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Anthropological and Eschatological Tenets in the Sermons of the 20th Century Wallachian Preachers

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Abstract

In addition to being extremely varied, and addressing to a great extent the essential issues of the Christian Orthodox teaching, the contents of sermons is well-documented and treated with much attention, proving that the authors are distinguished, erudite theologians with sound education and culture. Although the topics approached are largely moral in character, still, the preachers in the 20th century Wallachia do not confine themselves to moral themes, but also tackle dogmatic, liturgical, missionary, historical and biblical topics as well. Among the themes pertaining to the sphere of Dogmatic Theology, approached by 20th century Wallachian preachers, we mention: the Church – body of Christ; kenosis; the Cross – altar on which Christ sacrificed Himself; the Holy Spirit and His work in the world; God; Eucharist; angels; the Resurrection of Christ – a guarantee of our own resurrection, the Universal Judgment and the Second Coming of the Lord, freedom of the will, the Mother of God – intercessor before God, our Savior Jesus Christ, salvation, death, Confession and repentance, Priesthood, the Divine Providence, the Holy Trinity, the soul, eternal life.

Keywords

The Universal Judgment and the Second Coming of the Lord, freedom of the will, salvation, death as a consequence of sin, the Divine Providence, the soul, eternal life.

I. Introduction

In Romania, preaching has played a major role in defending Orthodoxy and developing the national language and culture, a fact that today is mentioned in all studies concerned with the history of the Romanian language and literature. It also notoriously played a major role in preserving the awareness of the national unity of Romanians on both sides of the Carpathian Mountains. The contents of many of the old sermons passed on to us, reflecting the life of Romanian society at various times, now serves to historians, sociologists and philologists as a mirror of the circumstances of the past.

The 20th-century Wallachian sermons render the cultural, social, economic and political realities experienced by our nation even more than those of the previous centuries. Preaching was more intense in Transylvania, due to the proximity of the Protestant Church which, as we know, had simplified many liturgical aspects, which increased the importance of the sermon that became the main point of interest; there was actually a missionary competition that produced very well-written sermons, published in the times' journals and collections of sermons.

In Wallachia also, all diligent preachers carefully structured their sermons, first and foremost in pursuit of a religious-moral goal, and also aiming to address the realities of everyday life.

The history of 20th-century sermon in Wallachia knew three distinct periods: from the turn of the century to the installation of the communist regime (1945); the communist period proper (1945-1989) and the period between 1990-2000, when freedom of expression was regained and exercised.

The content of the sermons is highly diverse, tackling most of the essential tenets of Orthodox Christian faith; moreover, it is very well-documented and carefully supported with arguments, as the authors were scholarly theologians with sound education and culture. Although the topics are largely moral in character, the preachers in 20th century Wallachia did not confine themselves to moral themes, but also tackled dogmatic, liturgical, missionary, historical and biblical themes as well.

Among the eschatological and anthropological doctrines that were dominant in the sermons of 20th-century Wallachian preachers, we men-

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tion: the Universal Judgment and the Second Coming of the Lord; freedom
of the will; salvation; death; the Divine Providence; the soul; eternal life.*

II. The Universal Judgment and the Second Coming of the Lord

According to the Orthodox doctrine and Church teachings, there are two divine judgments: a particular one, and a general or universal one. The particular judgment is mentioned, for instance, in the parable of Dives and Lazarus (also known as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus), while the universal one is narrated in the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 25, which presents the Last Judgment on the world's final day, when the good will be separated from the evil ones. The Last Judgment is preceded by the general resurrection

“that is, the reuniting with their bodies of all the souls of Adam's sons. In the sound of trumpets, angels will announce the resurrection... Each man shall rise from the dead and, in awe and trembling, shall appear to be judged by the Righteous Judge”¹.

The trial will take place before the entire world, before the holy angels, the saints in heaven, before the Mother of God, but what is most fearful is that on this day, “God's wrath shall fully manifest itself. Then, God shall exercise justice, not mercy. No tear will be of any use, no defense of any help”², because the Holy Scriptures says: “Then all shall shout to the mountains and rocks: Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb” (Revelation 6, 16).

• ***The depiction of the Dread Judgment.*** At the particular judgment, Christians cannot fully grasp the consequences that their words and deeds will have, following their death, on their contemporaries or even on the generations to come, and the sentence passed at this trial concerns only the condition of the soul, although it did the good or evil jointly with the body. Being incomplete, the particular judgment has a provisional character. That is why God, by virtue of His justice, ordered that immediately following the resurrection of the dead, there should be a new judgment, of

¹ Fr. dr. Ștefan Slevoacă, *Din tezaurul ortodoxiei. În apărarea credinței străbune (From the Orthodox Treasure. In Defense of our Ancestral Faith)*, Editura Episcopiei Buzăului, Buzău, 1985, p. 165.

² Șt. Slevoacă, *Din tezaurul ortodoxiei...*, p. 166.

universal, solemn, public and final nature. This is how Father Petre Teodor describes the frightful picture of the Judgment:

“Behold, the Son of Man comes to judge the world: all people are resurrected, the whole nature is a green and new field; they are humbled, ashamed and terrified and hide their faces, want to run, but there is nowhere to run to. The light dazzles them, the sound of the trumpet overwhelms them, and the angels praise and glorify the Son of God. Ashamed by the deeds of their lives and the splendor of His face, all creatures stand before their Creator and, seeing all their sins in the mirror of their conscience, remain speechless. Accompanied by the holy angels and by devils, also having human conscience as witness, the Savior judges the world. But now, unlike the particular judgment, both soul and body are judged, and judged before everyone; the decision is final, its effects concern the bodies as well, it is harsher and no soul can from now on be removed from hell”³.

• ***No secret will remain unrevealed at the Universal Judgment.*** The righteous will shine in all the splendor of their worthiness, and the entire ugliness of sinners will be completely revealed. The punishment in eternity – in repayment for the evil – consists of unhappiness, ordeal, physical and moral pain, despair, estrangement from God’s face and the tormenting presence of the devil. The reward for the good is absolute and everlasting happiness, always in contemplation of God’s face⁴. But the universal judgment shall also include the revelation of the divine plan concerning the entire world, of that plan that was forever known only to God. Then, the great revelation will occur, regarding the sense of creation and history. Nothing will remain concealed; everything will acquire meaning, a final explanation, even for the angels.

