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<b>Title:</b>	<i>THE ECUMENICAL AND MISSIONARY IMPORTANCE OF ASCETICISM AS A RESPONSE TO UNIVERSAL SALVATION</i>
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# THE ECUMENICAL AND MISSIONARY IMPORTANCE OF ASCETICISM AS A RESPONSE TO UNIVERSAL SALVATION

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## ABSTRACT:

*ASCETISM, AS A CENTRAL PRACTICE WITHIN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY, PLAYS A CRUCIAL ROLE IN THE ECUMENICAL AND MISSIONARY ENDEAVOR OF THE CHURCH, COUNTERING THE RISE OF CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM. IN A WORLD THAT IS INCREASINGLY DIVERSE AND PLURALISTIC, ASCETISM OFFERS A PATH TO SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE, PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE CULTIVATION OF VIRTUES THAT TRANSCEND CULTURAL AND CONFESSIONAL BARRIERS. THIS EXPLORES HOW ASCETIC PRACTICES, INCLUDING FASTING, PRAYER AND SELF-DENIAL, SERVE AS A FORM OF WITNESS TO THE HOLINESS. THROUGH ASCETISM, CHRISTIAN MISSION, EMPHASIZING HUMILITY, SOLIDARITY, AND THE UNIVERSAL CALL TO HOLINESS. THROUGH ASCETISM, CHRISTIANS TRANSCENDS ETHNIC AND SOCIAL DIVISIONS AND FOSTERS A SPIRIT OF COOPERATION BETWEEN DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS. ASCETISM, IN THIS SENSE, BECOMES A MISSIONARY INSTRUMENT THAT HELPS TO SANCTIFY THE INDIVIDUAL, BECOMING AN IMPORTANT WAKE-UP CALL FOR CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM WHICH, AMONG OTHER THINGS, CONSIDERS THAT LOVE OF GOD IS SUFFICIENT TO SAVE MAN, REGARDLESS OF HIS WAY OF LIFE OR HIS RELATIONSHIP.*

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**KEY WORDS:** ASCETICISM, CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM, UNIVERSAL SALVATION, APOCATASTASIS, ESCHATOLOGY

## ECUMENICAL AND ASCETIC MAN VS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSALISM

Asceticism, first of all, is aimed at the that leads to holiness and to the ultimate goal: union with God. The ascetic, who is sincerely and correctly practicing the work of asceticism is wrapped in humility, a humility that opens up a free space in the heart of the ascetic who is meant to be filled with grace [1]. Once freed from sins, God makes his dwelling in that space which has just been cleansed and prepared to receive him. But God, once received, touches the heart of the one who has been in need, and sincere love for him is inevitably and naturally redirected towards his fellow men, in whom God is identified.

When talking about ecumenism, openness to others is mentioned. One could say that one who is involved in the ecumenical movement is willing to open oneself to something or to someone; one has a certain openness to something foreign to oneself. Making the connection

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with the above, opening oneself to or towards God inevitably leads to an openness marked by love, towards one's neighbor and towards the whole of creation.

The person of another will appear as the image of God for the one who will be able to break away from his individual limitation in order to find the common nature and to realize his own person. Orthodox theology makes a distinction of these terms. What does the word "individual" mean and what does the word "person" mean? Why does theology speak and use the noun person more than the noun individual? The individual is the expression of something that cannot be divided: I with me, I for me. In theology the word person means, among other things: being in dialog, being in openness, in prosoponic dialog (face-to-face dialog). We are faces in dialog with others and first of all with God. Self-denial means openness to the other. To reach the state of saying: this man is my salvation, if he leaves me, I cannot stop him [2]. But if he stays with me, this man is my salvation. In a personal way, self-assertion, in which the person is confused with the flesh and loses his true freedom, must be broken. Thus, the Church in her wisdom sets before us the paradigm of the monastic who, renouncing himself, embraces in his heart the whole world, the whole Adam. This is why St. Nil of Sinai the Sinaite affirmed that the perfect monk will honor all men after God as God Himself [3], while Father Petroniu Tănase, a contemporary monk from Mount Athos remarked that we must honor all men as God, because in every man is the image of God [4].

