will be further demonstrated, there are still some key questions regarding the phenomenon of contemporary Athonite revival to which they fail to answer convincingly.

4.1.1. The charismatic elders

The first of the internal causes, the one responsible for determining most of the new Athonite vocations during the '50s, '60s and '70s, is by far the reputation of the charismatic elders, capable of living monastic life at its highest level, and of safely guiding the novices to the same peaks of mystical experiences. Father Joseph the Young is very clear about it, and his case is only one of many: his main motivation to come to Athos is the fame of the great hesychast spiritual fathers, in general, and of Elder Joseph the Hesychast, in particular (Joseph of Vatopedi 2008, 12-3).

Ware (1983, 57) records that several of the renewed monasteries have abbots with 'outstanding gifts of spiritual fatherhood', and Speake (2014, 211) draws the same conclusion:

'Perhaps the greatest single reason for the renewal is the presence on the Mountain today of so many outstanding spiritual fathers and abbots of international renown whose reputations and publications and personalities have attracted disciples in ever-increasing numbers.'

The validity of this argument is indubitable. What can be argued, however, is whether the reputation of the great hesychast figures alone can suffice to explain the phenomenon, especially in its later stages. As it seems, it may be the main cause of the first waves, but it cannot account for the continual influx ever since. The first generations of novices are attracted by the idea of living under the close supervision of such a father and saint like Elder Joseph. However, a few decades later, the revival is still happening even though abbots today are disciples of the first, second or even third generation of the original charismatic elders. And, as charismatic as these disciples

might still be, with most brotherhoods dramatically increasing in numbers and adopting the cenobitic routine, it is not very likely that the novice would enjoy such a close supervision as one can find in the testimonies about the small brotherhood of Elder Joseph the Hesychast.

So, although the issue of the charismatic elders can partly explain the beginning of the revival, there must be something else behind the Athonite transformation, something that perhaps depends more on a system or a principle and less on chance and personal charisma.

In the beginning of his book *Renewal in Paradise*, Speake (2014, 7) summarizes his opinion on the phenomenon: the recent revival has nothing essentially new in it, but it is just an episode in the natural cycle of regeneration followed by Athos for centuries:

‘Athonites are biologically incapable of reproducing themselves: they cannot survive without an intake from the world, and that intake will only present itself if there are enough men like Fr. Gabriel to draw them. The recent revival (...) is in no sense a reform. It is simply yet another manifestation of the Mountain regenerating itself in the way that it has always done – from within – and attracting new blood that will enable it not just to survive but to shine with the mystical radiance of an authentic icon.’

This paper argues that there is, in fact, a profound reform happening, although not one programmed by an agenda, and that this complex process of transformation is equally important to the contemporary revival as the presence of the charismatic and inspiring figures.

4.1.2. The conversion from idiorrhymy to cenobitism

The second of the big internal factors is the return of the nine remaining idiorrhymic monasteries to cenobitism. Idiorrhymy means that each monk follows his own (*idios*) “rhythm”. It is a form of monastic organization that allows more freedom for the individual. There are two main differences from the coenobium: a much reduced bond between the members of a community (there is no abbot appointed for life⁸⁶, attendance of the daily services is not obligatory, and monks provide their own meals and eat them in their own cells, except on special occasions) and the fact that monks are not bound to live in absolute personal poverty, but they can keep their former possessions and even get a regular income from them. This system⁸⁷ was introduced on Athos around the end of the 14th century and by the 16th century all the monasteries were idiorrhymic. It started out as form of monastic organization that would appeal more to the wealthy and educated, to those monks who wanted more personal and

⁸⁶ An idiorrhymic monastery does not have an abbot (*igoumenos*), but has a committee of two or three senior monks, known as *epitropoi*, who are elected annually from among the *proistamenoï*, the five or fifteen leading monks of the monastery (Cavarnos 1959, 26).

⁸⁷ Described in detail by Amand de Mendieta 1972, 190-197.

intellectual freedom. Gelzer⁸⁸ assigns the success of the model to a certain degree of compatibility with the democratic spirit of the Greek people, who refuse the autocratic rule of a cenobitic abbot and are less fond of long fasts and strict discipline. Amand de Mendieta (196) agrees that the idiorrhythmic system suits the Greeks better than the Slavs. Due to its increased flexibility, it is considered to have been partially responsible for the survival of Athonite monasticism during the harsh centuries of Ottoman rule.

While in theory idiorrhythmy gave room to an even stricter way of life and to as much asceticism as one wanted, in practice however, very often it led to a too relaxed and worldly way of life and even to the development of an 'aristocracy' among the monks (Speake 2014, 99). The very emergence of the sketes – organized according to the model of the ancient lavras – starting with the second half of the 16th century, is a clue that the standards of asceticism were falling in monasteries (Speake 2014, 109).

After the liberation from the Turks, the negative aspects of idiorrhythmy become more obvious than ever. But as recent as the 1960s, nine out of twenty monasteries⁸⁹ were still following the idiorrhythmic way of life. The pressure for a change was extremely high and idiorrhythmy was being treated as a debased form of monastic life. For example, Cavarnos (1959, 141) notes in the 1950s:

'I have heard other monks, both in idiorrhythmic and in cenobitic monasteries, strongly disapprove of the idiorrhythmic system and express their earnest desire that the nine idiorrhythmic monasteries on Athos return to the cenobitic system. They consider idiorrhythmism a deviation of monastic life that damages the monasteries both financially and spiritually. They stress that the older form of monastic organization, the cenobitic, benefits the monasteries in both respects: it cuts down expenses and frees the monks from many unnecessary cares, producing a more peaceful state of mind, and leaving more time for study and prayer.'

Later, in 1965, he already notices individual migrations from idiorrhythmy to cenobitism:

'One of the most pious brothers of the monastery [of Xeropotamou] whom I met in 1958, Gregory of Larissa, the baker, left in 1963 and went to the Monastery of St. Paul, apparently because he developed a preference for the stricter cenobitic system of St. Paul's to the idiorrhythmic system of Xeropotamou.' (Cavarnos 1988, 97).

Fr. Cherubim Karambelas confirms in 1972 (543):

'Youths who have a noble heart and know to search for evangelical truth and the pure and unadulterated monastic life thirst for a coenobium. They detest the idiorrhythmic system, which brings a myriad of evils to the monastic life. The young monks who flock today to the coenobium are a witness against the idiorrhythmic system.'

⁸⁸ H. Gelzer, *Vom Heiligen Berg und aus Makedonien*, Leipzig, 1904, p.35, cited by Amand de Mendieta 1972, 196.

⁸⁹ Mathematically less than half, but these nine included some of the biggest and most important of them: Great Lavra, Vatopedi and Iviron.

Some voices, such as fr. Theocletos', are even more critical and go as far as to not even count the idiorrhythmicists as true monks.⁹⁰ Beyond any controversy, it was becoming clear for all parties involved that idiorrhythmy could not nourish a monastic revival (Makarios 2004, 249).

However, it is difficult to believe that the simple conversion to cenobitism could have solved the problem. Traditional cenobitism, while being almost unanimously considered a better option, also had its own drawbacks. Cenobitic monasteries can sometimes reach impressive numbers in terms of population. The Russian Athonite monastery of St. Panteleimon used to host around 2000 monks at the beginning of the 20th century (Ware 1993, 129). It is reasonable to believe that in such a case, a monk wouldn't even be able to know all his brothers, let alone develop personal relationships with them. Following the same logic, the more numerous a monastery, the less relevant for each brother the charisma of the spiritual leader. Returning to the example of the 2000 monks community, a young novice could never hope for a direct supervision from his abbot. He would barely hope the abbot knows his name.

Furthermore, although in theory a cenobitic community is the most favorable setting for the personal development of a monk (Amand de Mendieta 1972, 231), in practice it can lean towards a militaristic style that can be suffocating for some, as the example of elder Sabbas the Father Confessor (1821-1908) shows:

'Accustomed to the stillness from his youth, he found no repose in the populous community of the coenobium. The atmosphere there oppressed him, and he was consumed by the yearning for silence. His soul thirsted for some desert hermitage.' (Karambelas 1992, 394).

To simplify, any monastic community that continually pursues the benefit of the group can tend to neglect the individual and level up the diversity within it. And the larger the group, the stronger this tendency. In the context of the 20th and now the 21st century, with recruits coming from a drastically transformed society and with a very different mindset, it is highly unlikely that the cenobitic model in its traditional shape would be too appealing.

The final argument, proving that the simple conversion from idiorrhythmy to cenobitism cannot account for a revival of such dimension, is that 11 out of 20 monasteries were already cenobitic when the crisis peaked, and had been so for almost 200 years, but this did not prevent them from facing the same challenges as the rest of the Mountain.

Between an idiorrhythmic system that is too relaxed and a cenobitic one that is not flexible enough to suit the modern man, what could Athos – and Orthodox monasticism, in general – choose?

⁹⁰ In his book, *Between heaven and earth* (Theocletos 2015), when referring to Athonite monks, he only counts the cenobites, the contemplatives and the hermits, but he never refers to those living in idiorrhythmic monasteries.