• ***On that day, justice shall be done to those who were wronged in this transient life.*** Describing that great and awesome day, when God shall bring this world to its end, Father Slevoacă says:

“The skies will resound with the angels’ trumpets... The dead bodies again shall be reunited with the souls they had in life...”

³ Fr. Petre Teodor, *Hrană și bucurie. Predici la Duminicile de peste an (Food and Joy. Sermons for the Sundays Throughout the Year)*, Editura Valea Plopului, 1995, p. 405.

⁴ P. Teodor, *Hrană și bucurie...*, p. 406.

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All generations, from Adam up to the last man, shall gather in one place, overwhelmed with dread, immersed in deep silence”⁵.

This is how each and every man will await his final judgment, the irreversible judgment. The preacher reminds that “the sins they did not dare to confess either to their confessors or to their friends, to those closest to them, will all be revealed, before all angels, saints, nations”⁶.

In addition to exposing the sins, God will make known to each one the punishment they deserve, and fear and horror will seize them. But for the righteous, this day will be a day of joy, a day of salvation, a day when comfort and glory will commence.

• **Preliminary signs.** When our Savior ascended to heaven, two angels appeared before the apostles who were mourning, and told them that they should not grieve for Jesus “who is taken up from you into heaven, for He shall so come in like manner as you have seen Him go into heaven” (Acts 1, 11). Thus, the promise made to them by Christ elsewhere in the Holy Scripture is confirmed. However, before the Second Coming of the Lord, at the end of times, there will be signs announcing it. Thus,

“The Christian religion will be preached before all nations of the earth...; faith in God will diminish, while moral corruption will increase as will the evils done by the sons of men. Deceitful prophets..., false teachings and misleading delusions will occur, culminating with the arrival of Antichrist”⁷.

There will be many natural disasters, and before the arrival of Christ in glory “the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky” (Matthew 24, 30) and at that moment, out of fear and trembling, “all the peoples of the earth will mourn” (Matthew 24, 30). Thus, says Father Slevoacă:

“There shall be weeping with fear. But what is important for us all is not the change of the nature, but our personal fate at the end of the world..., the sealing of our eternal fate for good or for bad, depending on how we lived”⁸.

Consequently, we need to be prepared at all times for this end, because, as the Savior says in the Scripture, not even the angels in heaven know when that time will come.

⁵ Ștefan Slevoacă, *Raze din lumina lui Hristos. Predici la duminici, praznice și sfinți (Beams from the Light of Christ. Sermons for Sundays, Feasts and Holidays)*, Editura Episcopiei Buzăului, Buzău, 1996, p. 243.

⁶ Șt. Slevoacă, *Raze din lumina lui Hristos...*, p. 245.

⁷ Șt. Slevoacă, *Din tezaurul ortodoxiei...*, pp. 160-161.

⁸ Șt. Slevoacă, *Din tezaurul ortodoxiei...*, p. 162.

- ***The Last Judgment*** is also described by Father Chiricuță as follows: “Behold as He comes, solemn and magnificent, surrounded by His holy angels, riding on the sky clouds. Sitting on a throne made of light, with His Holy Mother at His right side, having as a banner before Him, the sacred and life-giving Cross on which He was crucified and humiliated, on the Golgotha, by us sinners! Behold as He judges the sinners of the earth. All gathered before His seat, whatever social status they might have had in this world, behold as they stand in awe and moan before the Supreme Justice, which is Jesus. O, mountains! they shout, fall upon us and crush us entirely, so we don’t look our Judge in the face! Throw us in the abyss of hell, you, rocks, that raise threateningly above our head, so that we don’t hear the voice of our God! But the voice of sacred Justice responds to them: No, you sinful and wretched man, come and be held accountable for what you have done! Come, forever lost soul, you, that cursed your Lord during your life!”⁹

Furthermore, the preacher points out that before the Righteous Judge we will answer not only for our deeds, but also for their consequences on our fellow people:

“And not only for your sons will you answer, but also for all those who crossed your path, whether they were close to you or not: for your servants, for your neighbors, for your friends and foes, for your acquaintances and for the strangers that your life, thoughts and words harmed or uplifted, enlightened or darkened, killed or brought to life once more”¹⁰.

Sometimes, one word is enough to kill a man or raise a man, as Father Dumitru Stăniloae remarks: “The word builds, but it can also bring down, within the spiritual order of life, because through word man becomes a subject full of power over another”¹¹.

- ***The aspects of the Judgment.*** Father Boris Răduleanu describes three aspects of the Last Judgment: individual, social and spiritual. The

⁹ Fr. Toma Chiricuță, *Anul în predici (Sermons for the Year)*, Editura Anastasia, București, 1996, p. 218.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 222.

¹¹ Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului (Jesus Christ or the Restoration of Man)*, Sibiu, 1943, p. 219.

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individual aspect lies in the fact that each of us will go to the trial; “we will all appear, stripped of our titles. Kings and emperors, bishops and priests, monks, Christians and non-Christians, all will appear: not in grand church attires, not wearing any insignia, but as each is in his soul”¹². But prior to our death, each of us received conscience in this life, to be their judge.

The social aspect lies in the fact that each nation shall answer before the Judge, because every nation will come before the trial, and “each nation has its own importance and calling in the universal history... however, all together make the humankind and all have to work together in order to restore the unity of all”¹³.

But the final judgment must considered from the spiritual standpoint as well, since, by receiving the Sacrament of Baptism, we have rejected the evil and we have united ourselves with Jesus Christ. For that reason, “through baptism we have undertaken this obligation, we have received strength by means of grace, and we have received a calling and a responsibility for it. Every Christian, every priest, every bishop is responsible for this calling”¹⁴.

