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ANACHORESIS

The Flight into the Desert as a Missionary Paradigm

A.1. An introductory question: Desert versus society?

Anchoretic life is one aspect of the multidimensional Christian asceticism and especially of monasticism. The term „anachoresis” is usually used as identical with the „hermitism”. Both refer to solitary life in the desert. Nevertheless, „anachoresis” has a dynamic meaning: being the transliteration of the Greek noun ἀναχώρησις, it derives from the verb ἀναχωρεῖν, which means „to leave, to withdraw”.

The origins of anachoresis as a historical phenomenon can be traced in the third century AD in Egypt, when individuals – or sometimes whole communities – abandoned their villages and withdrew into deserts or swamps to escape from the intolerable burden of taxation; besides, during the persecutions many Christians sought refuge in the desert, where they possibly tasted the spiritual advantages of solitude.¹ For some Christians, however, the motive of the withdrawal into the wilderness was primarily the desire to run a life in the fullest possible accordance with God’s will, away from every kind of compromise which life in the world implies. This tension appeared even stronger around the fourth century, when the persecutions came to an end and Christian life in the empire, enjoying peace and official recognition, started to become secularized. Especially after the Egyptian St Antony (c. 251–356) who, through his exaltation by St Athanasius the Great (c. 296–373), gained a reputation as „the teacher of the desert”, anchoretic life is highly esteemed in Christian consciousness. What can be traced as its basic feature is a twofold action; an „exit” and, at the same time, an „entry”: On one hand, exit, retirement from the cities, disengagement from the world, withdrawal from society. On the other hand, entry into the desert, flight into the wilderness.

This flight is usually understood as a practical way to avoid the turmoil and the upheaval of the society. The anchorite appears as he who pursues tranquillity and quietness, that is, conditions which would facilitate his spiritual struggle against his passions. Certainly, this approach to anchoretic life can easily be scanned in the literature of the Church. Christ Himself used to withdraw privately to solitary places from time to time

¹ Derwas J. CHITTY, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York 1966, 7, Peter BROWN, *The World of late Antiquity from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad*, Thames and Hudson, London 1971, 98.

(Matthew 14:13,23). Into this line, St John Chrysostom (to mention only a few of the numerous testimonies one could invoke) argues that he who manages to get rid of the cares, the troubles and the anxieties of everyday life in society, runs an easier way of life and resembles him who avoids the sea waves and dwells in a safe harbour². Tranquillity, says St Basil the Great, gives us great profits, since it soothes the passions of our soul and offers us the opportunity to uproot them³.

The opposition between *society* and *desert* is an antithesis between two modes of life. In the religious peoples' mind, however, it is not always clear. Very often, *society* and *desert* are conceived as two *ontologically* different parts of the creation, as if they have been created out of two different stuffs, one „holy” and one „profane”, one „clean” and one „unclean”. In that case, anachoresis is considered the saving exit from the society, the sinful place par excellence. Other people, on the other hand, cannot see in the anchoretic life anything but a selfish escape which seeks to run away from the major problems of real life, that is, of life in society. In view of this, the institutionalized society has been attributed the characteristics of the „holy” place; every withdrawal from it appears as nonsense. Though both these aspects seem to be opposed to each other, they both presuppose – *mutatis mutandis* – the said *ontological, dualistic* and *irreconcilable* distinction between desert and society.

According to the authentic ecclesial faith and doctrine, however, asceticism is not basically a matter of geography. Abundant patristic texts show that the distinction between desert and society is not an ontological one. Every testimony, of course, has to be treated properly, that is within its context and not in a fragmentary way.⁴ For example, the above mentioned quotation from St Basil, which praises the benefits of solitary life, might lead a careless reader to a misunderstanding (e.g. that St Basil regards the desert as the only place proper for ascesis). Nevertheless, it is very important that the said quotation is actually preceded by a valuable clarification: If one – says St Basil – wants to flight from the cares of life, he has to separate himself from the world. But exit (anachoresis) from the world must not be conceived literally, as a bodily withdrawal. Anachoresis from the world means primarily that the soul must stop being subordinate to the body⁵. In a similar way St Isaak of Nineveh (d. c. 700) makes clear that: „When you hear about renunciation of the world or about abandonment of the world or about being pure of the world, first of all you need to learn and know... what the term 'world' means... The world is the carnal way of life and the mind of flesh... Negation of the world becomes apparent in these two changes: by a transformation in way of life and by a difference in mental impulses”⁶.

² JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Ad Theodorum lapsum liber secundus*, PG 47, 312, 315: „Τί γάρ ελαφρότερον, εἴτε μοι, τοῦ φροντισῶν καί πραγμάτων καί φόβων, καί πόνων ἀπηλλάχθαι, ἐξωθεν δέ τῶν τοῦ βίου κυμάτων ἔσταναι, καί ἐν εὐδίῳ διάγειν λιμένι... Ὁ Χριστῶ στρατευόμενος, τῆς ταραχῆς τοῦ βίου καί τῶν κυμάτων ἑαυτῶν ὑπεξαγαθῶν, κάθηται ἐπ' ἄσφαλει καί ὑψηλῷ χωρίῳ”.

³ BASILLI, *Epistola ii, Gregorio*, 2, PG 32, 225 B: „Μέγιστον ὄφελος ἡμῖν ἡ ἐρημία παρέχεται, κατενάουσα ἡμῶν τὰ πάθη, καί σχολήν δίδουσα τῷ λόγῳ παντελῶς αὐτά τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκτεμεῖν”. See also *Epistola xlii, ad Chilonem*, 5, PG 32, 357 A–B.

⁴ For the relationship between the catholicity of the church doctrine and the partiality of certain testimonies, see my *Τῆς Χριστιανικότητος ἡ ἀσκησις. Ἀνίχνευση μερικῶν κριτηρίων*. Σύνταξη 53 (1995) 11–26.