4.2. Mutated cenobitism

The answer may be found in a *third way* of Athonite monastic life, described by Ware as *semi-eremitic* or *semi-cenobitic* (2000, 188-193). It is the kind of life lived by the elders Joseph and Arsenios and their handful of disciples. This life is eremitic in its remoteness from the popular pilgrimage routes, in the scarcity of facilities and resources and in its approach towards the Divine Office and personal prayer: most of the church services are performed by each monk in his own cell or even replaced with the Jesus Prayer⁹¹. But it is cenobitic in the communal aspect of most of the activities (working, eating etc.), and in the absolute obedience pledged by all the members of the brotherhood to one elder/abbot.

When the first monasteries start turning to cenobitism at the end of 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, they are immediately populated by small groups of monks gathered around a charismatic leader. These groups come precisely from this type of semi-eremitic background. They bring along to their new, bigger settings, some of the characteristics of their former life.

One of these characteristics is the extensive practice of the Jesus Prayer, both during daytime, and especially during personal vigils at night. Another one, equally important, is a very personal relationship between the disciple and the elder, characterized by total obedience from the part of the former, and a close – and sometimes charismatic – supervision offered by the latter. Other examples include the frequent communion, the attention for every detail of spiritual life and the predilection for asceticism.

It is the main idea of this paper that all the characteristics mentioned above produce a crucial transformation in the cenobitic monastic lifestyle and that it is this transformation that triggers the remarkable contemporary revival. When semi-eremitic life moves to the big monasteries and sketes, the mixture gives birth to a *mutated* form of cenobitism. It is this *hesychastic cenobitism* that is capable of reversing the Athonite fate, and of generating so much enthusiasm for the last half a century, even after the first generation of charismatic elders is gone. The following subchapters will analyze the transmission from the desert to the coenobium of the above-mentioned practices and characteristics, and the transformations they bring along.

⁹¹ Archimandrite Cherubim Karambelas describes the eremitic rule of prayer of Elder Neophytus and his disciple, the future Elder Ignatius the Father Confessor, around mid 19th century: 'The daily services were performed according to the eremitic rule – that is, not with books, but with prayer-ropes. For example, the nightly service began; they each said five or six prayer-ropes, one after the other. When they had spent exactly three hours, an alarm clock rang, and with "Through the prayers..." the elder ended the service.' (Karambelas 1992, 467).

4.3. The achievability of hesychia and mystical experience in cenobitic life

The Jesus Prayer never ceased to be practiced on the Holy Mountain, no matter how low the overall standards of spirituality had fallen. But it has always been associated with the hermits. Even though monks in cenobitic monasteries might have practiced it in the intimacy of their cells, all the clues point to the conclusion that this was rather marginal and, at least for the past few centuries, it has never been systematically practiced outside the hermitages.

Throughout the sources covering the period between roughly 1850 and 1950 (Karambelas 1992, Lazarus 2012), every mention of the usage of the Jesus Prayer is linked to the eremitic area⁹². Moreover, as it will be shown later in the chapter, there used to be a firm belief that the Jesus Prayer can only be practiced in the secluded, remote environments and that for a cenobitic monk who would like to try it, it is of absolute necessity to leave his coenobium and move to the desert. Elder Dionysius' answer shows this very clearly:

‘«Father, is the Jesus Prayer still practiced on the Holy Mountain?»

«Yes, it is, but mainly in the desert. Because only in the desert is one able to lay the foundation of this great work. To be able to orientate the mind towards God, it is necessary not to see or hear anything [distractive]. But in the big monasteries too [...] some of the monks, who were struggling to acquire the Mental Prayer but were hindered by various tasks they had, they used to ask for the blessing to leave the monastery and go to a cave or to any crack in the mountain rocks in order to keep their mind and thought in God forever.»’ (Dionysius 2010, 111)

Surprisingly, Elder Dionysius' words come from a conversation in 2002, when hesychasm had already penetrated the cenobitic monasteries for a few decades. Father Dionysius (+2004), aged 92 and an Athonite hermit for 74 years at the time of this conversation, had his monastic training during the 1920s and the 1930s, so he may be considered in many respects a voice of a mentality from the past. But the skepticism towards the practice of the Jesus Prayer in cenobitic communities still has some

⁹² Examples:

- About Elder Hilarions and his disciple, future Elder Sabbas the Father Confessor: ‘Other weapons were the cease ceaseless invocation of the Name of Jesus and the almost daily Communion’ (Karambelas 1992, 382).
- About Elder Condratus of Karakallou: ‘His faith in prayer, and especially mental prayer, was deep and unshakeable. He wanted the saving and all-powerful name of Jesus never to be absent from the mouth and heart of his disciples. “By the name of Jesus flog your enemies” and “let the name of Jesus be attached to your breath”. This was his password.’ (Karambelas 1992, 557).
- About Elder Isaac of Dionysiou: ‘When we were praying together [at the cell of the Holy Apostles, close to the monastery of Dionysiou] the matins, it was enough for him to pray two ropes of “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon us!”. Starting with the third rope, his heart would heat up with love and divine zeal and he couldn’t control himself any more to only whisper the prayer. He would shout every word with zeal and with ardent love, as if Christ would stand right before him.’ (Lazarus 2012, 65-66).

supporters today, in what will be labeled “the camp of the realists” further in the chapter.

However, the contemporary proliferation of the Jesus Prayer in most of the cenobitic monasteries can be easily observed today, at least in its outward manifestation: some of the things that used to be characteristic only to the hermitages –

‘If you had visited St. Basil’s Skete at that time [1920’s] [...] walking around the little roads of the Skete you would have heard resound the sweet Name of our Lord with longing and expectancy: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”.’ (Karambelas 1992, 665)

– are today fully at place in the big monasteries.

But can the mere practice of the Jesus Prayer – be it aloud, on the road, or silently, in the cell – be accountable for the rejuvenation of Athonite monasticism? If the contemporary spiritual revival is indeed connected to the export of the hesychast practices from the desert to the cenobitic monasteries, a crucial question would then concern the degree of profoundness of such practices that one can achieve in the busy coenobium.

It is very important to investigate to which extent the Jesus Prayer can be practiced to its fullest outside its original setting. In other words, is it even possible in a crowded cenobitic monastery to reach the state of ceaseless inner prayer and to live mystical experiences of the kind Elder Joseph the Hesychast describes?

The comparison between the cenobitic and eremitic ways of life is as old as monasticism itself. The discussion resembles, to a certain extent, the one concerning the differences between monasticism and laity: in theory there should be no difference – after all, there isn’t one Gospel for monks and another Gospel for lay-people, but the same Gospel and the same commandments for all Christians, as many preachers like to emphasize – but in practice the two ways of life are rather different. The same is true for the two main monastic pathways: in theory, they are considered equal, but in practice, life in a community has always been ‘regarded as the lower and more worldly form of monastic life’ (Amand de Mendieta 1972, 320).

St Basil the Great and others insist on the importance of communal life using very compelling theological arguments. St Athanasios, the official founder of Athonite monasticism, also insists that the hermits are not to look on themselves as an elite; on the contrary, the cenobitic vocation, faithfully observed, should be on equal footing with the eremitic (Ware 1996, 13). But in reality, the dominant opinion has always been that the community hampers the development of spiritual gifts and makes it impossible to reach the highest level of mystical life (Amand de Mendieta 1972, 320). Fr. Theocletos of Dionysiou, one of the most respected Athonite voices of the past decades, an artisan of the spiritual renewal and a cenobite himself, strongly asserts the same belief in a conversation with Cavarnos:

‘A monastery is a school where men are instructed and trained in the science and art of purifying themselves of what the Church Fathers call passions. Those who have

achieved such purification are qualified to become hermits. A hermit has the possibility of rising to the state of contemplation (*theoria*), of mystical union with God.

«But isn't mystical experience possible to those who live in monasteries?», I asked.

«No», he replied. «To attain to such an experience one must live in complete quiet (*hesychia*) and pray constantly. But one who lives in a monastery is burdened with cares and tasks that make that impossible.»

«Are there mystics on Mount Athos today?» I asked Theocletos.

«Yes», he answered, «among the hermits. Of course, the fact that one is a hermit does not mean that one is necessarily a mystic (*theoretikos*).»' (Cavarnos 1959, 123-124).

It is true that both in the hesychast spring of the 14th century and in the two hesychast renaissances of the 18th and the 20th century, the epicenters of these movements have always been not the monasteries, but the lesser sketes and hermitages. It is also true that life in a large community may be too distracting for the intense practice of inner prayer. But even if a hermitage can offer the ideal conditions for practicing the prayer, it would be too much, according to Ware, to say that it enjoys an exclusive monopoly. If the criterion is not the exterior condition, but the interior one, while it is true that certain settings may prove more favorable for interior silence, 'there is no situation whatever which renders interior silence altogether impossible' (2000, 106).