Many of our Savior Jesus Christ’s statements teach us about the time of the judgment, the judge and the sentence men will receive on the final day. The Last Judgment tells us

“first and foremost, that the history of the world will come to an end. Just as there was a beginning, there will be an end... and we are told about the signs by which we can recognize its approach. There will be wars and news of war...there will be diseases, famine, earthquakes... People will hate each other. There will be false prophets and false Messiahs, who will perform signs and miracles so that they will deceive many”¹⁵.

And when these signs will have been completed, then the angels from heaven will sound their trumpets, all those who were dead will rise, and those who then will be alive will change in order to appear for judgment. But the day and hour when this will happen is unknown to all but God, because, fast and shining like lightning,

¹² Fr. Boris Răduleanu, *Semnificația Duminicilor din Postul Mare (The Significance of Lenten Sundays)*, vol. 2, Editura Bonifaciu, București, 1996, p. 37.

¹³ B. Răduleanu, *Semnificația Duminicilor din Postul Mare*, p. 38.

¹⁴ B. Răduleanu, *Semnificația Duminicilor din Postul Mare*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁵ B. Răduleanu, *Semnificația Duminicilor din Postul Mare*, p. 28-29.

“our Lord Jesus Christ will show himself in His glory and all angels will be with Him... and all nations will gather before Him... Jesus will not ask about the evil they did. The evil will reveal itself on its own, it will be known by us, and by all, and we will be held accountable for it”¹⁶.

• ***We will all appear before the Righteous Judge.*** In the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, the Holy Apostle Paul tells us that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5, 10). From the Holy Tradition we learn that there are two trials: one occurs 40 days after death, also called particular judgment, where the soul will be judged, and “the Last Judgment, when our soul will join our resurrected body and together will receive full reward or punishment, depending on how we lived our lives here on earth”¹⁷. We confess the Last Judgment in the *Creed*, and the Holy Scripture also describes the signs that will precede the arrival of Christ on the sky clouds. At that time “all will see Him... They will see the Cross on which He was crucified..., they will see Him and all will know Him, and will weep, and will repent for all their misdeeds toward Him”¹⁸. And Christ will show Himself in all his glory, surrounded by Saints and Angels, with all nations ever to have existed from the dawn of the world before Him. Father Sofian Boghiu supports the idea that at the universal Judgment not all will be judged according to the same law because:

- pagans will be judged according to the law of conscience, written by God in their hearts;
- the Jews will be judged according to the law of Moses;
- Christians will be judged according to the law of the Gospel;
- and we will all be judged according to the law of freedom”¹⁹.

Thus, before the entire world, all our deeds will be revealed and nothing we have ever done will be concealed.

¹⁶ B. Răduleanu, *Semnificația Duminicilor din Postul Mare*, p. 31.

¹⁷ Archim. Sofian Boghiu, *Buchet de cuvântări. Predici și meditații (A Collection of Sermons. Homilies and Musings)*, EIBMBOR, București, 2006, p. 45.

¹⁸ Sofian Boghiu, *Buchet de cuvântări...*, p. 47.

¹⁹ Sofian Boghiu, *Buchet de cuvântări...*, p. 48.

III. Freedom of the will

God respects the freedom He Himself has given us. When He created man, he made him a free being, not a machine. We, people, unlike animals and plants, have this great gift which is indeed divine: the gift of being able to rule ourselves, according to our conscience, according to the rules that come from our soul. Father Chiricuță is quite categorical in speaking about this, pointing out that God does not want to force us: “He does not want puppets, He does not want to receive gifts from marionettes. He wants these gifts to be offered freely. And that is why, even when man wants to use his freedom against Him, God does not take it away”²⁰.

• **God does not compel us.** Father Vasile Vasilache makes an interesting point, noting the fact that the origin of the ancestral sin lies in the free will of man, who turned from God towards the world of senses, by disobeying the command he had received for the strengthening of the will to remain innocent and unspoiled, thus advancing on the path towards perfection and deification:

“As sons of Adam, we, like our ancestor, have the choice to obey God’s command or not. God has given us this freedom. And then, in His kindness, he placed us in the paradise of a new, Christian life. This paradise of grace and learning, with God’s eternal presence amidst us, is the Church. And in this spiritual garden we have been given, as Adam was, full freedom to enjoy the fruit of faith and divine love, and to follow His sacred will, ordering us not to taste from the evil tree of sin, because once again, the moment we eat, we shall die”²¹.

God created man in His image, and gave him the mission to achieve greater and greater likeness to Him, through grace. That is why He did not make man machine-like, but a free being, granting him, as Fr. Petre Teodor remarks,

“the extraordinary power of building his own eternity. Of bringing unto himself joy or sadness, light or darkness. God urges him always to be happy and helps him with His grace, but respects his freedom to choose and build, on his own, with his own will, the destiny of his eternity”²².

²⁰ Fr. Toma Chiricuță, *Anul în predici...*, p. 203.

²¹ Protos. dr. Vasile Vasilache, *Pe căile Domnului. Predici rostite la radio (Along the Path of God. Sermons Delivered on the Radio)*, București, 1942, p. 265.

²² Fr. Petre Teodor, *Hrană și bucurie...*, p. 303.

IV. Salvation

Spiritual growth is the work of God's grace in man and man's cooperation with God. It is renewal, rebirth to a new life in Christ, imparted by the Holy Spirit dwelling within man, it is inward transfiguration. Because the radical transformation or change of man is a prerequisite condition for salvation, the terms betterment, spiritual growth and salvation are often used interchangeably.

• ***All nations have felt the need to be saved from the tyranny of evil.***

From among them, God chose one nation that He wanted to guide toward salvation. He announced this nation, through the voice of the prophets, about Christ's arrival, but the hearts of the people were calloused. That is why God addressed His call to salvation to all the nations of the world, to the entire mankind and not just one race or ethnic group. According to Father Petre Teodor, our Savior

“summons all nations of the world, even the Gentiles, the nations considered foul and unclean by the people of Israel, to be saved... The words through which our Savior Jesus Christ calls nations to salvation have a special significance for us, Christians of all times. The words inviting us to the Lord's Supper have always resounded in the Church for the people of all times, for Christians everywhere”²³.

