

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
68 (3), pp. 86-108, 2016

St. Isaac the Syrian in the Spiritual and Experimental Consciousness of the Contemporary Athonite Fathers

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Abstract

This study reveals and examines the implications of St. Isaac of Syria's work and theology in the neo-hesychast current and particularly in the thought and theology of some great contemporaries Fathers from the Holy Mountain such as: Elder Joseph the Hesychast, Venerable Paisios of Mount Athos and Father Sophrony Sakharov.

Keywords

Mount Athos, abba Isaac of Syria, neo-hesychasm, Elder Joseph the Hesychast, Venerable Paisios of Mount Athos, archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov.

I. Preliminaries

In its millennial existence, Mount Athos¹ experienced periods of flowering and periods of decadence. However, Athos had a providential and

¹ The mystical, dogmatic, cultic and spiritual centre of Orthodoxy and its praise, a small Byzantium, the “Garden of Theotokos”, a millenary citadel of Orthodox monasticism, sheltering invaluable historical, artistic and spiritual treasures, Mount Athos concentrates in a unique synthesis all the forms of monastic life known in history and all the lines and streams of major force of Eastern spirituality. It captures and assimilates creative contribution and legacy of ancient monastic centres, disappeared or declined because of Islamic invasion and domination - Desert of Egypt, Mount Sinai, Holy Bithynian Mountains, Palestinian, Jordanian and Hozeva desert (Diac. I. I. Ică jr., *Profil teologic athonit contemporan: monahul Teoclit Dionisiatul sau prologul în Grecia al dialogurilor la Athos*, in Teoclit Dionisiatul, “Dialoguri la Athos”, vol. I, trad. de Pr. prof. I. I. Ică, prezentare de Diac. I. I. Ică jr., Editura Deisis, Alba Iulia, 1994, pp. VI-VII).

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guiding significance in the history and tradition of the Orthodox East. We think about the emergence of hesychasm in the 14th century or the rebirth of the hesychastic spirituality in its philocalic form in the 18th century, a movement called the “Kollyvades”. The prominent representatives of this movement – Paisius Velichkovsky (†1793), Nikodemos the Hagiorite (†1806) Macarius of Corinth (†1805), Athanasius Parios (†1813) – have the great merit to put back into circulation the writings of the Holy Fathers, especially the hesychast ones that will influence the spiritual life of ascetics from the Holy Mountain. After the tumultuous and secular 19th century, a new trend based on these writings -namely the neo-hesychasm- will emerge in the dawn of the twentieth century, which will dominate the entire century and will influence the spiritual life of the Holy Mountain. A whole plethora of ascetics and hermits will continue the old and genuine tradition of hesychasm based on Jesus’ prayer, on the writings of the Holy Fathers and on the Divine Eucharist. We remember some of these “athletes of Christ”: Elder Barnabas Agiovasileiatis (†1905); papa Chariton Viglotis (†1906); Nilus of Simonopetra (†1911); Daniel the Katounakiotis (†1929); Kallinikos of Katounakia (†1930); Elder Joseph the Hesychast (†1959); Elder Philaretos (†1962); Elder Gabriel the Karouliotis (†1968); Elder Gabriel the Dionysiatis (†1983); Elder Porphyrios the Kavsokalyvitis (†1991); Elder Sophrony Sakharov (†1993); Venerable Paisios of Mount Athos (†1994); Elder Ephraim the Katounakiotis (†1998); Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi (†2009)². In this context, St. Isaac of Syria’s writings will be re-printed and recommended for spiritual reading and they will become normative for some fathers, influencing their work and theology.

In the following we will try to analyze the influence or rather the direct perception of the hesychast thought and spirituality on some great contemporary Athonite Fathers. Bringing abba Isaac of Syria³ to our days merely emphasizes the universal character of his writings, as well as the transmission of a holy and sanctifying tradition with an origin that coincides with the very beginning of the Church.

² A brief presentation of their lives we meet in: Monahul Moise Aghioritul, *Ieres morfes tou Agiou Orous*, Editura Tertios, Tesalonic, 2006, pp. 250-261.

³ From numerous studies and treaties on St. Isaac the Syrian’s life, work and theology we remember the most complete, scientific and current monograph: S. Chialà, *Dall’ascesi eremitica alla misericordia infinita. Ricerche su Isacco di Ninive e la sua fortuna*, Biblioteca della Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa, vol. XIV, Editura Leo S. Olschki, Firenze, 2002, [trad. rom., Maria-Cornelia și diac. Ioan I. Ică jr., *Isaac Sirianul – asceză singuratică și milă fără sfârșit*, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2012].