Archimandrite Cherubim Karambelas also emphasizes the view that, while the general rule may be that silence reinforces spiritual life, there are also exceptions, because 'the wind blows where it wishes'⁹³. He presents the examples of St. John of Kronstadt,

'a bright meteor of holiness in the Orthodoxy of the North [...]. In spite of his innumerable pastoral duties, he experienced so intensely within himself the presence of God that he surpassed even the most strict and secluded hermits.' (2002, 527);

and of Elder Ignatius the Confessor:

'He had many distractions: continual priestly duties, extensive work as a confessor, gatherings for the worship in his kalyve [cell] etc. Despite all this, his spiritual level was so high that even the most isolated hesychasts of the Holy Mountain wondered at him. The grace of the Holy Spirit replaced silence; "it made up the deficiency". [...] Sitting on this [a low chair] in the quiet hours of the night, he surrendered himself to intense self-concentration. By divine grace he brought down his mind to his heart, pronounced ceaselessly the name of the Lord, and obtained thus the unutterable blessings of mental prayer, culminating in visitations of the immaterial and otherworldly Light' (527-528).

When Fr. Cherubim says that, in the case of Elder Ignatius, 'the grace of the Holy Spirit replaced silence' and 'made up the deficiency', he restricts the meaning of *hesychia* to the external state of silence, which of course cannot be fully achieved when one has a lot of social – even though monastic – obligations. But if *hesychia* is

⁹³ Jn 3:8.

understood as a state of the soul, rather than an outward condition, the examples above become more than mere exceptions from the rule.

Ware (2000) explores the connection between internal hesychia and external solitude according to patristic sources (94-96) and finds compelling arguments that a contemplative life at the highest level and the fullness of the vision of God are possible not only outside the hermitages, in fairly large monastic communities, but also 'in the middle of cities', as a lay person:

'The Jesus Prayer makes it possible for each of us to be an "urban hesychast", preserving inwardly a secret center of stillness in the midst of our outward pressures, carrying the desert with us in our hearts wherever we go.'⁹⁴

The distinction between inner and outer silence is made even clearer in one of the answers given by John of Gaza to a brother who was living in community and asked him whether he should become a hermit and 'practice the silence of which the Fathers speak', because he found his duties as a monastic carpenter disturbing and distracting. John replies:

'Like most people, you do not understand what is meant by the silence of which the Fathers speak. Silence does not consist in keeping your mouth shut. One person may speak ten thousand useful words, and it is counted as silence; another speaks a single unnecessary word, and it is counted as a breach of the Lord's commandment, "You shall give account in the day of judgment for every idle word that comes out of your mouth" (Mt 12: 32).'⁹⁵

If the true meaning of hesychia is more interiorized and spiritual, the hesychast is then 'not someone who has journeyed outwardly into the desert, but someone who has embarked upon the journey inwards into his own heart' (93). If the condition of hesychia is watchful vigilance, then a hesychast 'need not always be a solitary but can be equally a monk living in community' (91).

In this light, the answer to the question regarding the possibility of ceaseless prayer and mystical experience outside the hermitage becomes pretty clear. The external setting may be an important factor, but it is not crucial. As in the case of the breathing exercises and bodily techniques that sometimes accompany the Jesus Prayer, external silence can be helpful, but it is in no case vital.

If the coenobium can offer the monk enough time for personal development, alongside the close personal supervision of an experienced, loving elder, it can be as favorable as the desert for the practice of the Jesus Prayer. In fact, as it will be further shown, by setting the monk totally free from any material concern, it can prove even more favorable than the eremitic houses.

⁹⁴ Kallistos Ware, "Ways of prayer and contemplation: Eastern." In *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, edited by B. Meginn, J. Meyendorff and J. Leclercq. New York: Crossroad. 1985, cited by Johnson 2010, 144.

⁹⁵ Barsanuphius and John, *Questions and Answers*, §554 (in the numbering of both Schoinas and of Regnault and Lemaire), cited in Ware 2000, 96.

4.4. The hesychast program: from the desert to the cenobitic monasteries

When studying the organizational transformations happening in the Athonite monasteries in the period of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, besides the conversion to cenobitism already described earlier in the chapter, three main reforms can be observed, two of which are directly related to the Jesus Prayer: frequent communion and more emphasis placed on the communal **liturgical celebration**, more room for private prayer (**Jesus Prayer**) **in the cell**, and the extensive practice of the **Jesus Prayer outside the cell**. All of them are implemented on the background of the elevation of the role played by the spiritual father and the increased importance attributed to absolute obedience.

Each of the aspects mentioned in the previous paragraph deserves special attention. The following subchapters will therefore focus on the imported practice of the Jesus Prayer, both inside and outside the privacy of the cell, alongside the renewed importance ascribed to the liturgy and to the figure of the spiritual father.

4.4.1. Monastic routine and the import of the Jesus Prayer

With the question of the achievability of hesychia being answered, there arises another one. The practice of the Jesus Prayer doesn't only require silence, it also needs rhythmicity, regularity and, most importantly, long hours every day. In the hermitages, most of the daily services are replaced by hours of privately praying the Jesus Prayer in the cell. Where does one find the time for the Jesus Prayer in a cenobitic monastery, besides the compulsory participation in the long daily services and the work-related tasks? This section will deal with investigating how exactly the extensive and systematic practice of the Jesus Prayer can be reconciled with the already crowded daily routine in a coenobium.

The eremitic rule observed by Elder Joseph the Hesychast and inherited by his disciples entails first and foremost a private vigil of at least six hours of Jesus Prayer every night. In a conversation with Cavarnos (1959, 206-207), Fr. Ephraim – Elder Joseph's former disciple and soon to become abbot of Philotheou – says that in his brotherhood the Jesus Prayer is practiced every morning⁹⁶ for six to seven hours, and again in the afternoon.

It must be clarified from the start that this kind of rule cannot physically fit into the cenobitic program and it would have been unrealistic for the hermits to hope they will be able to replicate their exact daily routine once in the monasteries.

In addition to this, it should be noted that, except for Stavronikita, none of the monasteries is completely deserted. The newly appointed abbots, although having full

⁹⁶ Not exactly in the morning, but rather at night: their morning is when they get up for prayer, which is at sunset.

spiritual and administrative authority, cannot defy the old monks living in the monastery at the time of their arrival by radically changing the rule they've been observing for decades. Diplomacy and finesse are required in order not to inflame the tension between the old residents and the "newcomers". Their challenge is beautifully described by Fr. Maximos of Simonopetra:

'The elder [Aimilianos of Simonopetra], therefore, was faced with the challenge of introducing the intoxicating wine of mystical prayer into the sobering wine-skins of a large, community monastery. The wine was precious, and not a drop of it could be lost, but neither could the skins be broken' (Maximos 2015, 81).

4.4.1.1. Jesus Prayer in the cell

Most of the newly appointed abbots, both from the external and the internal wave, and without necessarily knowing one another, consider the nightly vigil (*agripnia*) to be the most important element in a monk's spiritual life, as Fr. Makarios of Simonopetra explains:

'It is essential for a monk living in a community to have this inner conversation and relationship with God. [...] Most of the monasteries, but above all Elder Joseph himself, his brotherhood, and Father Aimilianos, without knowing one another, have come to emphasize the same practice: the private vigil of the monk, done every night. We're not talking about the communal liturgical services, but about the private prayer done by a monk in his cell during the night. Elder Aimilianos has particularly outlined the importance of the nightly prayer. He has arranged the life of our monastery in such a fashion that it would favor the private prayer at night. (...) When a monk is able to have a conversation with God every day at the same hour, he can have an authentic spiritual life. [...] Our Elder [Fr. Aimilianos] is not very systematic. He did not teach his disciples a certain method of prayer, he only offered them a frame, by helping each monk find his own preferred time, his own way of sitting in front of God, of presenting himself in front of God. [...] From that moment on, divine grace must be given room to work, because most of the times the monk's own will obstruct the working of the grace of God. What Elder Aimilianos taught us is not a certain method of attracting divine grace, but rather how to open our own hearts, through the practice of these night vigils, to make them receptive of the divine grace' (Cabas 2007, 80-81).

In the semi-eremitic cells of the sketes, Elder Joseph's brotherhood and those formed around each of his disciples after his repose, all live a life centered on the night vigil, consisting of long hours (minimum six) of praying mainly the Jesus Prayer. Everything else is secondary and thus subdued to making the vigil more effective.

But this is not applicable to the new cenobitic settings, where the daily schedule is very crowded, mainly because of the tasks related to receiving the continual flux of pilgrims and the strict observance of the church services, where participation of most of the monks is compulsory. Fr. Gabriel, abbot of Dionysiou, describes the typical schedule of a cenobitic monastery, in a conversation with Cavarnos (1959, 120-122):

'We rise at six o'clock Byzantine time, that is, six hours after sunset, and pray in private for an hour. At seven, we go to the *katholikon*⁹⁷ for the *orthros* [matins], which takes from two to three hours. At twelve, we rise and go to the side chapel of the main church for the liturgy and a prayer of entreaty (*paraklesis*). (On Sundays and major holy days the liturgy is performed in the *katholikon* proper.) These take about an hour and a half. When they are over, we go to the refectory and have our first meal, which takes about half an hour. During the next two hours, between two and six, we occupy ourselves with our special tasks. Next we have a two hour period of rest and study, followed by an hour and a half devoted to our tasks. From nine thirty to ten thirty we have vespers in the main church. Then we eat supper. After this, we take a walk for half an hour. At twelve, when the gate of the monastery closes, we have the *apodeipnon* [compline], which takes about thirty minutes. At one o'clock, which is one hour after sunset, we go to bed. [...] Our typical day thus comprises roughly eight hours of prayer, eight of work, and eight of rest.'