Although God “wants all people to be saved” (I Timothy 2, 4), He does not compel them but expects their free consent. By endowing man with free will, God does not coerce anyone, but asks for consent and voluntary cooperation: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice and open the door, I shall come in to him and sup with him and he with Me” (Revelation 3, 20).

• ***Salvation is achieved solely by means of man's cooperation with God.*** Since this is mutual cooperation, obviously salvation depends both on God and on man. God gives us heavenly grace, and man is required to have faith and do good deeds. Betterment, or subjective salvation is attained, therefore, by the joint operation of two factors: God and man. It is not a mere gift from God, but the result of a synergetic work.

²³ Fr. Petre Teodor, *Predică la Duminica a XXVIII-a după Rusalii (Sermon on the 28th Sunday after the Pentecost)*, in *Hrană și bucurie... (Food and Joy...)*, p. 358.

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• **Grace is the objective condition for our betterment and salvation in Christ, while faith and good deeds are the subjective requisites for salvation.** Grace is the uncreated divine energy, distinct from the divine nature, but inseparable from it, which is shared to people in the Church by the Holy Spirit or by Christ Himself in the Holy Spirit, through the Holy Sacraments, for their salvation and growth in Christ, until the *stature of the perfect man* is reached. Grace, as Father Nicolae Petrescu points out, is the “source of our salvation”²⁴, and faith

“is our first active step towards our own salvation and is second only to grace in achieving salvation. Faith, too, is a gift from God and for this reason, although it comes from us, it should not be a cause for personal pride, by which we may take credit for our salvation... Faith and grace alone could not be able to harvest the fruit of salvation, in the absence of good deeds. Furthermore, good deeds alone do not suffice for salvation, if they do not spring from faith and if they are not accompanied by God’s grace”²⁵.

Thus the prerequisites for subjective salvation imply the incorporation of man into Christ, as a member of His Body – the Church, through Baptism, Chrismation and Eucharist, and man’s continued affiliation to the Church, demonstrated through material proof of faith in Christ and in His Church, and good deeds as expressions of faith working through love, with the help of the redeeming grace received through the Holy Mysteries. By itself, grace cannot save us either without our will, our cooperation and our effort, just as fire cannot warm a dead corpse, because the light of grace works upon us only when it finds in us the warmth of faith, and from these two grows the fruit of good deeds²⁶.

• **Grace is a divine gift, and faith is human acceptance of this gift.** In Archimandrite Veniamin Micle’s view, grace is a question asked by God, and faith is the positive answer from the Christian believer; grace is an invitation from God, and faith is the Christian’s acceptance. Every Christian can receive God’s grace. It flows like a spring of clear water from the altar

²⁴ Fr. prof. Nicolae Petrescu, *Sermon on the 23rd Sunday after the Pentecost*, in *Explicarea Apostolelor... (Exegesis to the Epistles...)*, p. 227.

²⁵ N. Petrescu, *Sermon on the 23rd Sunday after the Pentecost*, p. 227

²⁶ Fr. prof. dr. Ene Braniște, *Credința prin fapte (Faith Through Deeds)*, in „Glasul Bisericii”, year XXV (1966), no. 3-4, p. 210.

of Christ's Church. All those thirsting for grace, all those thirsting for salvation can come and drink from it. Grace and faith must work together, to generate good deeds, which constitute the third prerequisite for salvation. It is not enough to receive God's grace, which is granted to all Christians, it is not enough to believe that God exists; we need to act, to do good deeds, fulfilling His will, in order to be saved²⁷.

• ***The overwhelming importance of good deeds.*** In order to make the listeners aware of the responsibility that each has toward God, for the precarious social condition of our fellow people, Father Nicolae Balcă also stresses the decisive impact that our social deeds and actions have on our salvation. By *good deed* we should not understand just a material benefaction, an act of almsgiving, because there are also good deeds that lack a material aspect. If by good deeds we understand only acts of charity, it would mean that those who are unable to offer such material benefaction because they are deprived, cannot obtain salvation although their life is full of virtues. Good deeds are also those that have a purely spiritual aspect: praying for our fellow people, honoring our parents and all people, giving good advice, abstaining from slander, returning to the faith those who have strayed from its path, refraining from retaliation – repaying evil with evil, etc. As fruit of the “seed sown by the Grace in our soul”²⁸, good deeds are “the means for a permanent improvement of human nature”²⁹. They have value only if “they are prompted by faith, and increase faith and love toward God”³⁰.

Employing a masterful stylistic device, Father Balcă highlights the fairness of the sentence passed for each man at the Universal Judgment. Responsibility for every deed is even greater since the human nature which is present in every person, was taken on by the Son of God. It seems a paradox that He, Who is True God and worked so many miracles as a Man, should face all the deprivations that humans can undergo:

²⁷ Archim. Veniamin Micle, *Predică la Duminica a XXXII-a după Rusalii... (Sermon on the 23rd Sunday after the Pentecost)*, pp. 81-82.

²⁸ Prof. Nicolae Chițescu, *Condițiile însușirii mântuirii (The Requisites for Attaining Salvation)*, in „Studii Teologice”, year II (1950), no. 1-2, p. 20.

²⁹ Fr. prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Faptele bune în învățătura ortodoxă și catolică (Good Deeds According to the Orthodox and the Roman-Catholic Doctrine)*, in „Ortodoxia”, year VI (1971), no. 4, p. 532.

³⁰ D. Stăniloae, *Faptele bune în învățătura ortodoxă și catolică*, p. 528.

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“He Who Created the forces of nature and fed the hungry crowds, confesses that He has suffered of hunger and that there were people who would not give Him anything to eat. Wasn’t He the One Who filled the seas with water and the mountains with clear springs? And yet, He complains that in this world He was scorched with thirst and there were people who would not give Him water to drink, to quench his ardent thirst. He Who adorned the lilies in the field with an attire more beautiful than that of Emperor Solomon, was naked and there were people who would not give him clothes. The Master of the world and of all ages, complains that He was a stranger among His most distinguished creatures. The Holy physician knows that He, who cured cohorts of sick people, physically and spiritually, was sick but many would not care for Him... So the evidence that we need to bring in this trial are our deeds, the deeds of Christian charity and compassion, because love is the core of our Christian religion, because our God is love (John 4, 16)”³¹.