The one united with God, marked by divine love, cannot fail to manifest it outwardly. His mission is driven by compassion and in fact no longer a mission in itself, but becomes a natural act of graceful inertia. Olivier Clement inserts in his book, "The Power of Faith", a well-known apophthegm: Avva Antony is sent by God to take the example of the spiritual life from a curate of Alexandria. Noticing that this curate was leading an ordinary life, living in a shabby hut with his wife, and that the money he earned he distributed to the church and the poor, Avva Antony asks him what else he does. And the curate gave him a profound answer. He tells him that he does nothing else but meditate every evening on the thought that "All will be saved, and he alone will go to hell" [5]. The one who has humbled himself by his unselfishness is seized with love for his fellow men, and his sole aim in relation to them is to see them saved, even if he should go before them.

In order to speak of mission, it is necessary, that it serve a goal, an objective proposed from the beginning, as necessity teaches man along the way that all things are in God, with God and through God. Selfishness is renounced, and then ecumenism, in its Christian sense, manifests itself. Asceticism, involuntarily, by its very nature gives evidence of ecumenism. Also, mission is accomplished by mere existence. The ascetic is transformed into a torch, designed to point one's neighbor towards God: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your heavenly Father" (Matthew 5:16).

The virtue of humility is manifested in ecumenism at the level of dialogue, for the purpose of the Church, and of Christianity in particular, it is not to dominate the interlocutor, or to exalt oneself above him, but to bear witness. As for importance of the mission itself, it presupposes, a leaning towards the other. Following the examples of the Savior, of the Holy Apostles, and of many saints, such as the fathers of the desert, whose acts are presented in the Patristic Letter, the purpose of the mission is manifested in service: "Not so shall it be among you, who among you would be great among you, and who among you would be first among you, and be your servant" (Matthew 20:26-27). Another aspect of humility in mission is to gradually increase its intensity. The humble one, who is aware that he has the mission of preaching about God, and is not driven by the desire to feed his ego, shows patience, tact and understanding in his ministry. No realistic missionary can begin his mission with "hard food" (Hebrews 5:12).

Orthodox spirituality has been accused of promoting a withdrawal from life, a carelessness marked by indifference, yet this is entirely wrong. As such, St. Maxim the Confessor speaks to us of the movement of creation in which man is invited to participate. For only by participating in this movement, can man rise in goodness and perfection. Each person becomes responsible for the fate of the whole universe. Every personal action influences to some extent the movement of the whole created world [6]. This statement supports exactly what was illustrated above. Recently canonized, Dumitru Stăniloae shared: "The great mystery of love is the union that it realizes between those who love each other, each one receiving the other in himself"[7].

Communion and friendship are still fundamental today, reaffirming that Christian fraternity must not disappear from this hurried and individualistic world. Fraternity is diametrically opposed to individualism, and it is through prayer, learned in turn from asceticism, that all are united and each person is reintegrated into the common consciousness of humanity. Friendship nourished by brotherly love is the recipe for ecumenism in the postmodern period. Man was created to crown creation, and his value to others and to the world is inestimable, for the soul is priceless. The soul's innate relationship with the self, with others and, above all, with all and beyond all, with God, is a contemporary imperative. Contemplating that human beings have value, both in this world and beyond this world, thus this value needs to be regained or reconfirmed.

To relate ecumenically to one another and to demonstrate spiritual exercise in your life means to open yourself to the other, to make everything about the other and not just about ourselves, meaning to leave everything to God's will without working on one's own eschatological becoming resulting into selfishness and laziness, thus always looking for solutions other than the winning ones.

## **THE NEED AND IMPORTANCE OF AN ASCETIC DISCOURSE IN CONTEMPORARY LIFE**

This theme, is structured in two sub-chapters, the first being Conceptualization and the second the Contemporary Paradigm and how to overcome it, both aim to define the terminology of "neediness" (in the past and present) identifying several types of contemporary mentalities. Conceptualization deals with how asceticism has been perceived over the past centuries, while the second concept of contemporary paradigm proposes a reconciliation of everyday human aspirations with the Christian ascetic ideal and shows how they can fully correspond to man's existential purpose.