The basic principle used by most of the new brotherhoods when adjusting the cenobitic schedule to meet the hesychast criteria is more time for the private prayer (Jesus Prayer, mainly) during the night. The program is thus subtly, but significantly tailored to allow the maximum extension of that hour of private prayer early in the morning, before the church services start, as mentioned by Fr. Gabriel. The time ascribed to private prayer is gained through small patches cut from here and there, which do not significantly affect the rest of the activities. When added up, they form a more consistent time unit dedicated to the Jesus Prayer, which can be considered a small private vigil.

Some of the time is gained from the slight relaxation of the liturgical program, where possible. This is easy to do in Stavronikita, where Fr. Vasileios' monks are free to adjust the program according to their hesychast longing – inside the limits prescribed by monastic rules – because there are no more old monks left from the previous brotherhood. When visiting Stavronikita, in 1976, Pennington can already see the small schedule adjustments. He notes in his journal that the morning service begins an hour later 'giving the monks time to pray in their cells' (1984, 40).

Philotheou is one of the monasteries where the *hesychast program* of extensive private prayer in the cell is applied closest to the maximal standard. Since the installation of the new brotherhood, under abbot Ephraim, the monks are given four hours each night, from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. to practice the Jesus Prayer (Ware 1983, 58).

Simonopetra is another one of the monasteries where the abbot manages to impose a program that includes many hours of private prayer every night. In its case, this reform is relatively easy to introduce, because the residing monks are so old that they do not challenge Fr. Aimilianos' decisions in any way (Cabas 2007, 80). The process is described by Fr. Maximos (2015,82):

'The monk's rule of prayer was expanded into a lengthy vigil of four to six hours in duration. This had always been the practice among solitaries and small groups of hesychasts, but never in the great monasteries, where the rule of prayer was often limited to rising an hour or so before the morning service, and performing a limited

⁹⁷ The *katholikon* is the central chapel of any monastery or skete.

number of bows and Jesus Prayers. Now, however, the bulk of the night was to be spent in prayer and devotional reading. Special attention was given to the spiritual study of the Old and New Testaments. To this could be added: meditation on the hymns from the coming day's services; the reading of saints' lives; and the writings of the Church Fathers. The monks also had to perform a large number of ritual bows, often running into the many hundreds, although the exact figure depended on one's age, health, and the kind of work load that one carried during the day. The main emphasis of course was on the Jesus Prayer, and here, too, the number of recitations varied from monk to monk.'

During his few months spent at Simonopetra in 1976, Pennington (1984, XV) is able to already observe the flexibility of the schedule so as to give more room to private prayer:

'In the monasteries, the Services hold a central place. This is not say that the Hegumen [abbot] may not exempt particular monks from many or even all the Services so that they can prolong their prayer in the cell or complete the necessary work of the monastery.'

Pennington spends most of his Athonite time at Simonopetra, with brief visits to some of the other monasteries. He thus naturally concludes that this kind of flexibility he sees at work in Simonopetra is probably characteristic to all the monasteries. But that is not the case. In Dionysiou, for example, – a monastery renowned for its rigorousness in keeping the rule of long services intact – any adjustment of the schedule proves impossible. Upon accepting the abbacy of Dionysiou, Fr. Charalambos requires that the monastery accept the hesychast program of his group, as practiced at Bourazeri. When most of the old monks resist, he drops the request, but allows some of the young monks, who are more "silence-lovers", to skip the first two hours of the morning service and stay in their cells, praying the Jesus Prayer. In the end he is forced to abandon this too and be content only with the introduction of frequent communion (Joseph of Dionysiou 2005, 157-158).

The same clash goes on in many monasteries, and even in some of the smaller houses⁹⁸. The result is usually a compromise solution, which satisfies both camps.

If the daily liturgical services cannot be significantly reduced to give more room for private prayer, time has to be taken from other activities. In Simonopetra, for instance, it is decided that hospitality (*philoxenia*, in Greek: love of strangers) should be reduced to a reasonably low maximum number of pilgrims accommodated each day, so that the monks won't be too burdened by it to the extent that they lose disposition for prayer⁹⁹.

Even more prayer time is gained through a smart, minor reshuffle of the daily activities, which results in less fragmentation.

⁹⁸ As is the case of the skete of the Prophet Elijah (Pennington 1984, 36).

⁹⁹ Out of the 20 monasteries, Simonopetra still remains the place where it is probably the most difficult to spend the night. Pilgrims have to book their place weeks in advance and if they fail to do so, they will be gently guided towards the neighboring monastery of Grigoriou.

	Dionysiou 1950s	Vatopedi 2000s
8 PM ¹⁰⁰	Compline	Work/study/rest
9 PM	Sleep	Sleep and private prayer
10 PM		
11 PM		
12 AM		
1 AM		
2 AM		
3 AM	Matins	Matins
4 AM		
5 AM		
6 AM	Sleep	Divine Liturgy
7 AM		
8 AM	Divine Liturgy; Paraklisis	First Meal
9 AM		First meal
10 AM	Work	Work
11 AM		
12 PM	Sleep/study	Sleep
1 PM		
2 PM	Work	Vespers (and Paraklisis)
3 PM	Vespers	
4 PM	Second meal	
5 PM	Walk/chat	Second meal
6 PM	Work	Walk/chat
7 PM		Compline
		Work/study/rest

The table above features an approximate comparison between the schedule of a regular weekday at Dionysiou in the 1950s, according to Cavarnos' account, and the one currently used at Vatopedi, derived from the author's own observations, hence the

¹⁰⁰ An approximation for the time of the sunset

approximation status. But some modifications are easily observed. Firstly, the break between matins and the Divine Liturgy has been eliminated, so the morning services are now grouped into a single unit. Secondly, the break between the first two periods of work is dropped.

The result is a program where activities are grouped together more efficiently – only two blocks of rest instead of three, two blocks of work instead of three, only three blocks of church services instead of four – according to the pattern liturgy-meal-work-rest, which is repeated twice every day. This kind of structuring looks ideal in terms of keeping safe from both too much fragmentation, which can lead to inefficiency, and too many consecutive hours of doing the same activity, which runs the risk of boredom and loss of focus.

Last but not least, another possibility for the monks who wish to practice the Jesus Prayer more extensively is to sleep less and wake up earlier. Less sleep may work fine for some people, but if it is to become a handy solution for all in a community, a certain type of lifestyle is needed, one where physical work, for example, doesn't leave the monks exhausted at the end of the day. Fortunately, most of the cenobitic monasteries today are able to offer exactly that, mainly due to the improvement of material conditions.

The economy of most monasteries has improved significantly, as described earlier in the paper. When the external financial support is added to the equation, it is easier to understand why many monasteries don't need to worry any more about the material aspect. That does not mean that the monks have stopped working, it rather means that their work is not burdened with the concern for immediate results any more. The very heavy works, such as constructions, have been assigned to paid workers, while the monks still handle most of the agricultural works and the tasks related to hospitality.

Helped by (sometimes state of the art) technology, the physical effort required from the part of the monks is less demanding than it used to be. Moreover, many monks are doing intellectual or artistic work, which is physically less demanding too.

In the past, monks used to retire from the monasteries to remote places in order to be freed from the various chores, and be able to fully dedicate to a life of prayer and contemplation. But with the recent developments, hermits are often forced to work more than monks in coenobia (Makarios 2004, 273). In this light, it can be said that the context for the practice of the Jesus Prayer is nowadays often better in the cenobitic monasteries than in the hermitages, with the condition that the spiritual father of the monastery is himself preoccupied with the subtleties of inner life rather than with activism and production of any kind (Cabas 2007, 82).

4.4.1.2. Jesus Prayer outside the cell

The core of a hesychast life lies, of course, in the private vigil: standing for long hours every night in a state of maximum spiritual focus, gathering the mind from its

dispersion, repeating the simple words of the Jesus Prayer and gradually being filled by the touch of divine grace. But one cannot simply live a worldly life for the most part of the day and then for two, four or six hours expect to be able to *keep the mind in the heart*.

The night vigil is only the most intense part of a combined effort, which usually encompasses all the aspects of one's life. Not surprisingly, the Jesus Prayer proves to be a very powerful tool during daytime too. As seen in the life and teaching of Elder Joseph the Hesychast, the continual repetition of the prayer during any daytime activity that allows it may not result in spectacular visions of the divine light, but it can be of utmost importance in the effort to eradicate passions and to keep the mind from scattering.