⁵ „Τούτων (σ.σ. τῶν φροντισῶν τοῦ βίου) δέ μία φυγή, ὁ χωρισμός ἀπό τοῦ κόσμου παντός. Κόσμου δέ ἀναχώρησις οὐ τό ἐξω αὐτοῦ γενέσθαι σωματικῶς, ἀλλά τῆς πρὸς τὸ σῶμα συμπαθείας τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπορῆξαι”. BASILLI, *Epistola ii, Gregorio*, 2, PG 32, 225 B. Actually, St Basil was in favour of coenobite life. See BASILLI, *Regulae Fusius Tractatae*, vii, PG 31, 928B–933C.

⁶ St ISAAC of Nineveh, *On Ascetical Life* (transl. from the Syriac by Mary Hansbury), St Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York 1989, 39–40.

On this subject it is of special importance what Niketas Stethatos (c. 1005–c.1090), the disciple and biographer of the famous St Symeon the New Theologian, emphasizes: „I have heard some people arguing that none can acquire virtue without leaving and flighting into the desert; but I wondered, how they can ever believe that something unrestrictable (i.e. our relationship with God) can be restricted to certain places... The powers of the soul have been engraved inside us since our creation, by divine and non-material energy. With and through these powers... we can enter the heavenly Kingdom, which is inside us, as the Lord said (Luke 17:21). Thus, the desert is not necessary, since we can enter the Kingdom even without it, by repentance and keeping God's commandments. This can be done, according to Saind David, in every place which is dominated by God; because he says 'Praise the Lord, O my soul, everywhere in His dominion' (Psalm 102:22)"⁷.

A.2. An introductory answer: Creation versus Autonomy

Niketas' last sentences successfully highlights the heart of the case: *Every place can* become place of the dominion of the Lord; nevertheless, the dominion of the Lord has not yet been established everywhere. What is implied here and what has been partially clarified above, can be resumed through the ecclesiastical doctrine as follows:

The only fundamental distinction we can make is between the Creator and the Creation; that is, between the Un-created (God) and the Created (universe). This is an ontological distinction, since God's essence and the essence of the Creation are totally different. We must keep in mind that the word „Creation" denotes *everything* except God alone: angels, humans, animals, inorganic matter etc. Each one's particular way of existence is just an aspect of the Created.

So, the whole world is conceived as a Creation; and since it was created by God Himself, „it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). He brought the Creation into existence so that it would willingly head towards God, meet Him and finally become His flesh; to be more precise, the final goal of the Creation is to become the body of the Son, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, and thus enter the eternal trinitarian life. The realization of this schedule began with the Incarnation of the Son. As God-Man (that is, as the person in which the divine and the created nature met and became united), Christ has been the commencement of a procedure with universal – cosmic perspectives. The entire Creation has been constructed and invited to participate in His incarnation, to be assumed by Him, to become Church, so that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28; see also Ephesians 1:22–23; Colossians 1:15–20, Revelation 21). Especially the human being has been ordained the priest – has been appointed the pilot who will lead the Creation to its destination. This eschatological perspective of the historical itinerary of the Creation has been emphasized by the Orthodox theology and especially by Church Fathers like Irinaeus (c. 130–c.200), Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–662), Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain (c. 1749–1809) et al.⁸

The human beings, however, can either accept or reject God's invitation. Hence, every place can either become place of the Lord's dominion, or degenerate into a place of

⁷ Φιλοκαλία τῶν ἑπὶ τὸν Νηπτικῶν, ἐκδ., Ἀστήρ, τ. Γ', Ἀθήναι 1976, 289–290 (the Greek texts are rendered by myself).

⁸ For a comprehensive approach of this issue see Panayotis NELLAS, *Deification in Christ; The Nature of the Human Person* (transl. from the Greek by Norman Russell), St Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York 1987.

evil's dominion. Thus, the distinction between „holy” and „profane” can not be abolished. But it must be clear that it does not refer to the essence or the calling, but to the deliberate orientation of the Creation, that is, its choice to go towards God or far away from Him.

What we have just called „orientation of the Creation” has nothing to do with moralism or sentimentalism. It is a matter of life. Relationship with God and finally unity with Him means participation in Life, since for every created existence life is a present, a donation by Him who is uncreated and owes His existence to nothing and none. In this perspective, communion and life coincide. On the contrary, the creatures which choose autonomy by breaking their connection with God, face the danger not only to become „bad” in a moral sense, but to deprive themselves from Life.

The status, however, of autonomy can give way to relationship with God whenever the human being repents and responds to God's calling. Every part of the Creation, which has not found its way into the Church yet, resembles a territory under illegal occupation. What remains in abeyance, is its liberation and the re-establishment of freedom over it.

In cases like that, what we could call liberation struggle bears historical and eschatological characteristics. Its horizon is the vision of the final encounter of the Creation with its Creator. The struggle of the Christians to elevate every part of the Creation to place of the dominion of the Lord, means to serve the itinerary of the Creation towards God. It is a historical attitude and, at the same time, a sign, an anticipation and foretaste of the Kingdom, as well. Every particular activity has to derive its meaning, its *raison d'être* from this fundamental perspective; otherwise it is meaningless. So, the Christian asceticism can not be conceived as the effort of the spirit to get rid of the body, or as the longing of the soul to get out of history. Such concepts, placed in an unhistorical, static frame, constitute a spirituality clearly diverse from the Christian faith. E.g., what the Church craves for, is not the annihilation of a part of the creation (e.g. the body) in favour of another part (e.g. the soul), but the Resurrection of the human being in its fullness in communion with Christ

B. The Flight as Fight

Anachoresis into the desert has many dimensions. To a great extent, the meaning it assumes, presupposes the meaning attributed to the desert. So, the desert can appear as the realm of tranquillity, as the shelter for the persecuted, as the meeting point with Jahwe, as the pure place distinct from the corruption of urban life, or as a cursed, devastated land. These dimensions appear already in the Semitic Orient and the Old Testament, that is, before the 4th century, the age of anachoresis⁹.