### **CONCEPTUALIZATION**

If originally asceticism was defined as being a practice for monks, regardless of their cult, it has since evolved into the following definition: 'A way of life that excludes excess or compromise'. In retrospect, the first definition poses a rather serious problem for our contemporary understanding of the concept of asceticism, although the reality is different. Ascetic values have been manifested in human life since before the monastic movement appeared. There is a relationship of interdependence or reciprocity between them: monasticism arose, among other things, as a consequence of ascetic aspirations, and the spiritual life of the city is inspired and sustained by monastic life. The lives of ascetics are said to be role models in man's relationship with God. At the same time, asceticism takes on the character of a martyr's gift and sacrifice from the lives of the early Christian martyrs. To say that asceticism is a purely monastic duty is to deny its aspirations and its spiritual character to anyone who lives outside this environment. One of the functions of asceticism is the social environment [8].

Father Dumitru Stăniloae's interpretation of asceticism suggests that it is not about rejecting the world but transcending it, in that ascetic practices help deepen one's relationship with God. Asceticism arises from the human desire to thank God for all the gifts received. Through the world given to us, God shows his love for us. To achieve a progressive dialog in love [9], a human response to this divine gift is required. The greatest gift that man can offer is his existence paired with his own labor. Father Stăniloae emphasizes that human labor, when seen through the lens of faith, is a spiritual act, thus work takes on a spiritual character for man, and the gifts given to man for labor serve as a bond of love between humanity and God. But, in order not to be captured by pleasure, man has the duty to rise above these gifts, to go toward their origin, that is, toward God. This is why "all that is between God and man is required after the cross" [10]. The limitations the world has created are meant to enhance spiritual growth and curb human selfishness. It is in this light that Father Dumitru Stăniloae sees the concept of asceticism. Asceticism is defined by him in his writings analyzed in this research, entitled "Orthodox Spirituality: Asceticism and Mysticism". Father Stăniloae presents the relationship and the passage from darkness to light (from non-being to being), emphasizing that the light can only be known through human consciousness [11] exploring another goal of asceticism: the (re)awakening of conscience and its cleansing.

Christianity has been seen as the way in which asceticism is formalized, and for Orthodox Christian asceticism makes the religious dimension of communion with God active in our lives and our existence. We conclude from this that the goal of asceticism is therefore man's communion with God. Man contributes with his need, and God strengthens him by grace. The greater the effort, the greater the grace [12]. Asceticism as an act of service to God, is fulfilled in the Church's communitarian worship. Therefore, asceticism does not promote isolation, exclusivism and in no way individuality or selfishness. Personal action is not the same as individual action, because the person includes much more than the individual.

Returning to the definition of asceticism, we see that it involves both abstinence and effort. The primordial state was a good one but not perfect state. Man had the mission to strengthen himself for the good. Ascetic effort is seen as a primordial requirement. Strengthening in the good is not a duty of a particular person, religion or cult, but of human nature itself. Vladimir Lossky sees in this renunciation a rejection of self-will in order to enter into the possession of true freedom [13], the personal, which is the image of God embodied in man.

The term askesis has the primary meaning of *practice*, regardless of the field. It is also encountered in describing military exercises. There are three principles found within the ascetic process including: practices, intentionality and novelty as presented by the author:

*"From a Christian perspective, asceticism can easily be called an "eschatology of transfiguration", since, according to Georges Florovsky, the ascetic gesture is not centered around the contempt and rejection of a reality, but precisely on a transformative impulse. This is, in essence, a return to the state of the beauty of the building, the first state from which man has departed through sin" [14].*

Asceticism, or necessity as it is called in this research, is a renunciation of the old self in order to form a new, transfigured mode of existence. This renunciation means, according to St. Luke of Crimea, the complete casting away of one's own understanding of the ways of life [15]. Basil Pennington speaks of the false self, an erroneously constructed self-image that the ascetic is obliged to renounce in order to know his true self from God's perspective. The complexity and difficulty of this effort is affirmed by St. Isaac the Syrian [16] (Isaac, 1997:

55). St. Theophan the Zaverite also states that without great zeal [17] this work cannot be accomplished. Therefore asceticism becomes a voluntary struggle for liberation.