It is, therefore, to be expected that the monks who spend their nights in prayer, imploring the mercy of the Lord, will try to impregnate their entire life with the words of the Jesus Prayer. And this is currently observable in the Athonite monasteries. Every monk carries with him a prayer rope and silently repeats the prayer in his mind wherever possible. The novices and the more zealous monks even do it aloud. Every group task, be it in the kitchen, in the garden or fishing on a boat, is accompanied by one voice saying the prayer loudly and the others silently repeating it in their mind.

More surprisingly is to see the monks spinning the prayer ropes during church services. It is known that a monk unable to attend a service can compensate by praying a certain number of prayer ropes, but why should monks who are present at the service be doing it?

The answer seems to lie in the same zeal that pushes the Athonite monks to harness every moment of time that is available to them and to transform it in prayer. Some try to make up for the insufficient hours of prayer in the cell¹⁰¹. Others find it difficult to follow the long services (Dionysius 2010, 51-52), especially since they are often performed in a language different from their own.¹⁰²

But most of the monks exercise a kind of multi-tasking, trying to pay as much attention to the service as possible, while continuously saying the Jesus Prayer in the background. This is also a training for the rest of the day, because the monk is supposed to become able of saying the Prayer while doing his tasks and even while having conversations. Father Maximos explains it, when interviewed by Cavarnos (1959, 48):

‘«Is it possible», I asked, «to practice this prayer during church services, which take up so much of the monk's time?». «Yes», replied Maximos. «One can carry on simultaneously two or even three different activities: one can listen to the chanting or the reading, following what is said, and also pray mentally. In the refectory, a monk can simultaneously eat, listen to the reading, and pray. Repeated prayer of the heart increases one's ability to do this. To get important results, one must practice this form of prayer with single-mindedness over a long period»’.

¹⁰¹ A monk once complains to Elder Charalambos that it is very difficult for him to seriously practice the Jesus Prayer because of the crowded schedule of his monastery. The elder replies: ‘Other monks from the monasteries, who confess to me, tell me the same thing. But God is not unjust. You should perform all your tasks and say the Jesus Prayer during the church services’ (Joseph of Dionysiou 2005, 210).

¹⁰² Except for the Romanians, who have all the services translated in contemporary, understandable Romanian, all the other Athonite monks have their services in languages that are extinct (Ancient Greek, Old Slavonic).

4.4.2. Frequent communion and the rediscovered joy of liturgical celebration

From what has been said so far, one could get the impression that there is a tension between the communal liturgical celebration and one's own agenda of private Jesus Prayer in the cell. In other words, the church services are something that *has to be done*, sometimes on behalf of the more important and fruitful private vigil that one longs for.

But this couldn't be farther from the truth and the case of Simonopetra is best to illustrate it. For Elder Aimilianos, private prayer and liturgical celebration are of equal importance and they function as two complementary wings, which need one another in order to be able to fly. Guided by the story of his own experience of the divine light (Maximos 2015, 74-81), which happens on an axis connecting the cell and the church, thus starting in the privacy of his cell and culminating in the liturgical celebration, he envisages the synthesis between hesychasm and cenobitism on the same coordinates: each of his monks will 'spend several hours in his cell, devoting himself to the practice of the Jesus Prayer, in preparation for the sacramental encounter with God in the Liturgy' (81).

Private prayer in the cell fires up the heart and prepares one for a deeper understanding of the liturgy or spiritual lecture, as Elder Charalambos explains to a monk who was accusing him of neglecting the church services on behalf of the cell prayer:

'Do you really want me to tell you how we do our services? We first hold vigil in our cells, saying the Prayer, so that the mind becomes illuminated. Then, we open the service books and start reading. But one feels so much spiritual sweetness, so much joy and humility, that the heart warms up of divine love and, leaving the books aside, he throws himself with the face on the ground and starts to cry irrepressibly. [...] I am not very educated, because I've only attended school until the 4th grade, but when the mind opens up [because of the Prayer], one can understand the texts written in Ancient Greek better than a professor. You should try to heat up with prayer first and then you will see the difference.' (Joseph of Dionysiou 2005, 208-209)

The accounts of liturgical celebrations in the hermitages all speak about an indescribable feeling of the presence of divine grace. Human language seems insufficient when it comes to describing how grace permeates the air and how the hearts of those present are filled with joy to such an extent that it is almost felt like a burden, as if they would be about to explode. Countless stories speak of the Divine Liturgy having to be halted for minutes and even hours because the priest, usually a saintly figure, could not help his tears of joy.

It would therefore be a mistake to suspect the hesychasts of not giving liturgical celebration its deserved importance. On the contrary, as Fr. Charalambos and Fr. Aimilianos understand it, the intense private prayer only nourishes the liturgical experience.

The struggle of Elder Aimilianos of Simonopetra, Elder Ephraim of Philotheou, Elder Charalambos and all the other artisans of the revival is not to replace a certain monastic lifestyle with another, just because they fancy it more. It is an effort to create conditions for their spiritual children to have their own experiences of the divine. In the case of Simonopetra, which is the best documented, the basic principle of the liturgical and hesychast renewal

‘was, and remains clear: “the time of liturgy is the time of revelation, in proportion to one’s preparation in the cell”. At Simonopetra, the programme established by Elder Aimilianos enables one to learn by experience that the prayer of the heart and the liturgy of the church are located on a single continuum. And this is because the elder’s experience itself was marked by a force that pulled him into the centre of established, public worship, in a manner that took nothing away from contemplation and silent prayer, but which rather showed how they are two aspects of a higher synthesis.’ (Maximos 2015, 83).

The hermitages can only stage humble liturgical displays, due to the scarcity of resources. A chapel has only a few square metres and the Divine Liturgy is usually officiated by one priest, with one or two monks singing. Not every cell has its own priest, so for many hermits attending the Divine Liturgy is only possible on Sundays and feast days.

The cenobitic monasteries, on the other hand, are the ideal setting for celebrating the liturgy at its fullest. When the energy and liturgical zeal of the young hermits meet the perfect conditions offered by their new cenobitic houses, the result is, in the words of Fr. Maximos of Simonopetra, a new ‘liturgical culture’, in which worship is ‘a vibrant, dynamic, and joyful experience’ (Maximos 2015, 82). He continues, describing the spectacular improvement of liturgical standards in Simonopetra:

‘The Divine Liturgy itself became a grand affair, chanted every day in the main church by two full choirs, with the entire community present, making every day a kind of feast day. It had been a long time since Mount Athos had seen anything like this.’ (83).

The secret recipe for the Athonite liturgy today, which seems to have arrived as close as possible to perfection, is precisely the mixture of the two: it combines the glitter and artistic splendor of Constantinople at its best with the hesychast mellow, but very deep and powerful mystical joy.

This combination is best observable in the monastery of Vatopedi. Here, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated as the ‘grand affair’ in the big katholikon on Sundays and feast days. On weekdays¹⁰³, however, after the matins in the katholikon is over, the pilgrims are gently guided towards the chapel of Agia Zoni (dedicated to The Holy Cincture of the Theotokos), while the monks spread throughout a dozen or more different small chapels across the monastery, where the Divine Liturgy is

¹⁰³ Except for Tuesdays, when the Divine Liturgy is celebrated in the big church, in honor of the icon Vimatarissa.

simultaneously celebrated in an eremitic, humble fashion. This way, the Vatopedine monks can enjoy both the festive, communal dimension, and the taste of the desert.

Not least, the renewed importance given to liturgical celebration culminates with the rediscovered centrality attached to the sacrament of Eucharist, which constitutes the core and climax of the liturgical cycle. The topic of the return to frequent communion has already been covered in the chapter dedicated to Elder Joseph the Hesychast (3.2.7). To illustrate the striking difference between the present and past states of affairs concerning the liturgy and the Eucharist, which make Ware call the phenomenon a 'eucharistic renewal', he compares his impressions from a visit in 1961 to the situation in 1983:

'Up to the late 1960s, concelebration tended to be uncommon, and communion by lay monks was surprisingly infrequent: perhaps only ten times a year, except in a few of the "observant" monasteries such as Dionysiou, where the monks might go twice a month. I can remember my astonishment, on my first visit to Athos in 1961, when I was present at the Great Lavra for the Nativity of the Mother of God (8/21 September), one of the twelve great feasts of the Orthodox liturgical year. After an All-Night Vigil, celebrated with full solemnity, only a single priest officiated at the Liturgy, without a deacon; and, out of a congregation of some eighty monks and forty laymen, not a single one received communion. I was left with a strange feeling of anti-climax. [...] But today [...] most of the younger monks, with the blessing and encouragement of their spiritual fathers, receive the sacrament not less than two or three times a week. [...] In the life of the contemporary Athonite monk the "medicine of immortality" is assuming a centrality that it has not possessed for many generations.'

4.4.3. The role of the spiritual father

As it has been shown right from the introduction of the paper, the contemporary spiritual Athonite revival is very often attributed to the emergence of some magnificent figures like Elder Joseph the Hesychast (and his disciples), Elder Aimilianos of Simonopetra, Elder Vasileios of Stavronikita (and of Iviron) and others, who, through their personal charisma and leadership, have been able to inspire hundreds of youngsters to follow them and thus reverse the fate of the Holy Mountain.