Here we shall deal only with a specific aspect of anchoretic life, which (aspect) is usually ignored or overlooked¹⁰. This aspect is: Anachoresis not as an escape, but as an expedition. Not primarily as a „withdrawal”, but as an „entry”. Here, what counts more is not the city (as the place left behind) but the desert (as the territory to be conquered). As

⁹ For the various concepts of the „desert” and the withdrawal into it, see: Antoine GUILLAUMONT, *La Conception du désert chez les moines d'Égypte*: Revue de l'Histoire des Religions 3 (1975) 3–21. J. A. SELBIE, *Wilderness or Desert: A Dictionary of the Bible* (J. Hastings ed.) IV, Edinburgh 1904³, 917–918. W. L. REED, *Desert: The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, I, New York – Nashville 1962, 828–829. G. KITTEL, έρημος: Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament (Hrsg. Gerhard Kittel) II, Stuttgart 1935, 654–657.

¹⁰ I have presented the basic concept of the present essay in two earlier publications of mine: „'Εκκλησιαστικοποίηση όλης της ζωής. Η πράξη των άσκητών οδηγός για τό σημερινό ήθος”: έρην. Χριστιανική 2–10–1981 and „Ο άναχωρητισμός. Μεταμόρφωση της έρήμου σε τόπο δεσποτείας Θεού”: Σύναξη 13 (1985) 38–40.

we shall argue extensively later on, from this point of view Anachoresis is conceived as the aggressive vindication of places occupied by the evil, in order to be liberated from the evil and rendered to God.

In the Semitic and Mesopotamian tradition, the desert was not thought of as an empty place, but – on the contrary – as an inhabited one. It was considered to be the abode of the powers which harass mankind; the domain of the demons. The wilderness, the waste places and the ruins were regarded as their favorite haunts¹¹. A similar concept recurs in ancient Egypt. The cultivated, fertile „black land” was the realm of the god of life, while the sterile „red land” was the habitation of the evil god Seth¹².

It is interesting that in the Old Testament the devastated and ruined cities become the residence of demons and wild beasts (Isaiah 13:21, 34:13–14, Jeremiah 27:39, Sophonias 2:14, Baruch 4:35; the beasts are often connected to evil powers: Psalm 21:11–21, Ezekiel 34:5, 8:25). In the case of desolated cities it becomes clear how a place can be deprived from the presence of God and degenerate into desert. The places which – through their inhabitants’ sins – reject the sovereignty of God, pass under the yoke of the demons. Perhaps it is not by chance that the supposed root of the Hebrew word denoting „demon”, means „to be mighty”, hence „to rule”¹³. In a few words, one could say that devil and his demons are usurpers since they keep under their own yoke creatures (places, living beings etc) which do not belong by nature to them. In the New Testament the evil spirits dwell in arid areas; when they possess a man, they try to drive him into solitary places (where they dominate) and they do manage it, even when his relatives have chained him hand and foot! (Luke 8:29, 11:24).

Within the frame of this tradition, the anchorites can not be seen as fugitives. On the contrary, they are a kind of determined pioneers of the Church: they penetrate and intrude into the quarters of the enemy, seeking for direct conflict with him in order to expel him. The example for an action like this was set by Christ Himself.

After he was baptized, „*Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil*” (Matthew 4:1, see also Mark 1:12–13, Luke 4:1–2). Jesus stayed in the desert for forty days and was confronted with the three demonic temptations. In this event we can lay emphasis on the following parameters: Christ’s entry to the desert was not an accidental episode, but a deliberate initiative guided by the Holy Spirit. The pattern of the incarnational mission of the Son is repeated here. The Son is being sent (John 17:18) into a place which has renounced its relationship with God (John 1:10–11). The purpose of this „invasion” was the direct struggle with Satan. Theophylact, the archbishop of Ochrid (ca 1050–1126) comments: „*The Holy Spirit led Him to the battle against the devil. He went into the desert in order to give the devil the pretext to attack Him*”¹⁴.

After the victorious outcome of the battle, that is, after Christ’s confrontation with the three temptations had been completed, „*the devil left Him, and angels came and attended (served) him*” (Matthew 4:11); „*he was with the wild animals and angels attended him*” (Mark 1:12–13). The desert, which was a little ago occupied by the devil, was at last liberated and became a place of dominion of the Lord, a place where the communion

¹¹ T.H. GASTER, *Demon, The habitat of demons: The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, op. cit. 821. GUILLAUMONT, op. cit. 4.

¹² GUILLAUMONT, op. cit., 11.

¹³ Owen C. WHITEHOUSE, *Demon, devil: A Dictionary of the Bible*, op. cit., 1, 590.

¹⁴ THEOPHYLACTI, *Enarratio in Evangelium Lucae*, iv, PG 123, 745 C: „Τὰ γὰρ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ἐνήγγεν αὐτὸν εἰς τὸν κατὰ τοῦ διαβόλου ἀγῶνα. Εἰς ἔρημον δὲ ἀπεισιν, ἵνα δόση λαβὴν τῷ διαβόλῳ τοῦ ἐπιθέσθαι αὐτῷ”. (Scripture taken from the „Holy Bible, New International Version”, 1984³).

between the Creator and His Creation (man, angles, animals etc) was re-established. Actually Christ acted like this during the whole period of His earthly life. He kept on expelling the demons from every residence they usurped, the people possessed included. St Ambrose of Milan (c. 339–397) connects the verse Luke 4:1–2 with the whole work carried out by Christ; Jesus, the second Adam, entered the desert, where the first Adam had been exiled, in order to challenge the devil and liberate the ancestor (in reality, the entire mankind)¹⁵. Furthermore, it is of particular importance that in an exegetical tradition, even His flee to Egypt (in order to avoid the massacre ordered by Herod; see Matthew 2:13–20) is viewed not as an escape, but rather as a purposeful entry in order to purify Egypt, which was considered one of the two „workshops of evil”. The other one, Babylon, was purified voluntarily, because its representatives, the three Magi, went to Him. But Egypt had stayed away from Him, so He had to go to it¹⁶.