V. Death – a consequence of sin

This is the greatest pain that anyone can experience. Death knows no mercy, it has regard for no one, lowly or highborn, young or old, rich or poor, man or woman. With Adam’s disobedience, death came into the world. Death is repayment for sin and it has visited all people that are born from Adam. It does not care that someone may have plans to put into practice or that someone else has not yet attained his goal in life, or has not yet completed his work. It is true, Father Petre Teodor assures us, that “death is a great evil in the world, an evil that was brought about by man’s free will, by disobeying his Heavenly Father”³²; however, “for all of us who believe and receive Jesus Christ, it is no longer our doom, but sleep, the door through which we enter into the future eternal life”³³.

³¹ Archdeacon prof.dr. Nicolae Balcă, *Creștinul în fața Judecătorului Suprem: Valoarea faptei pentru destinul său în veșnicie (Christians before the Great Judge: the Importance of Deeds for Their Eternal Destiny)*, in „Glasul Bisericii”, year XXIV (1965), no. 3-4, p. 222.

³² Pr. Petre Teodor, *Hrană și bucurie...*, p. 328.

³³ P. Teodor, *Hrană și bucurie...*, p. 328.

• ***All things created by God come to an end***, every living creature, once it ceases to live, decomposes into the natural elements of which it was formed. As Father Slevoacă reminds us, bodily death separates the soul from the body, irrespective of age or social standing. God did not create men to be mortals, but

“free, immortal and happy..., yet they refused to continue to obey His word,... they tasted from the forbidden tree... Death seized them, and neither the forefathers of mankind, nor their descendants, were ever able to liberate themselves from it”³⁴.

From the first people ever to live on this earth and until the end of the world, death has always stirred horror, dread and fear among men, which proves that ***death is not something inherent in the human nature***. By stressing that death did not exist before sin, but also that we have a Savior that has freed us from death, the preacher points out that death

“is a consequence of the fall of the first human couple, it is a punishment..., and by a kind of family solidarity, we are all subject to the same fate... But the Son of Man broke the chains of death and with His divine power he annihilated the law of sin, and three days later, His Body resurrected”³⁵.

Addressing the fear of death, experienced by many people, the preacher asserts that the reasons for this fear are sins, because righteous people receive death happily and peacefully, since it marks their entrance into the eternal life in Heaven.

• ***The unexpected hour of death***. It is unavoidable for the entire mankind, and the approach of the hour of death sends shivers of fear in our bodies. As the Scripture shows and as we ourselves notice every day, young and old, rich and poor die all alike. The unexpected hour of death, as Apostle Paul puts it, “comes like a thief at night” (I Thessalonians 5, 2), because the thief

“comes when you least expect him, when the lights are out and everybody is asleep with no worry in the world. It is the same with death. Just when man thinks that nothing threatens his life,

³⁴ Fr. dr. Ștefan Slevoacă, *Făclii pentru dreapta credință. Predici (Guide for the Orthodox Faith. Sermons)*, Editura Episcopiei Buzăului, Buzău, 1985, p. 156.

³⁵ Ș. Slevoacă, *Făclii pentru dreapta credință...*, p. 158.

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when he sinks in the worldly affairs like in a profound sleep, death approaches to cut off the roots of his life”³⁶.

And psalmist David confirms that the end can occur anytime, when he says about the Israelites in the desert: “While the food was still in their mouths, the wrath of God rose against them” (Psalm 78/79, 30-31). In order not to share the same unfortunate fate, we must know that “this unawareness about the moment of our death is the best way to prevent us from sinning. It is the best thorn that keeps us from idling in our spiritual life. It is like Damocles’ sword hanging by a single hair above our heads”³⁷.

By admitting that death is the general law of all that is alive, Father Ene Braniște emphasizes that only God – and God alone – is above time, is immortal, is without beginning and without end, being the very source of life. Death is the reverse of life, always present.

„Like everything else in nature, man is born, lives and then dies. We can doubt anything but we cannot doubt this universal truth. Sooner or later we will all die. He who has fulfilled his duty toward God, toward people and toward his own soul, will not fear death. He will stand prepared for it; such a man has gained for himself gratitude and remembrance among people here on earth, but also the reward of eternal life in heaven, after death. Death is not a source of fear or terror for Christians, but just a threshold or a bridge which we cross into another existence, and the grave is no longer a place of decay and non-existence, but the bed on which we await resurrection and «the life of the world to come», as is confessed in the Symbol of Faith”³⁸.

VI. The Divine Providence

In the *Sermon on the 20th Sunday after the Pentecost*, Father Petre Teodor seeks to emphasize in the most forcefully and effective manner the

³⁶ Fr. dr. Ștefan Slevoacă, *Popasuri duhovnicești. Predici la toate duminicile de peste an (Spiritual Meditations. Sermons for the Sundays Around the Year)*, Editura Mitropoliei Olteniei, Craiova, 1945, p. 198.

³⁷ Ș. Slevoacă, *Popasuri duhovnicești...*, p. 201.

³⁸ Fr. prof. dr. Ene Braniște, *Predică la Duminica a XXIV-a după Rusalii (Sermon on the 24th Sunday after the Pentecost)*, in „Glasul Bisericii”, anul XXXII (1973), nr. 9-10, p. 867.

Christian teaching that God is Father and Provider, that is, our Caretaker who supplies all our needs. In his exegesis to the miraculous raising of the young man of Nain, he says:

„Seeing this miracle, no doubt all were frightened and awed, because in the presence of heavenly power at work, man feels small and unworthy. But this miracle demonstrated more than this to the people. It proved that God directs and cares for His people. Indeed, the resurrection of the son of the widow of Nain is the best proof to us that God is aware of our sufferings, that He is with us always, helps us, gives us strength, heals us. *He shall never turn His face away from us, he shall never pass by the one made in His image – that is, man. He shall never ignore our suffering, just as he did not turn His back on the suffering of the widow of Nain*”³⁹.