This thesis, however, argues that, as important as the personal charisma might have been, there must be a principle behind this transformation, rather than the hazardous emergence of so many illustrious personalities, sometimes independent from one another.

The three already mentioned mutations (4.3.1, 4.3.2 and 4.4) suffered by traditional cenobitism in its process of becoming more hesychast – the introduction of the private night vigil, the renewal of liturgical celebration and the impregnation of all aspects of monastic life with the Jesus Prayer – could not have been possible without the broader principle that supports them: the new importance attributed to the role of the spiritual father:

'In all the renewed monasteries the utmost emphasis is placed upon direct, personal guidance given by a Spirit-filled elder.' (Ware 1983, 63).

Although the spiritual father has always held a crucial role in the Orthodox monastic tradition, his position had been severely weakened during the troublesome Athonite history after the year 1400. The 20th century finds the institution of the spiritual father exiled to the eremitic area, while administrative and, most important, spiritual authority in the monasteries is often dissipated. The situation is best described by Archimandrite Cherubim:

'For (we must confess the truth) on the Holy Mountain the abbot tends to resemble an appointed superior clerk, who undersigns resolutions and documents and holds the abbatial staff without a pastoral vocation, mission or responsibility. Alas! This signifies a misfortune for the institution of monasticism, a blow from within, a derailment from the holy course which the experience of the Fathers, guided by the Holy Spirit, delineated. Indeed, it is curious that the Holy Mountain, which preserves the holy traditions, customs, and habits of the ancient fathers with such exactness, is not more careful about this fundamental and basic question of the pastoral position of the abbot in the monastery. Besides this, in certain monasteries there prevails the custom of the brothers confessing to an outside confessor and not to their abbot, who is supposed to be a father, doctor, guide, noetic Moses, trainer in athletic combats, responsible for their souls from morning to evening. We hope and pray that the Lord will send the monasteries elect abbots possessing a holy awareness of their essential mission, for the glory of His name and the salvation of souls.' (Karambelas 1992, 552).

Fr. Cherubim's prayers will soon be answered, but salvation will not come – as it was expected, and as many observers have rushed to conclude – from some messianic figures who manage all by themselves to turn the tables. On a more attentive look, one will notice that the change is brought not necessarily by persons, but by a renewed understanding of the institution of the spiritual father in a cenobitic community, informed by the way in which this same institution had always been operating in the eremitic environment.

It may sound surprising that the role of the spiritual father had become so formal and diminished in the monasteries, but a closer analysis reveals that the need for an experienced master appears only when someone is trying to live an intense spiritual life and realizes he cannot do any significant progress on his own. For centuries, the general rule on Athos had been that, with few exceptions, those preoccupied with the maximal standard of spiritual life would go for the eremitic life, because that is where the good teachers could be found. But the vast majority of monks would settle with the "normal", disciplined life in the monasteries, be it cenobitic or idiorrhythmic. In fact, an idiorrhythmic monastery could actually have been more favorable to an intense prayer life, because of its closer resemblance to the eremitic settings, even though more often than not, as it has been shown, idiorrhythmy fell closer to the indolent extreme, rather than to the ascetic one.

The direct connection between the need for a spiritual father and the preoccupation for inner prayer is explicitly outlined by Fr. Ephraim, former disciple of Elder Joseph the Hesychast and future abbot of Philotheou, in a discussion with Cavarnos (1959, 208):

‘«The spiritual decline of monasticism has resulted from the lack of men of this kind, who are called spiritual guides. To become a monk, one must first and foremost seek and find a spiritual guide. Everything depends upon this.»

«What is the chief feature of the guidance that a spiritual guide should provide to a monk?»

«It should be guidance concerning mental prayer. This mode of prayer is the essence of monasticism, its salt, its light, its life, and its glory. Yet it is precisely in this that the contemporary monk is very much in need of guidance. He hears about mental prayer, but he does not know how to practice it. And if he undertakes to proceed in this work relying on writings, he has the power to persist in it for a limited time only, because he encounters inner (*noeras*) difficulties on the way. Not having an experienced guide, he turns back convinced that he has need of one, without whom it is impossible to succeed.»’

Elder Joseph the Hesychast is in a desperate search for a spiritual father during his first years on the Holy Mountain, and so are most of the young novices who join the ranks starting with the 1950s (Makarios 2004, 270). In the words of Ware (1983, 64),

‘Young people in Greece today are not so much attracted by the idea of the monastic life in the abstract, but are rather drawn in a specific way to particular monastic centres, where they can find the personal spiritual direction for which they are thirsty. What draws them is the *abba*, rather than the abbey.’

They start filling up the cells of the sketes, while the monasteries are being deserted. When this contrast becomes obvious for everyone, they are invited to populate the monasteries in the fashion already described earlier in the paper.

The liveliness in the cenobitic monasteries today may also come from the fact that they are filled with monks of hesychast vocation, who in previous epochs would have constituted the exceptions that went to the desert. Today they don’t have to do that any more, partly because the cenobitic monasteries have become much more hesychast-friendly, as shown so far, but mainly because spiritual mentors are today much easier to find there than at any other time in history.

In what concerns the portrait of a good spiritual father, Fr. Ephraim believes that the main prerequisite is the experience in the art of the Jesus Prayer, as can be seen from his words quoted above. In order to be able to offer his spiritual children that surplus of guidance that books and common sense cannot give, he needs to be himself an experienced hesychast and to anticipate any obstacle, temptation or delusion his disciple might encounter.

While the above is a prerequisite, it is not enough to make one a good spiritual father, he must also be willing to share his experience and dedicate time and energy to his disciples, most often at the cost of his own spiritual progress. It might be difficult to understand from outside just how difficult it can be for an elder to keep his inner life of

prayer intact, while simultaneously offering full supervision to a group of disciples. But the conclusion to be drawn from the vast corpus of testimonies related to the topic is that the spiritual realm seems to be operating with realities so delicate and fragile, that the subtlest *movement* can be enough to produce severe damage, as an anonymous hermit explains to Vlachos:

‘The ascetic practice says that once we speak about these states, they suddenly stop, and it takes a lot of time to acquire them again’ (Vlachos 2006, 145).

At this stage it must be recalled that young Francis (future Elder Joseph the Hesychast) is denied a discipleship near the famous Kallinikos the Hesychast, because the latter wouldn’t want to risk his own hesychia by taking disciples (Ephraim 2010, 66)¹⁰⁴. People like Elder Joseph, who ‘had a strong desire to share his spiritual wealth with others’ (144), are therefore this much more valuable.

Some other features to complete the portrait of the spiritual father can be drawn from the example of Elder Aimilianos, for whom the key word is freedom. His words, recorded by Pennington and fully confirmed throughout the testimonies of his disciples (Cabas 2007, 82-83), are crystal clear:

‘The monk has to be left to face God. The Spiritual Father’s role is to encourage, to stand between the monk and God as mediator – this is his main role – and not get between God and the monk. He is to help the monk in discernment so that he will not take sensible feelings or imagination as being the work of the Spirit and miss the true movement of leading of the Spirit.’ (Pennington 1984, 183).

Last but not least, in the ideal case, the spiritual father should be able to communicate holiness to his disciples, understood not as moral purity, but as a natural radiation of the divine grace dwelling in his own heart. Sister Nikodimi, the abbess of Ormylia, uses the metaphor of holy people who are like burning candles (Aimilianos 2011, 5). Besides any advice and supervision, the most precious opportunity for a disciple is to live close to such a luminary, and benefit from the direct experience of sharing in the divine grace radiated by him. It is in this light that the testimonies of Elder Joseph’s disciples of the transmission of “little packages of grace” should be understood.

And it is this wonderful property of transmissibility of holiness that makes Cavarnos quote St Gregory of Nyssa to explain Fr. Ephraim’s “spiritual success”:

‘What accounts for Ephraim’s extraordinary success in attracting so many men to monasticism, at a time when there are numerous anti-monastic forces operating in the world? It is, above all, his purity and holiness. And this he owes in large measure to his elder Joseph. For, as St. Gregory of Nyssa remarks, “the saintliness of a life is transmitted from him who has achieved it to those who come within his circle; for there is truth in the Prophet’s saying, that one who lives with a man who is holy and clean and elect will become such himself”: On Virginité, ch.24.’ (Cavarnos 1988, 125).

¹⁰⁴ This is by no means a criticism of the choice for self-isolation. Elder Kallinikos the Hesychast’s decision to become a recluse and stay so for no less than 45 years is described by Archimandrite Cherubim as ‘brave’, ‘heroic’, ‘sacrificial’ and ‘blessed by God’ (Archimandrite Cherubim, *Contemporary Ascetics of Mount Athos*, vol.1, 179-180, cited by Speake 2014, 209).

