

Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, *Asceticism and Marriage*, Translation from English by Dragoș Dâscă, book printed with the blessing of His Eminence Teofan, Metropolitan of Moldavia and Bucovina Romanian Orthodox Church, “Doxologia” Publishing House, Iași, 2014

His Eminence Anthony Bloom, Metropolitan of Sourozh, was born at Lausanne, on June 19, 1914. He attended university studies in physics, chemistry and biology, obtaining a Bachelor of Science Diploma in 1938 and, an year later, his doctorate in medicine at the Sorbonne University in Paris. During the Second World War, he worked as a surgeon. In 1943, he was tonsured at the Podvorja monastery. In 1948, he was ordained priest, arriving after that in England, as a spiritual shepherd for the orthodox Brotherhood of the Alban and Sergius Saints. In 1966, he was raised to the rank of Metropolitan of Sourozh of the Russian Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. He passed to the Lord on August 4, 2003.

One of the works of Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh is the book “Asceticism and Marriage”, which appeared in 2014, printed by “Doxologia” Publishing House, translated from English, by Dragoș Dâscă. This book is the fourth in an author series, dedicated by “Doxologia” Publishing House to this important theologian of the Orthodox Church, in recent years. The book urges us to fulfill, regardless of the external conditions in which we are living, the commandment of the love of God and thy neighbor. The work has a stretch of 200 pages, being structured in 2 parts. The first part, entitled Asceticism, comprises 3 chapters, and the second part, entitled Marriage, consists of 5 chapters.

The first chapter of the first part, entitled “Introduction to Asceticism”, talks about the fact that “*The Asceticism means discipline*”, about “*The Im-*

Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, *Asceticism and Marriage*

portance of *Listening and Fulfilling the Word of The Scripture*”, about the fact that “*Through Asceticism We Acquire the Mind of Christ*”, about “*The Role of the Body in the Asceticism*” and about the connection involved in “*The Asceticism and the Sacraments*”.

Also included in the first part, the second chapter entitled “Asceticism. Somatopsychic Techniques in Greek Orthodox Christianity” refers to “*Mortificational Ascesis*”, to “*The Asceticism of Watchfulness*” to “*The Asceticism of Sobriety*” and as well as to “*Somatopsychic Techniques*”.

In the third chapter of the first part, the author makes a confession, for educational reasons, to his readers, speaking openly about “My Monastic Life”.

The second part shows us, in the first chapter, the connections between “Marriage, Eucharist and Monasticism”. The second chapter is a historical, symbolical and liturgical incursion in the “Holy Matrimony” and the third chapter describes the “Marriage”, resuming certain aspects of the religious ceremony ordinance, presented in the previous chapter. The author performs a comment on “The Apostle and the Gospel of the Holy Matrimony”, in the fourth chapter. The end of the second part has the role to highlight the conclusions of the topic under discussion, contained in the fifth chapter, “Marriage, concluded”.

In the following, we will present in several lines, the contents of each section of the book. So in the part headed Asceticism, in the first chapter “Introduction to Asceticism”, in subchapter “*Asceticism means discipline*”, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh argues about the idea of discipline that lies beneath the practice of asceticism, starting from the meaning of the word “ascesis” which comes from the Greek “askesis” and means “exercise”. The author specifies that asceticism is the true discipline of mind and body which the Saints have practiced in the desert wilderness. The ascetics were able to break away from the earthly things and to approach God with ease and with a high spiritual tension. Metropolitan Anthony appeals to the notion of “apprenticeship”, to the image of the relationship between a soldier and his superior, in order to highlight the importance of discipline in practicing asceticism. “Discipline is the condition of the apprentice, not of the soldier who receives orders from corporal. Training provides that soldier stand at attention before corporal. Here is offered the ultimate freedom, but a liberty which is rooted entirely in loyalty and responsibility. But to do this you must have an adviser.” It is clear that the hermit needs an adviser, and that one is nobody else but our Savior Jesus Christ Himself.

The subchapter “*The Importance of Listening and Fulfilling the Word of the Scripture*” tells us about the necessity of obeying to the Scripture’s word for to acquire the conscience of Christ. We can fully understand the message of the Scripture only to the extent that we manage to become what Scripture is teaching us. Metropolitan Anthony urges us: “Let us learn to communicate with the Lord above and beyond words, in a contemplative silence or deep quiet, in a deep stillness of all energies of the body and soul”.

The third subchapter – “*Through Asceticism We Acquire the Mind of Christ*” – emphasizes that only by deep prayer, by self-denial and by strengthening the spiritual powers, we can acquire the mind and heart of Christ.