• **God is at the helm of our life.** Before showing how God cares for His creatures, Father Slevoacă presents to us the dangers and factors that lead to the alienation of men from God, if they are too interested in their bodies and are too self-reliant. It is very beneficial to remember that we are the sons of God and that, if we seek Him first, all other needs will be sure to be satisfied, because “the Lord knows we need food and He will give it to us. Just as He cares for the birds in the sky and the grass in the field, He will not forget about us, the most precious of His creatures, His children, created in His image”⁴⁰. Man’s powerlessness, in the absence of God’s help, even before nature, which was given to be used by man, is described as follows:

“He gives us good weather, health, the power to work so that from bare stone we will be able to take our bread. But, if we are forsaken by God and if He turns away from us, we lose our breath and we crumble to the ground...There is however one fact that gives profound reassurance: the Father is in heaven; God is at the helm of our life. So let us not fear and worry”⁴¹.

For forty years He cared for the people in the desert and fed them with manna; He freed Joseph from prison and rescued Daniel, the prophet, from the lions’ den, and multiplied the fish and bread, feeding many a nation, and so, in the same way, He will care for us, His creatures.

³⁹ P. Teodor, *Hrană și bucurie...*, p. 276.

⁴⁰ Șt. Slevoacă, *Raze din lumina lui Hristos*, p. 75.

⁴¹ Șt. Slevoacă, *Raze din lumina lui Hristos*, pp. 76-77.

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Father Sofian Boghiu pays particular attention to this topic, defining it as follows: “The Divine Providence is the work through which God continuously cares for the world. Because only the power that created the world, can also preserve it”⁴².

• *Having created the entire Universe, God did not leave His Creation at the mercy of hazard,*

“he did not withdraw from it, as some mistakenly suggested, but remained within it and is constantly present everywhere, available to His creatures, as the One who is omnipresent, preserving and protecting His creatures, working together with them and guiding them toward the achievement of the ultimate goal of their existence”⁴³.

That is why Our Savior says: “My Father is always at His work, and I too am working” (John 5, 17). Every one of us can see God’s work in the world by looking around and carefully examining the life of all the creatures surrounding us. These things were noticed by important figures who portrayed God as the ruler of all: Cicero, Voltaire, J.H. Fabre, Robert Brown, Newton, Tyndall, Kepler and others.

In the *Pastoral Letter* entitled *Contra înjurăturilor de cele sfinte (Against those who commit blasphemy)*, patriarch Miron Cristea shows that God gave man the most precious gifts, such as the ability to speak, then goes on to criticize man’s attitude who uses this gift against the kindest and most merciful of his donors, against God

“who built, supports and rules heaven and earth; who created not just man, endowing him with health, but made the entire earth available to him, with its fields and rich crops and with all its goods, sending him the beneficial light and warmth, the fertile rains, etc.; who, despite man’s disobedience, did not forsake us, but loved and continues to love men so much that He sacrificed His only Son...; and from whom, in brief, come all the gifts and all goodness granted to us”⁴⁴.

⁴² S. Boghiu, *Buchet de predici...*, p. 247.

⁴³ S. Boghiu, *Buchet de predici...*, p. 248.

⁴⁴ † Miron Cristea, *Pastorale, predici și cuvântări ținute de Înalt Prea Sfinția Sa Domn Domn Dr. Miron Cristea, Patriarh al României (Pastoral Letters, Sermons and Speeches Delivered by His Holiness Dr Miron Cristea, Patriarch of Romania)*, vol. IV, Tipografia Cărților Bisericești, București, 1938, pp. 78-79.

• ***Wherever we are, we can feel God.*** In his turn, Fr. Toma Chiricuță addresses the topic of the Divine Providence, remarking that nothing happening in this immense world, around us, does not occur at random

“because you see God when you look at the nature. Wherever you may be, you can feel God. Even if you are on the top of mountains, amidst the storm or waves of the sea, in the flames of furnace or caught in the fangs of beasts, you feel Him everywhere, you see Him. And God is present everywhere, He is the Master of all, guiding all and nothing happens at random; not one hair falls from your head without God’s will and without God knowing about it. And so, there is no reason for you to be concerned, even when suffering comes upon you, even when you are put to the worst of trials, even if hunger, sickness, poverty assault you, even if your house burns down and your children die, even if the entire world turns against you, even if you are struck with leprosy and have come to sit on a pile of ashes, while people point at you calling: «behold the madman», you, child of God, never say other than: «God has given, God has taken away, blessed be God’s name». Because you see what they can’t, blinded as they are, while you can see everything everywhere, you can see your Heavenly Father everywhere, you can see God”⁴⁵.

Thus, everything happens according to a plan of God’s love that He has laid at the foundation of all things, so that “not even the most insignificant flutter of the wings of an insect, the fall of a dry little leaf, the floating of a tiny particle of dust in a ray of sun, nothing, absolutely nothing, happens without God’s will and knowledge”⁴⁶.

• ***The core of the Christian doctrine.*** God’s care is felt and perceived at every step we take, in every moment, with every heartbeat. For Father Sebastian Chilea this constitutes the core of the Christian doctrine and the central tenet of Christian sermon, whose role is to guide Christians’ lives. This emphasizes “not only the supernatural glory of God in the unfolding of universal phenomena, but especially the staggering closeness between God and His creatures”⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ T. Chiricuță, *Anul în predici...*, p. 158.

⁴⁶ T. Chiricuță, *Anul în predici...*, p. 154.

⁴⁷ Pr. prof. Sebastian Chilea, *Material omiletic. Despre Providență (Homiletic Material. About Providence)*, in „Mitropolia Olteniei”, anul X (1958), nr. 7-8, p. 542.