We shall not be wrong if we argue that the anchorites have patterned themselves upon Christ. The „*Life of St Antony*”, e.g., informs us that in the desert, where Antony dwelt, something which reminds us of the above quoted scriptural narrative happened: When Antony came to heights of ascesis, the demons went away from him and the wild animals became peaceful to him¹⁷. The anchorites and the authors of the relevant texts (narratives, sayings, lives etc) probably shared the said tradition about the evil yoke over the desert. It is very important that the demons appear very often claiming to be the owners and masters of certain parts of the creation. When they attacked Antony, they cried to him: „*Get off our own domain; it's not of your business to involve the desert*”¹⁸. According to another narrative, the famous anchorite Macarius from Alexandria decided to enter an ancient pagan graveyard. There he was confronted with the demons who inhabited that devastated place. They uttered the following (indeed revealing) words: „*What do you want, Macarius? Why have you come to us?... You and your fellow anchorites occupy our property, that is the desert. You have chased our relatives away... Why do you transgress our own regions?*”¹⁹. Something similar is said to have happened when an anonymous anchorite entered a pagan temple and had a skirmish with the demons dwelling there. They told him: „*Go away from our own place*”. His reply, though extremely brief, fully expresses the ecclesial faith: „*You have no place of your own*”²⁰. For the Church, the claims of the demons over the desert are false and groundless; in reality, „*the Lord's power extends over*

¹⁵ „*Conuenit recordari quemadmodum de paradiso in desertum Adam primus eiectus sit, ut aduertus quemadmodum de deserto ad paradysum Adam secundus reuerterit... Plenus igitur Iesus spiritu sancto agit in desertum consilio, ut diabolum prouocaret... ut illum Adam de exilio liberaret*”. AMBROISE de Milan, *Traité sur l'Évangile de S. Luc*, I, livres I–VI, Sources Chrétiennes 45 (Dom Gabriel Tissot ed.), Paris 1956, 153, 156. Here one more dimension is clearly implied: the desert as the symbol of human life away from God. We refer to this in the last unity of this essay

¹⁶ THEOPHYLACTI, *Enarratio in Evangelium Matthaei*, ii, PG 123, 168C: „Εἰς Αἴγυπτον δὲ φεύγει, ἵνα καὶ ἐκεῖνην ἀγίασῃ, δύο γὰρ ἦσαν χώραι πάσης κακίας ἐργαστήρια, ἡ Βαβυλῶν καὶ ἡ Αἴγυπτος. Τὴν μὲν οὖν Βαβυλῶνα, διὰ τῶν Μάγων ἐδέξατο προσκυνοῦσαν τὴν δὲ Αἴγυπτον, τῇ ἑαυτοῦ παραουσίᾳ ἠγάσεν”. Cf. CHRYSOSTOMI, *Homilia viii*, „*Et intrantes domum...*”, 4, PG 57, 88.

¹⁷ ATHANASIIUS, *Vita et conversatio S.P.N. Antonii*, 51, PG 26, 917 B: „...ὥστε μᾶλλον τοὺς δαίμονας φεύγειν, καὶ τὰ θηρία τὰ ἄγρια, ὡς γέγραπται, εἰρηνεύειν πρὸς αὐτόν”.

¹⁸ *Vita S. Antonii*, op. cit., 13, PG 26, 861 C: „ Ἀπόστα τῶν ἡμετέρων ἵ σοὶ καὶ τῇ ἐρήμῳ”.

¹⁹ PALLADI, *Historia Lausiaca*, xix, PG 34, 1052C–D: „Τὶ θέλεις, Μακάριε, πειρασμέ τῶν μοναχῶν; τί πρὸς ἡμᾶς παρεγένου;... Τὰ ἡμέτερα ἔχεις ἐκεῖ μετὰ τῶν σοι ὁμοίων, τὴν ἐρήμον ἄκακίθεν τοὺς συγγενεῖς ἡμῶν ἐξεδιώξατα.... Τί ἐπιβαίνεις ἡμῶν τοῖς τόποις;”. The entry into pagan graveyards, as well as the conversion of pagan temples to Christian Churches should be considered a specific aspect of the „invasion into the desert”. Here we can not cope with this aspect in detail, but we hope to do it in future time.

²⁰ *Aprophetegmata Patrum*, vii, PG 65, 184 D: „Τίς γέρων ἔμεινεν εἰς ἰερόν καὶ ἦλθον οἱ δαίμονες λέγοντες αὐτῷ Ἀπελθε ἐκ τοῦ τόπου ἡμῶν. Καὶ ὁ γέρων ἐφῆ Ὑμεῖς οὐκ ἔχετε τόπον”.

the desert” (Psalm 107:35). Nevertheless, the care which constantly preoccupies the mind of the demons is how they will expel the anchorites from the desert, either through direct attacks²¹ or through indirect ones, that is, by trying to persuade them that no spiritual progress could be achieved in the desert, so it would be better for the anchorites to leave the wilderness and return to the cities. St John Climacus (c. 570–c. 649) clarifies that many demons have been exiled to the deserts and the abyss by Christ for the sake of the human kind. So, it is not strange if the anchorites suffer hard offences there. Especially the demons of the prostitution (says St John) attack violently the hermit in order to convince him that the desert offers him nothing and that he has to go back to the world²².

The anchorites invade every shelter of the demons without exceptions: the deserts, the pagan graves, the ruins. In ascetical literature this is expressed through a „charming” setting: the demons often appear to complain that they are forced to flee from place to place, and that they are ruthlessly expelled successively from all. So the satan addressed to Antony: „I have no longer place, arrow or town of my own. The Christians have settled everywhere; even the desert has been crowded with monks”²³. Similar complaints are found in an episode during the persecutions launched by Valens (c. 375) against the monks in Egypt. Macarius and other anchorites were exiled to an island inhabited exclusively by pagans. When they disembarked, the demons told them through the possessed daughter of the pagan priest: „You have chased us out of every place; of cities and towns, mountains and hills, even out of the uninhabited desert. We hoped that if we settle in this little island we would be saved from your arrows; but our hopes are defeated”²⁴.