As it has been shown in the chapter dedicated to Elder Joseph's brotherhood, the role of the spiritual father is a concept that always goes hand in hand with the one of obedience. The master has only as much transformative power as the disciple grants him through obedience, so the reward is proportional to one's willingness to surrender his own will. Elder Aimilianos is again brilliant in describing the mystical and sacramental dimensions of this dynamic relationship:

'The monastery is a mystery, a sacrament, and the spiritual father is the visible element of this mystery, behind whom hides the invisible: God, and everything that escapes the senses, which can only be sensed by the spirit... The spiritual father is therefore, in fact, the same who takes his disciple, the monk, by the hand in order to introduce him to the Lord. He is the same who brings Christ down, who reunites that which was separated – the realities of heaven and of earth – in order to transform them into the one, unique, and genuine dance. Such is the role of the spiritual father and such is the manner in which the monks perceive him. This is why this discipline exists, this obedience, this charity, this gift of self and this confidence that addresses itself not so much to the superior – who is only a man – but to Christ Whom he represents.'¹⁰⁵

A final question regarding the spiritual fatherhood in the cenobitic Athonite monasteries today must concern the applicability of the concept. As described so far, a key feature in the feasibility of such a model is the close supervision by the spiritual master. In the eremitic and semi-eremitic zone, as exemplified in the case of Elder Joseph's brotherhood, disciples are day and night under the watchful eyes of their abbot. Moreover, they practice a daily confession of thoughts. For obvious practical reasons, this is close to impossible in a cenobitic monastery. So, how can it be possible for an abbot to maintain a close relationship with all his monks, in a community that numbers tens of members and sometimes even more than a hundred?

The answer to this question will be given using the example of Vatopedi, the most populated Athonite monastery, with more than 150 monks. Because it is impossible for all the monks to practice frequent confession to the abbot, several other spiritual fathers have been appointed to confess and supervise the monks. That does not mean that their connection with the abbot is lost. In special cases, when needed, any monk can confess to the abbot. Moreover, the abbot makes sure to have private conversations with all his children on a regular basis.

The enhanced role of the spiritual father is thus the cornerstone of all the other mutations operated to the Athonite cenobitic monasticism, leading to the vivid landscape observable during the past few decades, as bishop Kallistos Ware already anticipates in 1976, when talking to Pennington (1984, 44):

'Father Kallistos feels the contribution of the *Philokalia* [which he was translating into English at the time] is not so much the techniques for prayer which people tend to emphasize, but the presentation of the role of the Spiritual Father. He feels that the

¹⁰⁵ Archimandrite Aimilianos, 'The Role of the Spiritual Father', in Hieromonk Alexander (Golitzin), trans., *The Living Witness of the Holy Mountain*, pp. 165-7, cited by Speake 2014, 188.

renewal of this role is the great need of Christianity today. Here on the Mountain wherever there is a good Spiritual Father, there is a lively community.’

4.5. The camp of the realists

After being raised to the heavens by the words of Elder Aimilianos, Fr. Maximos and the others in the previous sections, it is now time to descend back to earth and give voice to a different approach, which subtly challenges the enthusiasm of the cenobite hesychasts.

The voices of this “camp of the realists” come mainly from the older generation of monks. They manifest nostalgia for the simplicity of Athonite life in their youth and criticize the developments of the contemporary revival, alongside the introduction of technology, and the current state of spiritual decay when compared to the golden age of the past (Dionysus 2010, 66-67).

On a deeper level, they manifest obvious reserves regarding the monks who talk about mystical experiences and the Jesus Prayer (Dionysus 2010). Their reserves go as far as to doubt the feasibility of the practice of the Jesus Prayer in community: the Prayer is always something that can be practiced only by hermits and probably only by those of the past, not during these times of decay.

Fr. Petronius, the former abbot of the Romanian cenobitic skete of Prodromou (of the Forerunner), believes that one has to become free of the passions first, in order to be able to practice the Mental Prayer (Coman 2015, 153). Moreover, he says that Mental Prayer cannot be practiced in cenobitic life, because of the liturgical prayer (154). Unlike Fr. Aimilianos and others who see the two as complementary and enhancing each other, Fr. Petronius sees them as mutually exclusive. He summarizes his view in a conversation with Cabas (2007, 144-145):

‘In cenobitic life, monks also have the church services and their specific tasks, required for the welfare of the brotherhood. This is why the ceaseless prayer is left to the hermits, the monks who have withdrawn to a totally solitary life of simplicity and struggle, with ceaseless prayer as their main occupation. [. . .] Whoever wishes to practice the ceaseless prayer, as the Neptic Fathers teach us, must first acquire the kind of inner disposition that entails a clean conscience in front of God, of the neighbor and of things. [. . .] Everything you do should be done as if you were in front of God. Furthermore, you have to acquire the state of apatheia, which means to be free from any passion. Only after achieving this level you may start practicing the ceaseless prayer.’

Another meaningful example is that of Elder Parthenios, the abbot of the monastery of Agiou Pavlou. He does not express any hostility towards the Jesus Prayer. He is just very, very humble and doesn’t even conceive that he could ever try such heights. In an interview taken by Cabas (2007, 100-102), he recounts:

‘I have never learned the Mental Prayer, nor have I lived it. [. . .] I live a different kind of life, the cenobitic one, and I cannot teach you such things. The prayer I do is spontaneous prayer: I gather my mind and pray to God that he grants me His mercy

and salvation. [. . .] [Jesus Prayer] is something high, which I don't know, because I have never lived in the desert or in a cave.»

«But if you ever try Mental Prayer or, better, the spontaneous prayer, as you mentioned, does it ever happen, even for a short while, to have your mind descending in the heart?»

«Yes, this happens sometimes, but not very often, and not for long. When it happened to me once, I did not know what it was and I was very confused and perplexed. To be honest, I said: "My God, I'm not meant for such things! I don't know this kind of things and I do not want to know! I only want to do what my spiritual father tells me to and nothing more!". [. . .] I was afraid, to be honest, I did not know what that was. Something started to happen here (he points to his heart) and I told myself I'm not built for such things. I felt something I cannot explain. [. . .] The only purpose I have ever had was to learn patience and obedience. This was my goal: "Are all apostles? Are all prophets?"¹⁰⁶

All the elders mentioned so far show an attitude of reverence towards hesychasm and mystical experiences, but they don't like talking about it too much. When being asked about the Jesus Prayer and divine visions, they often decline their competence and try to move the discussion to more humble topics, like obedience, patience, simplicity, silence, struggle etc. This attitude is very characteristic for the period before the revival, which is easily noticeable in the collection of little stories *Tales from Dionysiou*, written by monk Lazarus. The collection covers the two centuries between roughly 1750 and 1950 and displays the same kind of attitude: the experiences of grace are rarely mentioned, especially when the reported events belong to the recent past.

The most articulated voice of the realists' camp is Fr. Gregorios, abbot of Docheiariou. Although belonging to the same generation as the artisans of revival, and despite being himself part of the revival (the external wave), abbot Gregorios is not the biggest fan of hesychast cenobitism. The extensive information on his monastic preferences comes from two sources: an article by his former disciple, Fr. Ephrem Lash (1996), and his spiritual autobiography (Gregorios 2015).

Father Ephrem paints the portrait of an abbot who values simplicity and meekness over the very high states described by his hesychast contemporaries. He believes that

'the essential work of the monk is the cutting off of the will and the eradication of the passions by absolute obedience and hard work' (Lash 1996, 88).

To be fair, the situation of Docheiariou during the 1980s really requires the monks to work very hard to restore the monastery, so it may not be only a matter of preference, but also of necessity.

His view on monastic lifestyles is that

'the ideal monastery is the koinobion [coenobium], the communal life. Like St Benedict, he believes that the monastery is a school for the Lord's service in which most monks are still at a fairly elementary level. [. . .] A working community may not have many members who have seen the uncreated light; and many monks, I suspect,

¹⁰⁶ 1 Cor 12:29.

go through their lives trying simply to live in obedience to their abbot and their brothers and to go about their daily tasks of prayer and work so that, at the end, they will be able to say, "I am an unprofitable servant; I have done my duty"¹⁰⁷ (88).

Not only does he value simplicity and humility far more than the virtual hesychast visions, but he

'does not, unlike some abbots, encourage the use of the Jesus Prayer, muttered half aloud, while going about one's daily tasks and even during services in church. Instead he recommended the silent use of just *Kyrie, eleison* or of prayers, particularly psalms, that one might have learnt by heart.' (87).

Little by little, one can see outlining the portrait of an abbot who goes beyond merely keeping reserves about contemporary hesychasm. He seems to have an agenda of reluctance towards the practices that the rest of the Holy Mountain so readily adopts.

His spiritual autobiography only adds to that image, although the references are not at all obvious, but rather subtle and covered in thin irony. When he praises a certain monk he had met, it is often for his simplicity and for not showing off. The following examples are suggestive:

'A young monk once told us, without making any kind of reference to the charismas of foresight, prophecy of miracle-working, that in Katounakia there is a monk who is struggling. This is what monastic language should be about: to be struggling' (Gregorios 2015, 334).

'Fr. Ephrem never amplified his stories. You never heard from him neither «I saw» nor «I heard our Lady». The elder did have charismas, but he never waved them in front of the others as if they were little flags' (338).