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• **The doctrine on providence removes any fear and prevents us from losing our way.** Whoever has fully surrendered to the care of God knows how to look at life's circumstances and the world through God's eyes. The following example is also worth considering, since it is extremely suggestive:

“Talking to some sailors, a missionary preaching the Holy Gospel described the sea as a school extremely rich in teachings. Seas were created by God not for the purpose of separating nations but for uniting them. Seas were explored before the continents. The sea, with its vastness, is a great teacher. And, particularly, because of what it teaches man. Above all, the sea shows how the forces of nature can be put to good use. Few of creation's works bring souls as close to God as the sea, immense and deep, splendid when tranquil, grand when the storm raises its waves. At any time it carries our thoughts to God, in its midst man must recognize and acknowledge the power, providence and wisdom of God”⁴⁸.

VII. The soul

Unlike certain religions which assert that the human soul takes different forms or identifies with the Divinity, the Christian doctrine holds, as professor Vasile Ispir puts it, that “one's personality remains the same and carries on even after death. Man does not die, but only falls asleep in God, he lives on... *Die to live*: this is the fundamental tenet of Christianity”⁴⁹. By truly believing in the Christian teaching, we assert the immortality of the soul, the immortality of the souls of nations over millennia, as independent entities; thus we distance ourselves from the materialistic stance that denies the spirit, or from the Asian denial of existence – annihilation⁵⁰.

• **Death is not the end.** As the Church teaches us, in its prayers for the deceased, bodies go into the earth they were made of, while the souls continue to live, because they were created by God, who breathed upon

⁴⁸ S. Chilea, *Material omiletic. Despre Providență*, p. 542.

⁴⁹ Vasile Ispir, *Biserica Activă. Predici la Radio (The Active Church. Sermons Delivered on the Radio)*, Editura Ion Creangă, București, 1941, p. 142.

⁵⁰ V. Ispir, *Biserica Activă*, p. 143.

them His life-giving breath, so that they may be immortal. Death for the Christian is not the horrifying nothingness, putting an end to all our hopes, but a bridge toward a new existence. Because the earthly life of each of us is just one moment in the vastness of eternity that precedes and follows it, Father Bulacu states that

“death might have reaped countless human bodies of our soldiers through their heroic sacrifice, but it could not kill their souls, it wasn’t able to kill the life of the souls. The afterlife carries on, and the Christian chants intoned here on earth, join - as poet Coșbuc said – the souls of those who are on the other side and rise from the graves”⁵¹.

• ***The soul, as that part of the human being that never dies, needs special care.*** Those who are aware of this, as Father Slevoacă says, will never seek the pleasures of this world but rather “seek and find pleasure in the things beyond this world, they are concerned with the fate of their soul in eternity. They thirst for God”⁵². In this respect, we understand that the purpose of our life is to save our soul. And for this the Son of God was incarnate,

“accepting the condition of a slave, humiliation, weeping, weariness, hunger... Behold His wounds, His bloody face, His head crowned with thorns, His hands pierced with nails, His legs broken, His person denigrated!”⁵³

In order to show how much Christ did for the sake of our salvation, the Father says: “Judge for yourselves what high price was paid for our redemption from the slavery of sin. If God’s blood is so precious, then salvation must be too, because of that blood that was shed”⁵⁴. Following the example set by the Saints, by our ancestors, who laid down their lives for salvation, is the best and most profitable thing, because they stir in man the desire to reach the same position they have reached: coming close to Christ, Who made salvation possible.

• ***God’s gift.*** Man, the creature that God made the master over the entire creation, received an invaluable gift from the Creator: the soul. Upon our

⁵¹ Pr. Mihail Bulacu, *Cuvinte din Evanghelie pentru suflet românesc (Gospel Words for Romanian Souls)*, vol. I, Tipografia Curții Regale, București, 1944, p. 228.

⁵² Șt. Slevoacă, *Raze din lumina lui Hristos...*, p. 136.

⁵³ Șt. Slevoacă, *Raze din lumina lui Hristos...*, p. 138.

⁵⁴ Șt. Slevoacă, *Raze din lumina lui Hristos...*, p. 138.

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physical death, our life on earth comes to an end. Father Ștefan Slevoacă supports the existence of life after death with arguments provided by the Scripture, pointing out that “the Christian religion teaches us that, at the end of the world, the souls of the dead shall be called back into the bodies and all people shall be resurrected”⁵⁵. Following this resurrection, similar to that of the son of the widow of Nain, we will all be judged, and separated into two distinct groups: “And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation” (John 5, 29). God gave man an immortal soul, because, once created “it no longer dies. The soul spends a while in this vessel that is the body. Through death, the body detaches from the soul and goes into the ground..., while the soul continues to exist... and shall continue to live forever and ever”⁵⁶. If the soul weren’t immortal, concludes the preacher, then neither would Christ have sacrificed Himself for our redemption.

VIII. Eternal life

With death our life does not come to an end; on the contrary, it moves on toward eternity. The afterlife, in which we enter after death, is the eternal Kingdom that includes all the inhabitants of earth and is superior to the life we lead here. There, the presence of God is closest to us. There we find the abundance of happiness, there is the ocean of life. Whatever the time or civilization in which they lived, people have always had the notion of afterlife. The Old Testament prophets spoke about eternal life, but the most edifying explanations, through deed and word, were given by the Savior, Who teaches us “that man’s life does not end here on earth... Our bodies return to the dust they were made of, and the souls appear before God, so that they may receive the reward for the deeds performed in the world”⁵⁷.

• ***Our preparation for this eternity should be redeeming, because once we leave our earthly life, we can no longer work for the soul.*** With our limited mind we can hardly fully grasp the two states of eternal life: happiness or torment. Still, the word of God reveals to us that heaven shall

⁵⁵ Șt. Slevoacă, *Raze din lumina lui Hristos...*, p. 162.

⁵⁶ Șt. Slevoacă, *Raze din lumina lui Hristos...*, p. 164.

⁵⁷ Șt. Slevoacă, *Din tezaurul ortodoxiei...*, p. 208.

not mean eating and drinking, but joy and peace. It will be the contemplation of God's presence, communion of the righteous with the angels and the saints, sharing in Christ's glory⁵⁸.