The struggle for the liberation of the Creation is liable to no limitations. The relevant ascetic narratives, though they may seem mythical and naive, are texts of wisdom, founded on the Christian cosmology. Palladius, the author of the „Lausiac History” narrates that one day he was sent by his spiritual father, abba Dorotheus, to draw up water. When he approached the well, he saw an asp (a kind of serpent) in it; so he returned desperate to the abba without bringing water at all. But Dorotheus told him: „If the devil likes to place asps in every well or snakes and other poisonous beasts in every spring of water, will you abstain from drinking for ever?” Then the abba drew up water himself, drank and concluded: „Wherever the Cross dwells, the satan’s evil has no power”²⁵. Here it becomes apparent that the mission of the anchorite is not the rejection of the contaminated creation, but its

²¹ See e.g. *Vita S. Antonii*, op. cit., 53, PG 26, 920 A–B: „πάντα γάρ ἐσπούδαζον (σ.σ. οἱ δαίμονες) ποιεῖν, ἵνα καταγάωσιν αὐτὸν ἐκ τῆς ἐρήμου, καὶ οὐκ ἴσχυσαν (sic)”.

²² IOANNIS CLIMACI, *Scala Paradisi*, xv, PG 88, 893A: „Τινές... ἐν τοῖς ἡσυχαστικοῦ τόποις, πολλῶ πλέον πολεμῆσθαι πεφύκασι καὶ οὐ θαῦμα, φιλοχωροῦσι γὰρ ἐκεῖ πολλῶ πλέον οἱ δαίμονες ὑπὸ τοῦ Κυρίου ἐν ταῖς ἐρήμοις, καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀβύσσῳ ἐξορισθέντες πρὸς σωτηρίαν ἡμῶν. Πολεμοῦσιν ἡσυχαστῆ χαλεπῶς οἱ τῆς πορνείας δαίμονες ἵνα ὡς μηδὲν ὀφελούμενον ἐκ τῆς ἐρήμου πρὸς τὸν κόσμον διώξωσιν”. Besides, it is recorded that the demon managed to persuade abba Nathanael to leave his cell and build another, closer to the persuade abba Nathanael to leave his cell and build another, closer to the town. PALLADI, op.cit., xviii, PG 34, 1041 D. See also xxxii, 1091 D.

²³ *Vita S. Antonii*, op. cit., 41, PG 26, 904 A–B: „Οὐκ ἔτι τόπον ἔχω, οὐ βέλος, οὐ πόλιν. Πανταχοῦ Χριστιανοὶ γεγόνασι λοιπὸν καὶ ἡ ἐρημος πεπληρωταί μοναχῶν”. See also 853 C – 856 A: when Antony entered a cemetery, he was attacked by a demon who was afraid that Antony would fill the desert with monks.

²⁴ THEODORETI CYRENSIS, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iv, 18, PG 82, 1165 C: „Ἦ τῆς ὑμετέρας δυναστείας, ὃ θεράποντες τοῦ Χριστοῦ πανταχοθεν παρ’ ὑμῶν ἐηλάμεθα, ἀπὸ πόλεων καὶ κομῶν, ἀπὸ ἀρῶν (sic) καὶ βουνῶν, ἀπὸ τῆς οἰκητόρων ἐστερημένης ἐρήμου ἤλπισαμεν ἐν τῷδε τῷ νησοῦδρῳ διαγοντες τῶν ὑμετέρων ἀπηλλάχθαι βελῶν, καὶ τῆς ἐλπίδος ἐνεύσθημεν”. Theodoret (c. 393–c. 466) draws his information from Socrates (c. 380–450), who mentions the story more concisely. See SOCRATIS, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iv, 24, PG 67, 524 C – 525 A. For the said persecution see CHITTY, op. cit., 48.

²⁵ PALLADI, op. cit., ii, PG 34, 1011 D – 1012 A: „Ἐάν δόξη τῷ διαβόλῳ κατὰ πᾶν φρεᾶρ ἀσπίδας ἐμβαλεῖν, ἢ ὄφεις ἢ ἔτερα ἰόβόλα θηρία εἰς πάσας τὰς πηγὰς τῶν ὑδάτων, οὐ μένεις μηδέποτε πίνων... Ὅπου σταυρὸς ἐπιφοιτᾷ, οὐκ ἰσχύει κακία τοῦ σατανᾶ”.

purification. Otherwise it would mean that the anchorite compromises with the devil and finally recognizes and legalizes its arbitrary yoke. Every place can be contaminated and every place must be cleansed, and vice versa. That's why another anchorite, John the Cilix, used to advise the monks not to re-stain the place that had been cleansed from the devil by the earlier anchorites²⁶. In a few words, as the late Derwas Chitty put it, anachoresis „was no mere flight, nor a rejection of matter as evil... It was rooted in a stark realism of faith in God and acceptance of the battle which is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness”²⁷. Thus, anachoresis can help us understand that the life of the Church is a struggle indeed, but it must not be conceived in terms of an imperialistic expansion. The entry into the desert is not a model for a quasi-Christian jihad; the fight is actually waged against the evil – not against the infidels, the sinners or even the possessed by the evil. Moreover, even those who deny the existence of devil must admit that it is unfair to identify (as usually happens) the anachoresis with resignation from participation in history; actually, it is evident that anachoresis (even viewed merely as a type of religious behaviour) presupposes a sheer confidence in man's historical assignment, intervention and creativity.