St. Maxim Maxim the Confessor speaks of a mysterious wedding of God with every soul. From this perspective, human need is a preparation of the soul for the wedding day. A parallel can thus be drawn between the spiritual ascent and the bride's journey to the altar. From the opposite direction, as St. Nectarios of Eghina states, the Kingdom becomes accessible to the people of God [18] through ascetical work. The Holy and Great Council of Crete describes the purpose of asceticism thus: "The Church also lives this foreshadowing of the 'new creation', of the transfigured world, through her saints, who, through asceticism and their virtues, have become images of the Kingdom of God from this life" [19]. The same Synod describes the importance of fasting [20] and therefore of asceticism, as well as the fact that asceticism do not end in this life [21] being a work that is constantly required of man, however perfect he may be on earth.

For Archimandrite Sophrony, asceticism means first and foremost that unceasing prayer through which man manifests his trust in God [22] and opens towards a cosmic ecclesiology in Christ, the new Adam. It is only in Christ and through Christ that human nature can be perfected. This communitarian character of asceticism is also found in Emilianos Simonopetritus [23] (Mărginean, 2020: 73). To continually cry out to God is an ascetic act. All these methods rightly turn asceticism into an art form. We can observe in asceticism a blending of the practical and the contemplative, as developed by Saints Gregory of Nyssa and Maxim the Confessor [24].

### **THE CONTEMPORARY PARADIGM AND OVERCOMING IT**

Today's man is in a constant search for meaning. This may be the main bridge between Christian asceticism and modern human aspiration. The Romanian nun Siluana Vlad confessed that in her search for meaning in life [25], ended up being found by God. Father Dumitru Stăniloae devotes whole pages to the subject of the reasons for things [26] and the importance of their discovery. That the universe has a purpose [27] such as the the great religions of the world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Man has always felt the need to give meaning to his existence. Even if he was profane, he was never a sacrilege [28]. There is, however, a retreat from the search for existential meaning in contemporary man's mentality. The world without a known meaning is a vortex from which there is no escape [29]. Science has often been seen as the guilty side in this fall, even if it is more a consequence of human pride in science.

In several of its documents, the Council of Crete describes the state of contemporary man and how to overcome it. Speaking about the contemporary crisis of marriage. The synodal document describes the great crises of man today: the misunderstanding of the relationship between freedom and responsibility, the restriction of freedom to a pleasure orientation and its identification with selfishness. The problem with the above is that man will never be able to find peace in anything in the material sphere, because he seeks infinite fulfillment in finite matter. There is in the ascetical life a stage of withdrawal of grace precisely with a view to overcoming the aforementioned, but also as a verification of the stability in the desire for transfiguration. There is talk of certain "spiritual diseases" [30] from which today's man suffers. One of these is the concept of infallibility. This is nothing but an expression of the pride of human reason. Neurosis is triggered when this human supremacy is questioned. Man loses his coherence on reality and the archetypal meaning of things [31], which generates inner conflict. When man truly realizes his existence, he hears, beyond the emptiness in which he finds himself, the divine call [32]. In fact, Plato, in recounting the story of Socrates' death, describes the peace gained by a man who has come close to understanding this meaning [33]. Plato

himself gives the explanation: "the author of comedies must also know how to write tragedies: that the true playwright is as good in tragedy as in comedy" [34]. Of course, in the light of the above, it can be seen that Christian asceticism proposes much more in terms of the meaning of life.