• ***Beside this ephemeral, terrestrial life, there is eternal life, lived in the spirit.*** Based on the testimony of the Holy Scripture and of the Holy Tradition, archimandrite Vasile Vasilache compares life here with a race “toward the true life beyond death. Here, we are just preparing for the afterlife: to grow in its ideals and guide ourselves by following the directions given to us by God Himself”⁵⁹, and Father Toma Chiricuță exhorts us “never to allow the forces of our soul drag us into sin, but continuously keep the truths of faith revealed by God before our conscience”, thus clearly illustrating that, beside this ephemeral, mundane life, there is eternal life, given to the spirit. The true life for all people is eternal life. And the sense of our existence in temporality cannot be other than acquiring eternity. This is the significance that God Himself attaches to our life. For this He gave our life on earth, so that we may acquire eternal life, by means of the way in which we will lead our ephemeral life⁶⁰.

• ***Arguments based on the Holy Scripture.*** The Holy Scripture is rich with both testimonies about eternal life, and testimonies concerning the places where the righteous or the sinners will spend eternity. In the Old Testament, prophets Isaiah and Daniel speak about the torments of eternal fire. But even clearer is the teaching of our Savior through His parables, showing us clearly that the “unmerciful rich man will burn in the terrible fire. The unmerciful servant who showed no clemency for his debtor, the idle servant and so many other ill-doers will be *cast into the outer darkness*”⁶¹. They shall hear, in fear and trembling, the words uttered by the Righteous Judge: “Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25, 41). But there are some people who say that God is very kind and He shall forgive all because He is not evil. It is true, God is not evil, but He is also fair. And as long as we believe in his justice, we must believe that He will punish the sinners and that his punishments will be eternal”⁶².

⁵⁸ Șt. Slevoacă, *Din tezaurul ortodoxiei...*, p. 209.

⁵⁹ V. Vasilache, *Pe căile Domnului...*, p. 117.

⁶⁰ Fr. Toma Chiricuță, *Cunoști tu Calea? Chemări către suflet (Do You Know the Way? Calling to the Soul)*, Editura Fântâna Darurilor, București, 1934, p. 14.

⁶¹ Șt. Slevoacă, *Popasuri...*, p. 130.

⁶² Șt. Slevoacă, *Popasuri...*, p. 131.

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• **Nothing compares to eternal life.** In the *Sermon on the 12th Sunday after the Pentecost*, Father Petre Teodor comments on the question of the young man in the evangelic account: “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Matthew 19, 16), and explains that there are many valuable things in the world and many are sought by everyone, but, no matter how precious and useful they are, nothing compares to eternal life. In that life, says the preacher,

“you will not have earthly riches that are transient, but heavenly riches. There, instead of the earthly pleasures, burdening the human soul, there are spiritual pleasures that uplift and elevate the soul. There is no human glory, here today, gone tomorrow, but heavenly glory which, by the Lord’s word, desired by everyone, will shine like the sun on the sky. In that life you will have no bad neighbors or smooth-tongued friends, or biased rulers, you will fear no one and worry for nothing, but live close to countless hosts of angels, with all those who have lived their earthly life so that to gain the benefit of eternal life”⁶³.

• **People usually die in the same way as they have lived.** Father Petre Teodor regards the end of earthly life calmly and serenely, as a fact that comes naturally and which must prompt us to work, during our lifetime, toward fulfilling those things that please God, because man usually dies in the same way he has lived. If he lives in sin, he will die in sin; if he spends his life in obedience to God, he will end his life in the same way. By explaining the evangelic parable of the unmerciful rich man and poor Lazarus, on the 22nd Sunday after the Pentecost, the preacher states that “the condition of each man after death is absolutely sealed one way or another. This fact seems strange and is unsettling. We might be inclined, says the author, to criticize God for His terrible harshness of condemning a soul to eternal torment, based on a short sinful life here on earth. We would rather want God to be kind than fair. But we forget that His kindness is bestowed on us during our earthly life, but He reserves the right to be merciless in rewarding our deeds on the seat of justice”⁶⁴.

⁶³ P. Teodor, *Hrană și bucurie...*, p. 194.

⁶⁴ P. Teodor, *Hrană și bucurie...*, p. 300.

IX. Conclusions

A common trait of all scholarly preachers in the three Romanian provinces, up to the 20th century, is their common pursuit of their predecessors' goals, namely: defending and promoting the ancestral faith, developing the Romanian language and literature, maintaining awareness of the national unity of all Romanians.

The representatives of Romanian preaching in the first half of the 20th century, added to these lofty ideals that of increasing the value of this liturgical mission – the preaching activity, in the traditional context of the Holy Liturgy. Even more than in the case of the scholars of our old culture or those of the Transylvanian School (Școala Ardeleană), to the priests preaching in the first half of the 20th century, sermons played a major role in safeguarding Orthodoxy and carrying out the religious and moral function, also responding to the realities of everyday life. Thus we can assert that all these Orthodox theological statements, evince the preachers' subtle dogmatic and moral theological thinking, reflecting the richness of Romanian spiritual life during that period.

During the communist times, the preaching activity of the Church was hindered by the policy aiming to intimidate the representatives of Orthodox religion, although preaching was not formally forbidden but only supervised and monitored, with the intention of abolishing it. However, by focusing mainly on theological aspects, the priests preaching under the communist regime never ceased to promote the Christian teachings, sometimes at the cost of their own freedom or even their lives. This is why we can assert that, between 1945-1989, the Romanian Orthodox Church, due to its survival strategy, succeeded in remaining the only institution that saved the Romanian people from spiritual disaster.

After 1989, the Church had the chance to be restored to its rightful, leading place in the context of contemporary Romanian society, and intensified its missionary, holy and salvific activity. Preaching knew an exceptional revival, as show the spectacular number of publications of this type, edifying the faithful on the truths of the faith. Homiletics flourished, both in terms of the rhetorical discourse and its characteristics, as well as in terms of the theological and artistic qualities of the text.

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An overview of the sermons delivered in 20th-century Wallachia reveals the fact that they stress not only the moral dimension, but also the dogmatic, liturgical, missionary, historical and biblical ones, proving that their authors are distinguished, erudite theologians with a sound theological background.