What we call „purification” and „cleansing” has to do with the liturgical relationship between man and the rest of the creation. They are not strangers to each other. The human being can contribute either to the fall or to the resurrection of the creation (Romans 8:19–23). Thus, the Christians are the priests who minister the transformation of the whole world into Church. In this perspective, the anchorites are the missionaries who would go „to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:7–8) in order to invite the whole creation to the Kingdom. The above quoted words of abba Dorotheus, „whenever the Cross dwells...”, are extremely important. On no occasion do they imply magic ritual or so. Actually, they have to do with the inculcation of Christ into every aspect of life; it has to do with the incorporation of the Creation to His body. In fact, the mission which the anchorites have shouldered is to act as new Apostles in order that what Christ Himself achieved on His Cross may be – in a way – extended, activated, grafted into space and time. This is about human cooperation (synergia) in a divine work with cosmic capacity. In an especially important text St John Chrysostom throws light on these universal dimensions. Why was Christ crucified out of the city (Jerusalem), on a high place (Golgotha), and not under a roof?, Chrysostom asks. And he replies: Christ did so, in order to cleanse the air, which was believed to be the domain of the devil. During the crucifixion the sky was the only roof over Him, so that the sky itself would be cleansed. Apart from the sky, the earth was also cleansed, because His blood trickled down on the earth and purified all its contaminations. But – Chrysostom continues – why was not He crucified in the Judaic Temple? And he answers again: He was crucified outside the walls of the city so that His sacrifice would not be misappropriated by the Judeans. Because His self-offering was catholic; it was made for the sake of all Nations and the cleansing of the human nature gives profit to all the humans. So, Christ, cleansed the entire earth and transformed every place into prayer place²⁸.

²⁶ JOANNIS MOSCHI, *Pratum Spirituale*, cxv, PG 87³, 2980 B: „Μή ρυψώμεν, τέκνα, τὸν τόπον τοῦτον, ὃν οἱ Πατέρες ἡμῶν ἐκαθάρισαν ἀπὸ τῶν δαιμόνων”.

²⁷ CHITTY, op. cit., xvi.

²⁸ JOANNIS CHRYSOSTOMI, *Oratio II in crucem et in confessionem latronis*, PG 49, 408–409: „Τίνος οὖν ἔνεκεν ἔξω τῆς πόλεως, ἐφ' ὑψηλοῦ, καὶ οὐχ ὑπὸ στέγην τινά; Οὐχ ἀπλῶς οὐδὲ τοῦτο, ἀλλ' ἵνα τοῦ αἵματος καθάρῃ τὴν φύσιν. Διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἐφ' ὑψηλοῦ, καὶ οὐκ ἐπικειμένης στέγης, ἀλλ' ἀντὶ στέγης ἐπικειμένου τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, ἵνα καθάρθῃ ὁ οὐρανὸς ἀπαξ, ἀφ' ὑψηλοῦ θυομένου τοῦ προβάτου. Ἐκαθάρθη οὖν οὐρανός, ἐκαθάρθη δὲ καὶ ἡ γῆ. Ἔσταξε γάρ τὸ αἷμα ἀπὸ τῆς πλευράς, ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν, καὶ τὸν μολυσμὸν οὐτῆς ἀπαντα ἐξεκάθηνεν.

For the time being, a basic characteristic of Christian life is *expectation*. The Christians groan inwardly as they wait eagerly for their adoption by God; not only so, but even the creation waits in eager expectation for its liberation from its bondage to decay (cf Romans 8:19–23). Every battle the Church wins (to use a military image) is a step towards the expected end. That's why the author of the „Life of St Antony” rejoices for the presence of the anchorites in the wilderness. He uses a rather striking hyperbole. „*The desert was turned into a city by monks*”²⁹. This is a renowned phrase, very often quoted in essays on monasticism. It certainly has to do with the communal ideal of the Church and especially of the coenobitic monasticism (the faithfuls are not conceived as isolated individuals, but as members of a body, as citizens of a city). But we shall not deal with this perspective now. What we want to underline here is the expression of rejoice. It is probably not by chance that the same concept (the transformation of a desert into a city) recurs in the „Life of St Sabas” (439–532). It is interesting to watch how this „Life” presents and interprets Savas’ withdrawal from the monastery into the desert. According to the „Life”, the desert was destined to be turned into a city by Sabas and so the prophecies of Isaiah concerning the desert to be fulfilled. Sabas pleaded his abbot to let him leave the monastery and depart to the desert. Yet, the abbot did not consent; so, God appeared to him in a vision and told him: leave Sabas go in order to worship me in the desert³⁰.

We can see here that the flight to desert appears as the performance of God’s will, as the fulfilment of prophecies. That means that God never ceased to vindicate the desert; the warm expectation for its liberation gives place to the rejoice for the realization of the liberation. The „Life of Sabas” is probably referring to the prophecy of Isaiah: „*Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations*”³¹. Besides, the words the abbot heard in vision are also biblical verses: „*Let my people, so that they may worship me in the desert*” (Exodus 7:16).

It seems that this hermeneutical approach (i.e. anachoresis, the conquest of the desert as a joyful fulfilment of prophecies) was an idea shared by many. In a source which refers to the monastic life in Egypt, it is recorded that the monks who gathered around an ascetic named Appollo resembled an angel army. Through their lives two scriptural prophecies came true: „*The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom*” (Isaiah 35:1), and „*Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst*

Ἄλλ’ ὑπὸ στέγῃν μὲν ταύτης ἔνεκεν τῆς αἰτίας οὐ προσφέρεται ἡ θυσία· τίνος δὲ ἔνεκεν οὐχὶ ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ ναῷ τῷ Ἰουδαϊκῷ; Καὶ τοῦτο πάλιν οὐχ ἀπλῶς, ἀλλ’ ἵνα μὴ ἰδιοποιήσωνται τὴν θυσίαν οἱ οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, ἵνα μὴ νομισθῆς ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἔθνους ἐκεῖνου μόνου τὴν θυσίαν προσφέρεισθαι, διὰ τοῦτο ἔξω τῆς πόλεως, ἔξω τῶν τειχῶν, ἵνα μάθῃς ὅτι καθολικὴ ἐστὶν ἡ προσφορὰ, καὶ ὅτι κοινὸς τῆς φύσεως ἡμῶν ἀπάσφς ἐστὶν ὁ καθαρισμὸς... Ἐλθὼν ὁ Χριστὸς, καὶ τῆς πόλεως ἔξω παθῶν, πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν ἐκάθῃρε, πάντα τόπον εὐκτήριον εἰργάσατο... Εἶδες πῶς ἐκάθῃρε τὴν οἰκουμένην;”. See also ATHANASII, *Oratio de humana natura a Verbo assumpta*, 25, PG 25, 140 B–C, where it is emphasized that the air had to be cleansed, since it had been the domain of the devil (Ephesians 2:2) after his original fall.