In the fourth subchapter – “*The Role of the Body in the Asceticism*” – Metropolitan Anthony makes from the very beginning the distinction between the body and the flesh. Thus, while the flesh must be understood as something earthly, a biological presence, estranged from God, the body is the same physical human reality, but full of life, to which God gives it. The author underlines the importance of the body, making reference to the Sacraments, which are “divine acts”, expressed through material elements of this world such as: water, bread, wine, oil, which come in direct contact with the body. By immersion in the holy water, we baptize, and by consuming bread and wine, we partake in the fullness of the spring of Life flowed from the Body and the Blood of Christ. The human body, after the fall into sin, has become tick and heavy, and what was supposed to be a spiritual body became flesh. Therefore, the body must be released from the state of unfaithfulness and turned into a body capable of being filled with the spiritual life.

In order to show the close relationship between asceticism and sacraments, the author, in the fifth subchapter – “*Asceticism and the Sacraments*” – refers to Saint Theophan the Recluse who says that there are two Sacraments which relate directly to ascetic life: Baptism and Repentance. The grace is transmitted to us by matter into the body and beyond it into the soul.

The second chapter, entitled “Asceticism. Somatopsychic Techniques in Greek Orthodox Christianity”, starts with the subchapter about “*Mortifical Asceticism*”. This ascetic practice – tells us Anthony of Sourozh – involves only the body and is divided into several other related practices

Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, *Asceticism and Marriage*

such as: fasting, vigil, virginity, etc. In this subsection we learn that in order to get to one's highest purpose, the human being must open to God and exceed the limit. Man must become what he was originally. So he must lead a fight against flesh, whereas the flesh is the body deprived of divine life. Mortification means, on the one hand, the fight against flesh, and on the other hand, the struggle for reviving the body. Man can accomplish this act of mortification by killing the passion and destroying the addiction inside him.

In the following subsection – “*Somatopsychic Techniques*” – Metropolitan Anthony makes a brief reflection on hesychasm. Man has entered, through sin, inside a cyclical harmful chaining, from which he cannot escape through his own forces, because his thinking has become discursive. Therefore, he needs to pay full attention to return to the true norm. In the spiritual experience, we notice that the attention is not just concentrating divergent forces of the intellect, but fixing the whole being on a single point from which follows that complete withdrawal in “the eternal present of God”. By inner silence, the human being withdraws into oneself, to give oneself in a totally, unique and personal relationship of love and worship with God. This point of full concentration is called “Heart”. The anatomical heart is the center of life, not the place of emotions. To find out the place of the heart means to create a perfect balance in the spiritual life as a prerequisite to achieve the desired peace. Furthermore, the author analyzes on some of these ascetical processes and hesychastic practices of concentration, of lowering of the mind into the heart and then makes a description of the somatopsychic techniques on which the asceticism is focused.

The third section, entitled “*The Asceticism of Watchfulness*”, shows that the spirit of man, gone down into the hesychia, bears in and through prayer a war against thoughts that are foreign to God. Watchfulness investigates with “the light of the inner prayer” the thoughts and emotions which arise from the subconscious or are influenced from the outside. The good ones it receives, and the other ones it rejects and is keeping away from their assault.

The fourth subsection speaks about “*The Asceticism of Sobriety*”, identified by the author with the self-denial. The first rule in practicing this type of asceticism is driving away the spiritual greed which is born from sin. The one who prays should not seek anything else other than God. The second requirement would be banishing any hope in one's own powers,

in one's human possibilities. Thus, it is recommended patience and faith, whereas "God only reveals Himself beyond all representation".

The first part continues with the third chapter, entitled "My Monastic Life". In this chapter, Metropolitan Anthony presents a part of his biography about his life as a monk. Although there was a period when he had been unfaithful, however the author does not insist too much on this stage, preferring to talk about his tireless longing to live a monastic life. Thus, he tells us how he and two friends sought to lead a monastic life, making the decision not ever to ordain. But their great love for people was stronger and persuaded them to break their promise to receive the Sacrament of Priesthood. In 1939, he took the monastic vows and from that moment on, he has never got the opportunity to live in the bosom of a monastic community. Metropolitan Anthony tells us that the determining factor in the embrace of monastic life is the calling or vocation. And while the call belongs to God, the answer to it depends only on us. And if God has called to such a ministry on man, refusal cannot be an option.