'Fr. Evdokimos used to have divine illumination. He was a very careful monk. He wasn't a prophet, neither a foreseer, nor a miracle-worker. He remained humble, hiding his life in Christ. This is why he hasn't acquired neither disciples, nor admirers or the reputation of a saint.' (349).

'He [Fr. Dionysios] never said exaggerated stuff like «I embrace Christ and He embraces me» or «We are here in a constant conversation with God», to reveal himself as one who experiences superior states, so that the poor layman would appear as inferior.' (360).

'In the year 1967 [...] the mutual admiration between elders, which simply is a product of pietism, had not yet started.' (333).

His irony towards a certain kind of monks is both sharp and delightful. Fr. Gregorios cannot be suspected of ignorance. His choice is very well informed. But a closer analysis of his view reveals that he is not necessarily an adversary of the hesychast practices, but rather a critic of their public display, which he finds arrogant and totally inappropriate.

Fr. Gregorios' view seems very reasonable, especially if he had probably been confronted many times with that kind of behavior for which he seems to have developed a sort of allergy. As a spiritual shepherd, he sees pride as the most immediate danger for

¹⁰⁷ Lk 17:10.

his flock. Thus he does not encourage them to try high things, but to stay humble and try to guide themselves by the Lord's commandments and the struggle against passions.

The tendency to cover up these high experiences and everything that exceeds the limits of the natural human existence springs from the genuine meekness of these monks. But, as recent history has shown, it may not be the best advertising strategy for monasticism. On the contrary, once the Athonite monks start to openly testify about the experiences of their elders and even of their own, either through written publications or in conferences and sermons, the youth is once again inspired to leave the world behind and join them in their daily monastic struggles.

Are the contemporary monastic testimonies beneficial to the world? Of course. More than being beneficial, they are a real blessing. Are they beneficial for the testifiers themselves? This is difficult to answer, but probably not. A monk will always prefer to pray inside his cloister rather than doing missionary work. But there come moments when the latter is needed, as it happened at the middle of the previous century. And if the monks would have kept the fruits of eternal life hidden from the world, maybe this paper would have been about the extinction of Athonite monastic life instead of its wonderful revival.

Conclusion

The present thesis set out to explore the causes behind the remarkable contemporary spiritual revival of the Holy Mountain. Athonite monasticism was on the brink of extinction just a few decades ago, whereas today it is flourishing.

As impressive as this revival may look like, most voices have classified it as a typical restoration of the state of affairs before the crisis. As in many other cases, when crises are caused by external factors, once the external pressure is over, things get back to their previous state. The same was believed to be true for the Athonite revival: since the decay had been caused mainly by socio-economic problems and by some unsolved issues within the Greek Church, once the negative factors ceased to exist, the situation of the Holy Mountain rapidly improved. When some significant internal factors were added to the equation, the result was the perfect recipe for a revival.

The first part of this research aimed to prove that the question regarding the causes of the contemporary Athonite revival is still open. The solution presented above, although simple and appealing, is far from being satisfactory to explain the phenomenon in all its complexity. A thorough investigation of the decay of the first half of the 20th century revealed that its internal roots were far more important than the external ones. In other words, it was not so much a case of Athos being marginalized and isolated by the *world* (socially, economically etc.), but rather an identity crisis, concerning the very ethos and *raison d' être* of Athonite monasticism. Any “bandage” from the outside, be it financial aid or publicity, could only treat the wound superficially, but the true healing could only come from within. What were the main causes of the revival then, if not the change of the external conditions?

When it came to investigating the internal causes – namely the two that are generally accepted as the most important: the conversion to cenobitism of the last idiorrhhythmic monasteries and the emergence of an exceptional generation of spiritual fathers – they too proved frail when subjected to closer analysis. While their role in the revival was indisputable, they alone failed to convincingly answer a whole bundle of key questions.

The question of the causes was therefore still open and the second part of the paper attempted to propose a new answer, by looking instead at the parallel revival of hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer happening simultaneously on Athos. The main research question could thus be formulated: are the two revivals connected in any way and, if so, how?

The analysis provided a positive answer. The two revivals are not separate phenomena, but one and the same, and it was precisely the rediscovery of hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer that gave consistency to the other internal factors.

The main thesis of the paper could be formulated as follows: the contemporary Athonite revival is in fact the revival and propagation of hesychasm to a scale greater

than ever before, acted through the repopulation of the monasteries with young, hesychast-minded brotherhoods formed around charismatic spiritual fathers, combined with the conversion of the same monasteries to cenobitism. In other words, this thesis argued that what used to be considered the main internal factors of the Athonite revival were in fact mere vehicles for the real cause: the rediscovery and successful export of the hesychast model to the cenobitic monasteries, resulting in a new, fresh, mutated kind of cenobitism, a so-called hesychast cenobitism.

What are the characteristics of this new model? Hesychast cenobitism, fully at place in most of the Athonite monasteries today, reveals a wonderful combination of features, originating from both the communal and solitary traditional monastic lifestyles. Cenobitic life, traditionally very rich from the liturgical and social points of view, became permeated by the ascetical, spiritually-focused hesychast lifestyle. This fresh approach towards monastic life meant that the ideals of unceasing prayer, powerful spiritual experiences and absolute obedience towards the spiritual father, were no longer mere fairytales of the old books or perks confined to the hermits, but realistic objectives for the monk in the coenobium too. By providing a framework of stability and safety, where the monk, freed from any material and spiritual concern, could concentrate solely on cultivating his spiritual progress, hesychast cenobitism proved to be the most auspicious environment for spiritual life lived at the highest level.

As smooth and beautiful as it may sound, the transition towards the new model has encountered some powerful challenges, of which the most significant were resistance from the older generations and an obvious difficulty in marrying the demanding requirements of hesychasm with all the aspects implied by a busy and communal way of life. How were they settled? Simply put, through discernment and a lot of creativity from the part of the spiritual fathers. The daily schedule was smartly adjusted to allow more time for private prayer. But, more importantly, by encouraging the continuous repetition of the Jesus Prayer, all the daily activities – working, eating, celebrating – became impregnated with a strong scent of spiritual intensity. It was precisely in finding suitable ways of applying the hesychast cenobitism that the charismatic fathers manifested their gift of eldership.

The hesychast mutation of cenobitism can certainly be considered an upgrade. It gave cenobitic life a status of equality with eremitism not only in theory, as it has always been the case, but also in practice, making it more appealing than ever for new vocations. The consequent Athonite revival was thus a natural result of this mutation.

The conclusions of this thesis do have their limitations. The Athonite revival is still an open process, so it is virtually impossible to draw definitive conclusions about its causes, manifestations and consequences. Furthermore, the nature of the topic limits the conclusions one can draw from written sources. The complexity of monastic and spiritual life can hardly be contained in literature – be it biographical or testimonial – but it is best observable at work, ideally from within, and not from the outside. The present project does include some field observation, mainly from the monastery of

Vatopedi and some of the Romanian hermitages, but further field research should extend to the other monasteries and sketes.

Nevertheless, the results of this research set a fertile ground for future exploration in the fields of theology and religious studies. First and foremost, there are clues that contemporary Athonite monasticism is slightly mutated and does not fit in the standard schemes, defined by the division between communal and eremitic. In order for such a conclusion to be validated, an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon is required, one informed by extensive direct observations. The results of such a study could reveal that monastic life on the Holy Mountain has, in fact, gone through a profound reform. This kind of reform would be particularly interesting, since it would entail not only a readjustment to meet the expectations of the 20th and 21st century man, but also a return towards the prescriptions of tradition, which seems paradoxical. How can present day Athonite monasticism be more modern and more traditional at the same time? This surely is a question worth investigating.

Secondly, the certain success enjoyed by the hesychast-cenobitic model on Athos asks for further inquiry. This paper has tapped into the topic by suggesting some of the features that could make this model so appealing. From the point of view of practical theology and especially missiology, it would be very interesting to investigate to which extent can such a model be replicated in other monastic settings, outside the Holy Mountain. Throughout the Orthodox countries, but in the Orthodox diaspora too – as in the case of the monasteries founded by Elder Ephraim Moraitis in North America – there are already some monasteries trying to implement the model in conditions very different from the original, and they may provide valuable information. This research path could prove particularly important today, as Christian monasticism seems to be facing, on a different scale, challenges that are often similar to those which threatened the existence of the Holy Mountain five decades ago.

Last but not least, the question of compatibility between hesychia and the coenobium, essentially the possibility of being able to experience an intense spiritual life while maintaining an active social life in a community – be it in a monastery, a parish, a family or even in society as a whole – is of utmost importance for both spirituality and pastoral theology. Whereas achieving the unceasing prayer used to be considered a very rare exception outside the desert (and still is, according to some in the “camp of the realists”), monks in the revived cenobitic Athonite monasteries today are working hard to prove the contrary. Besides providing rich material for theological and religious studies, they set a valuable example. Their struggle to aim for maximalist standards in their life of inner prayer, while simultaneously fulfilling all their liturgical and work-related duties, can be inspirational for any Christian in the world who tries to ‘fight the good fight.’¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ 1 Tim 6:12

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