²⁹ Vita S. Antonii, op. cit., 14, PG 26, 865 B: „Ἡ ἔρημος ἐπολίσθη ὑπὸ μοναχῶν”.

³⁰ Edward SCHWARTZ (Hrsg.), *Kyrillos von Skythopolis, Leben des Sabas (Texte und Untersuchungen)*, Leipzig 1939, 90: „Ἐδεῖ γὰρ δι’ οὗτου ταύτην (σ.σ. τὴν ἔρημον) πολιισθῆναι, καὶ τὰς ἐπ’ αὐτῇ τοῦ μεγαλο-φώνου Ἡσαίου πληρωθῆναι προφητείας. καὶ προσελθῶν τῷ βασι-μανδρίτῃ ἐδυσώπει ἀπολυθῆναι μετ’ εὐχῆς. τῷ δὲ μὴ βουληθέντι θεῖα τις ἀποκαλύπτεται ὄπτασία λέγουσα· ἀπόλυσον τὸν Σάββαν, ἵνα μοι λατρεύῃ ἐν τῇ ἔρημῳ”.

³¹ Isaiah 58:12: „καὶ οἰκοδομησονται σου αἱ ἔρημοι αἰώνιοι, καὶ ἔσται σου τὰ θεμέλια αἰῶνων γενεῶν γενεάς”. In the Septuagint the words „ancient ruins” are rendered as ἔρημοι αἰώνιοι (everlasting deserts). Nevertheless, the Hebrew word comes from a root meaning „to be waste” or „desolate”; the proper application of this Hebrew term is to cities or districts once inhabited, but now lying waste. J. A. SELBIE, *Wilderness or desert: A Dictionary of the Bible*, op. cit., IV, 918.

into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband" (Isaiah 54:1). According to the author, these prophecies were fulfilled in the case of the Egyptian desert, which became spiritually the most fruitful place, though the whole land of Egypt had previously been the most unclean country among all the pagan nations³².

Exactly the same biblical verses (Isaiah 35:1, 54:1) are evoked by Procopius of Gaza (c. 475–c.538), who wants to show that „the Father subordinated the desert to Christ". Nevertheless, Procopius gives the „desert" an allegorical meaning, denoting the nations which, according to God's old promises, were finally converted, and evil powers which were defeated by Christ³³.

C. Mission to every desert

The Church is neither an air-tight compartment of human life, nor a special service of the institutionalized societies. The Church alone constitutes a fresh proposal, a radically new perspective for the life of the entire world. So, to open herself to the world – even to its parts which seem totally alienated from her – means to remain faithful to her own identity. Her opening to the world, her effort to assume the world into the body of Christ, is not an extra, secondary or merely optional task of hers. It has to do with her own nature and mission. A church that denies to be sent to the world would be right only if she could prove to be adherent of a „Christ" who denied to be sent into the world.

St Gregory of Nazianzus comments on the way Christ lived on earth and makes clear that He did not address Himself only to individuals, but also to the concrete contexts of human life and to the specific characteristics it has in space and time. Jesus – Gregory says – committed Himself to fishing, so He travelled from place to place. Why didn't He stay permanently at one place? Because he wanted not only to win more and more faithfuls, but also to sanctify more places. So, He became a Jew for the sake of the Jews, He put Himself under the law for the sake of those who are under the law, He became weak for the sake of the weak and curse for the sake of us, the cursed³⁴.

³² A.-J. FESTUGIERE (ed.), *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, 19–21, (Subsidia Hagiographica 34), Bruxelles 1961, 54–55: „καί ἦν ἰδεῖν αὐτοὺς ἀγγελικὴν τινα ἀληθῶς στρατιάν κεκοσμημένην κόσμῳ παντὶ λευκοφοροῦντων καὶ τὸ τῆς γραφῆς ἐπ' αὐτοῖς πεπληρωθῆαι λεγούσης εὐφράνθητι ἔρημος διψῶσα ῥῆξον καὶ βόησον ἢ οὐκ οὐδίνουσα, ὅτι πολλὰ τὰ τέκνα τῆς ἔρημου μᾶλλον ἢ τῆς ἐχούσης τὸν ἄνδρα. Πεπληρωτο μὲν γὰρ καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς ἐξ ἔθνῶν ἐκκλησίας τὸ προφητικὸν τοῦτο λόγιον, τετέλεσται δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς Αἰγυπτιακῆς ἔρημου πλείονα τέκνα τῷ Θεῷ παριστώσης ὑπὲρ τὴν οἰκουμένην γῆν... καὶ μοι δοκεῖ τὸ τοῦ ἀποστόλου ρητόν καὶ ἐπ' αὐτοῖς πεπληρωθῆαι λέγοντος ὅπου ἐπλεόνασεν ἡ ἁμαρτία, ὑπερπερίσευσεν ἡ χάρις. ἐπλεόνασεν γὰρ ποτε ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ πολλή τις καὶ ἄσημος ἡ εἰδωλολατρία, ὡς ἐν οὐδενὶ ἔθνει". This transformation of Egypt (especially of its desert) is also stressed by Chrysostom: CHRYSOSTOMI, *Homilia vii*, „*Et intrantes domun...*”, 4, PG 57, 88.

³³ PROCOPII GAZEL, *Commentarii in Josue*, PG 87¹, 993 A–C: „Πιάς ὁ τόπος, ἐφ' ὃν ἂν ἐπιβῆτε τῶ ἴχνει τῶν ποδῶν ὑμῶν, ὑμῖν δώσω αὐτόν. Ἡ μὲν ἐπαγγελία αὐτῆ, ὁ δὲ ἄγων μέγας, ἔθνη νικῆσαι τὰ νοστή... Τῆν ἔρημον ὑπέταξεν ὁ Πατήρ τῷ Χριστῷ. Περὶ ἧς εἰρηται, Εὐφράνθητι, ἔρημος ἡ διψῶσα καὶ Πολλὰ τὰ τέκνα τῆς ἔρημου, μᾶλλον ἢ τῆς ἐχούσης τὸν ἄνδρα”.