Today, the Church is accused of conservatism and there is an autonomization of man from Christ and from the spiritual influence of the Church [35]. Romanian philosopher Mihai Şora, like Gabriel Marcel, draws attention to the tension in the world between "to be" and "to have". The following statement can be made:

*"In a global society, oriented towards "having" and individualism, the Sovereign Orthodox Church emphasizes the truth of life in Christ and conformed to Christ, freely concretized in the daily life of each person through his works "until evening" (Psalm 103:23), through which he becomes a co-worker with the eternal Father [...] and with His Son"[36].*

Even the environmental crisis is seen as having moral and spiritual roots. In fact, people realize all this, but they try to remedy it without the religious component, which is the main problem in the perception of asceticism today:

*"Contemporary society has rediscovered the ideal of asceticism because in many aspects of its existence it capitalizes on various practices of renunciation, whether of food, through diet, or of comfort, through physical exercise, pollution, care for the environment and rationalization of consumption, all of which are nothing other than a response to excess, exhortations to moderation, that is to say, a general form of asceticism" [37].*

The importance of holiness in the perspective of spiritual life is what contemporary man is lacking in order to capitalize on his ascetic drives. This requires a (re)awakening of conscience and an unceasing guarding of thoughts. Only a clear conscience and a clear mind united with the heart can give man a clear perspective on things and on God. The theorist par excellence of unceasingness applied to the mind is Evagrius Ponticus [38]. From the very moment of the practical stage, the main goal of the need is to free the mind from all kinds of images in order to be totally captured, in the final stage, by the contemplation of the divine. Vladimir Lossky says in this regard that the mind must find its nourishment in God [39], because of origin and inclination in the flesh. The main target of contemporary asceticism must be, primarily, the mind.

The summary of the doctrines of the new theologies is given by Seraphim Rose: apostasy ("the death of God"), the onslaught of demons (by the phrase: "everything is permitted"), the superman (which, in his conception, means a sub-human because his worship is exclusively of the self), the ultimate deception of the devil (man and the world are considered divine) and millenarianism or universal monarchy. The answer is also given by the hieromonk Seraphim: personal salvation [40]. In conclusion, the most precious asset for contemporary man, in order to acquire true happiness, is discernment [41], strengthened by the work of ascetic.

### **UNIVERSAL SALVATION AND ITS SLOGAN: ALL WILL BE WELL!**

Within the teaching of universal salvation, there is a variant that states that salvation is already an accomplished fact for all people, due to the unconditional love of God. According

to this perspective, God has ensured, through the sacrifice of Christ and through divine grace, the salvation of all humanity, and this does not depend on the individual deeds or behaviors of people – good or bad. Thus, not only is God’s love sufficient for salvation, but, in this view, salvation is already a free and universal gift, which does not require an active reaction on the part of man to be obtained.

This teaching starts from the premise that, at the moment when Christ died on the cross for the sins of the world, He accomplished a complete work of salvation for all humanity. From this perspective, all people are already saved, even if they are not aware of it or do not have an active religious experience. God's love is considered so profound and powerful that nothing that man does, regardless of his deeds, can prevent the salvation already offered.

This view challenges the traditional idea that man's deeds (morality, faith, religious behavior) are the decisive elements for salvation. Instead of emphasizing a process of awareness or "earning" salvation, the teaching of universal salvation in this form emphasizes that salvation is a state already achieved and accessible to all. Thus, man does not have to "deserve" salvation through good deeds or avoid sins in order to be saved; salvation is a divine gift that does not depend on human behavior, but only on the loving will of God.

In this context, salvation is not seen as a goal to be achieved through an intense religious life or by observing a moral code, but as a reality already achieved for all humanity, and the role of man is to recognize this salvation and to live in accordance with the divine love that has already saved him, Jesus Christ. Thus, the teaching of universal salvation supports the idea that salvation is not conditioned by human deeds, but by the unlimited love and mercy of God, which includes all people, regardless of their choices.

Christ is called the Savior of all and, following the logic of traditional teaching, we should affirm that He is the Savior of those who actually did not save them, although He came to save precisely the wicked [42].