Part II – Marriage – evokes the history, ordinance and mystical and symbolic meanings of the Sacrament which blesses and sanctifies the connection between a man and a woman. In the first chapter of this part – "Marriage, Eucharist and Monasticism" – the author highlights for the beginning that the two Sacraments, Marriage and the Eucharist, are very closely linked to each other. Anthony of Sourozh tells us that both are sacraments of unity and understanding amongst men. They both have on earth a state of wholeness which belongs to the eschatological realm. He said that "the link between these two sacraments goes very deep, because it is not only the spiritual unity or the psychological harmony between man and woman, but even their physical harmony and oneness which is seen as parallel to the mystery of God's union with his creatures in the sacrament of Communion". It is also emphasized the link established between the Sacrament of Marriage and monasticism. Metropolitan Anthony believes that monasticism is "a situation in which, having refused enslavement, entanglement, a human being roots himself in God, and in God finds again the whole creation which he seemingly had forsaken". Consecrated celibacy, monasticism is not alienation from the world, but a different way of approaching the world, from within God and with God, into another relationship. For the author, both monasticism and the condition of being married are two sides of the same coin, a vision from two different angles

Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, *Asceticism and Marriage*

of the Sacrament of the Church and eventually of the sacrament of Christ in history and in eternity at the same time. Thus, whether we choose the consecrated celibacy or marriage, we arrange our lives in the Sacrament of the Church in the relationship with God and with all those who live in God. Therefore, although both paths obviously involve what we could call in modern terms a different lifestyle, their essence is the same.

The second chapter, “Holy Matrimony”, underlines, in the opening paragraph, the sacramental nature of Matrimony. According to the author, the Matrimony is a sacrament because it is an icon, a fulfillment, although incomplete, of the sacrament of the Kingdom; it is the Supper of the Lamb, the unity of two people in God, through Him. Metropolitan Anthony then makes a few clarifications about how it was celebrated Matrimony in Constantinople, in the early Church in relation to the same service nowadays. The service itself was composed of two smaller services, which were celebrated separately. The first service was the Engagement which once was celebrated long before Matrimony, whereas there had already been created a link between the future bride and groom, for they received, through Engagement, the blessing of God. The chapter continues with the presentation of the liturgical service from the point of the crowning. In the old times, the crowns were held by the newlyweds on their heads for a week, but nowadays this habit was lost. It is then briefly presented the service of Matrimony.

In the third chapter – “Marriage” – the author resumes some ideas related to the service of Matrimony itself. He insists more on the ordination of the service, on the preparation and especially on the connection between the Bridegroom and the Bride and between both and Christ.

The fourth chapter, entitled “The Apostle and the Gospel of the Holy Matrimony”, continues the description of the Matrimony’s service, from the moment of crowning. From the very beginning, the author emphasizes the fact that it is uttered the great blessing: “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, now and ever and ever”. So, it is made aware to the reader that the time has come in which is revealed to us the beauty of the Kingdom, but also the state of peace and prayer, which signals – in the discreet and delicate way the Spirit of God is working – that the kingdom is here, offered and ready to be grabbed. It follows the reading of a particularly important and complex passage of the Apostle, which makes an analogy between the relationship between Christ and the

Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, *Asceticism and Marriage*

Church and the relationship between husband and wife. It is a love that knows no boundaries, a love in which both bride and groom are ready to forsake all and follow each other. The next important step of the service is the reading of the Gospel. The word of the Gospel makes us understand the conditions to be fulfilled before a gathering of people to become kingdom. The author speaks about the events at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, and especially about the Virgin's faith in her Son. Her faith has brought the kingdom to us and in our midst. Likewise, those gathered in the church must believe that there the Kingdom of God is open for them.

The last chapter of this part, but also of the book – "Marriage, concluded" – offers some tips for future spouses. They are urged to realize that they must bear a battle against selfishness and greed, which own human nature. The author stresses that "at the root of the prayers which we offer we ask for mutual chastity, for integrity, for love - and all this in a relationship of true freedom and true humility, a humility which consists not in denigrating one's own self but in being open – humbly, reverently, worshipfully – to the other, ready to receive what will be given, never to grudge what is not offered, never to complain of what the other is not yet capable of giving." Thus, the grooms are called to establish themselves the kingdom of God in their midst and in each other's heart, being united by the love they carry for each other and for God.

Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh has given us, in this beautiful and profound book, a shred of his experience and spiritual wisdom. The rich meanings of his theological discourse cannot but rejoice, enlighten and nourish the souls of his readers hungered for God. Through the pages of the book, the author has managed to open his heart to make it a market, from which the man, the reader who comes and follows its lines to take what is necessary because it is not right for him to possess anything of this life, anything of God.

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