³⁴ GREGORII, *Oratio xxvii, in dictum Evangelii „Cum Consumasset Jesus hoc sermones”*, PG 36, 281 A, 284 A–B: „Ὁ τοῦς ἀλαεῖς προελόμενος Ἰησοῦς καὶ αὐτὸς σατηνεύει, καὶ τόπους ἐκ τόπων ἀμειβεῖ. Τίνος ἔνεκεν; Οὐ μόνον ἵνα κερδάνη πλείονας τῶν φιλοθεῶν διὰ τῆς ἐπιφοιτήσεως, ἀλλ', ἐμοιγε δοκεῖ, ἵνα καὶ τόπους ἀγιάσει πλείονας”. Besides, John Kantakouzenos (d. 1383) argues that Christ did not come only to call sinful individuals to repentance, but also to honour humble places which were considered unimportant till then (Bethlehem, Nazareth, Galilee). See ΧΑΡ. Γ. ΣΩΤΗΡΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ, Ἰωάννου ΣΤ' Καντακουζηνοῦ, *Κατὰ Ἰουδαίων Λόγοι ἐννέα (τὸ πρῶτον νῦν ἐκδιδόμενοι)*, Ἀθήναι 1983, λόγος β', 389–402, 91.

An important aspect of the Incarnation is the „mobility” of Christ, that is, what St Gregory marked off as constant travelling from place to place. In other words, His deliberate entry into every area, where the pain and the decay still reigned. One has to note that in Gregory’s word the term „places” is not conceived merely in geographical sense, but as significative of the various contexts of human life. This concept is certainly not irrelevant to what modern Missiology calls „contextualization”.

The anchorites, on behalf of the Church, carried out a critical shift: the people of God, instead of keeping away from the desert and sending away into it the scape-goat alone, now enter the desert themselves and pollinate it. The anchorite entry into the deserts, therefore, is not exclusively the assignment of a particular cast in the Church. As an attitude towards the world and the historical responsibility of the faithful, it pertains to the whole Church. Actually, what the anchorites do, is not something exceeding the task of the Church; it is just the performance of this task. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that it is a tragedy when the Christians imagine that some sections of human life belong by nature to evil, or that the resistance against evil is a pathetic immobility rather than an energetic initiative.

The desert, as the place under evil yoke, has not merely geographic meaning. This becomes apparent especially in some cases, where the scenery seems to have been inverted: Some anchorites, after having won the battle in the desert, continue their mission by invading other devastated places, as we have already seen, e.g. pagan graveyards, temples etc. In such cases the demons (already expelled from the desert and now dwelling in the graves) protest and, instead of trying to expel the anchorites from the desert, try to restrict them to the desert. So, the demon of a temple invaded by Macarius, appears to utter to the monk something which would be unthinkable out of the certain context: „*Since you are an anchorite, the desert is enough for you (restrict yourself in the desert)*”³⁵. In reality, the inversion is only ostensible; the terms and the reason of the clash remain the same. When, therefore, the evil seems to have occupied a section of the human life, the anchorite regards this section as a desert and enters it. An initiative, e.g., attributed to St Ephraem Syrus, an austere ascetic, is significant. Ephraem was informed that the city of Edessa was heavily struck by famine. Judging that the social injustice was the ally of this disaster, he left his hermitage, went to the city and convinced the rich to let him administer their wealth to the profit of the weak. After this was done, the anchorite, having fulfilled his prophetic mission, returned to his cell³⁶.

The Church has been called to enter every desert. Desert is any part of the creation and human life, which claims existence in autonomy, out of communion with the Uncreated³⁷. Desert can be everything which has lapsed into the domain of evil, whatever sort of evil. As a matter of fact, the Christians – no matter whether they live in a modern city or in wilderness – have to be able to discern that loneliness, alienation, lack of love, starvation, war, pollution, death, heresies etc try to dominate human life. The field for the life – giving mission of the Church is nothing less than all the deserts of the entire world.

35. PALLADI, op. cit. xix, PG 34, 1052 D: „Ὡς ἀναχωρητῆς ἀρκέσθητι τῇ ἐρήμῳ”.

36. PALLADI, op. cit., ci. PG 1204 C – 1209 A.

37. Jean MEYENDORFF, *St Grégoire Palamas et la mystique Orthodoxe*, Editions du Seuil, 1959, 13: „*Le désert apparait ainsi comme le type parfait du monde, hostile à Dieu et soumis à Satan, où le Messie vient apporter la vie nouvelle*”. According to holy Augustine of Hippo, for the Christians the desert is the present world. See Karl BOSL, „*Ἐρημὸς – Eremus. Begriffsgeschichtliche Bemerkungen zum historischen Problem der Entfremdung und Vereinsamung des Menschen: Byzantinische Forschungen 2 (1967) 74.*”

РЕЗИМЕ

Атанасије Папаганасиу

Анахореза

Одлазак у пустињу као мисионарска парадигма

Аутор на основу једног аутентичног православног промишљања категорија *пyстиња* и *друштво* полази од претпоставке да монашки отшелнички аскетизам није условљен голом чињеницом географског измештања него да се може разумети на један аутентичнији начин. Пустињом се назива сваки део Божије творевине који постоји на аутономистички, из заједнице са Богом, издвојени начин. Подвижништво је стога свештеничко служење синова Божијих који обесмрћују творевину враћајући је у заједницу са Богом за коју је и створена. Аутор на тај начин истиче теургичко-космичку димензију подвижништва. Стога је смисао и циљ подвижништва данас да се све цивилизацијске „пустиње”, сваки апсект људског живота који постоји без Бога нашим аскетским постојањем и литургијском праксом врати у ту заједницу која је за творевину гарант вечног постојања.