Rob Bell rejects the idea that if you have said a prayer of acceptance by God, this makes you worthy of heaven, because, in his view, salvation is not about simply belonging to a cult, but about the way in which man relates to God. Rob Bell believes that if man starts thinking with the premise that the time will come when he will leave this world for a worse world, this relationship often demotivates him to do something with his own life and for the suffering in this world in which he lives. Therefore, the author believes that only the relationship with God can transform the world, and through God man can be part of creation. “From this perspective, eternal life is not so much a kind of time that begins with the moment we die, as a quality and vitality of the life that we live now in connection with God. It is about experiencing now this way of life that can last and survive even after death” [43].

On the divine plan of salvation for all creation, Carlton Pearson says that he would rather overestimate God's love and grace than underestimate them. His inclusivist and pluralist stance, however, stems from a pantheistic view of God, which he himself declares himself to be an adherent of: "I have come to the conclusion that I am not a monotheist but a pantheist - I believe that God or the Godhead is all and everywhere. This is a belief in an omnipresent God. If God is everywhere, then He is in everyone and everything - in all religions, people, cultures, ideologies, concepts and beliefs. And in all books" [44].

## **CONCLUSION**

The present study addresses a fundamental topic in Christian spiritual traditions - the importance of asceticism in terms of salvation, comparing this view with the perspectives of contemporary theologians, such as Rob Bell, Thomas Allin and George MacDonald, who support the idea that God is obliged to save all humanity because of the gift of life that he has



given them. In the analysis of this study, the essential differences between traditional Orthodox approaches and the latest theological conceptions are pointed out, highlighting the importance of asceticism, will and personal responsibility in the process of salvation.

A first aspect of the study emphasizes the Orthodox view of salvation, which cannot be conceived only as an gift, but as a continuous work between man and God. In this vision, asceticism plays a central role, being seen as a process of cleansing the soul and aligning the human will with the divine will. Salvation is not a human right, but a gift of God, which can only be realized through the active cooperation of man with divine grace. Asceticism, in this context, is not just a physical practice or a series of external abstinences, but an inner state of openness to God, a constant willingness to renounce selfishness and one's own desires in favor of love and humility. Everything is important for the life which is to come [45]. Contrary to this view, theologians such as Rob Bell, Thomas Allin, and George MacDonald hold a more universalistic and "debtive" view of salvation. They believe that since God gave life to every human being, He is obligated, in a theological sense, to provide for the salvation of all who have been brought into being. In this light, salvation becomes an act of divine justice, an obligation of God towards His creation. This position emphasizes God's unconditional love and His intention to save all humanity, without significant consideration of human response or personal choice of each individual.

The study points out, however, the contradictions that arise when it is claimed that salvation is a duty of God. Salvation, in the Orthodox tradition, is not just an automatic gift, but a path that requires human effort, a spiritual struggle against passions and selfishness, and a constant desire for perfection. From this point of view, asceticism is not only a method of personal fulfillment, but a means by which man frees himself from his weaknesses and makes himself capable of receiving divine grace in an authentic way. Salvation is thus a continuous work of the whole being, which involves a deep commitment to God's will and to inner transformation.

In contrast to these views, the idea that salvation is God's duty may diminish the importance of human involvement in this process. If God were obliged to save all people, man's freedom of choice would disappear, and salvation would no longer be a personal and transformative process, but an act imposed from outside. This conception could lead to an erroneous understanding of salvation, in which man becomes passive, waiting for God to save him regardless of his will or efforts.

The study concludes that salvation presupposes an active collaboration between God and man. Even though God is the source of unconditional love and grace, salvation cannot be achieved without the conscious participation of each individual. Asceticism, in this context, is not just a religious or ascetic practice, but a deep and free choice of man to respond to the divine call [46]. Thus, salvation is not a right that man has because of the gift of life, but a continuous and dynamic gift, which is achieved only through a personal and spiritual work. According to traditional Orthodox teaching, man must make efforts to cleanse himself of sins, to overcome selfishness and to reach salvation, thus being able to receive the gift of salvation.

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