Abba Isaac's theology and spirituality can be found in the dogmatic truths of the Church, deep in content, but clearly formulated by some Fathers such as: Gregory of Nyssa (†394), Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor (†662). These truths are not so explicitly formulated in words but first they are found in the experiences of the great mystic, because ascetic life is based on dogma. From this point of view Abba Isaac is a true orthoprax⁴. We found the same mystical experiences at the contemporary Fathers that we will talk about in this chapter; this is one of the similarities that made this study appear.

We can also mention the determinant influence of Isaac's spirituality on the theological thinking after him without being accused of an exaggeration, because both East and West considered him saint and his teachings and experiences normative. His works were translated into most of the languages of circulation. He is considered the father of the hesychasm, given the influences of his writings found in the works of great hesychasts: Symeon the New Theologian (†1022), Nicetas Stethatos (†1090), Gregory Palamas (†1359)⁵. Where was this essential current of Orthodoxy perpetually lived but in Mount Athos? Nikodemos the Hagiorite calls abba Isaac "my spiritual philosopher". Elder Vasilios from Iviron considers him the very icon of the orthodox saint and, moreover, of the man who reached perfection and whom God's eternal will is accomplished in, that is the deification⁶.

II. Saint Isaac of Syria rediscovered in the Holy Mountain tradition

His work and spirituality have been irradiated in the Holy Mountain, being found in an absolutely authentic way in the experiences of the saints from this holy place. The main lines of his theological thinking are met at the great spiritual fathers, to whom the renewal of the hesychasm is connected – Elder Joseph the Hesychast (†1959) and all his disciples, Elder Vasilios from Iviron (n.1958). These turn our attention to three great spiritual per-

⁴ Arhim. Basileios, *Abbas Isaak o Syros, ena plēsiasma ston kosmo tou*, Editura Sfintei Mănăstiri Ivir, Muntele Athos, 2003, p. 9.

⁵ Arhim. Basileios, *Abbas Isaak o Syros*, p. 17.

⁶ Fr. Teofan, *Gândirea Sfântului Isaac Sirul în experiența mistică a unui călugăr de la Athos din secolul XX*, in "Studii Teologice", seria a II-a, anul XLIX, (1997), nr. 1-2, p. 198.

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sonalities, all three belonging to the blessed eastern Chalkidiki peninsula.

It was impossible that such a place should not assimilate the theology and ascetic-mystical experiences of abba Isaac and proposed him as a model of the deified monk. He is the type of monk by excellence, ignited by God's love and consumed by it and unceasingly flowing into His mercy and beauty: "Follow the mercy that takes the image of that Holy Beauty in you when it is inside of you whom you resembled to"⁷. We let Elder Vasilios talk to us about abba Isaac through his poetic and extremely beautiful words:

"He is so unconcerned, quiet, indulgent, that he melts you with his delicacy and sweetness. This known modesty and indulgence have such ruthless and indisputable harshness that simply pierces you without being able to bring any internal or external objection. It is something else, very deep, very hard and very easy. It is something very strange and unrelated to you, and - at the same time - very profoundly familiar and desirable. You understand that you will be attracted to him and you will be pushed by him forward on bold roads that lead you to your personal liberty and to your «destiny». An effective silence, a word of consolation, a unified existence, an irrigation of the world from the depths, a gathering of all beings and an offering of freedom through the same work, exhortation and presence. [...] Abba Isaac is a great blessing; he is the bottomless and endless ocean that leads to distant lands. The open sea that gives you the pure air that enlivens your inner life, the sea of love where the wind of mercy always blows and easily takes you into the island where the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are. [...] To have such an abba that resolves your existence, slaves you and frees you. He shows you a little of his own world, his own being, his own mystical, dark and infinite paradise. So he reveals the things you know. He destroys your death. He breaks you into pieces. He holds your hand. And you will be free, knowing the Holy Spirit «has no beginning and no end». He challenges you and calms you like no other. He shines your darkness. His light goes beyond your questions. Your joy

⁷ "Ἀκολούθησον τῇ ἐλεημοσύνῃ, ἣτις ὅταν εὐρεθῇ ἐνδον σου, εἰκονίζεται ἐν σοὶ ἐκεῖνο τὸ κάλος τὸ ἅγιον ἐν ᾧ ὁμοιώθης" (Isaac Sirul, *Logoi askētikoi*, Cuv. 1, [ed. crt.], Marcel Pirar, Iera Monē Ivēron, AgionOros, 2012, p. 221).

and surprise never end remaining close to him. And the tension ends in non-tension. The surprise ceases to be a surprise and to have such an unexpected element. The unexpected becomes regular, ordinary. «Now all things have been filled with light», gushing incessantly, moving dazzling and shining calmly; a whirlwind of light into an eternal life of rest. They all remain motionless and move dazzling to an endless end, which is the same start without beginning, «hypostasis of all, beginning and perfection, which keeps them together, shield and outbreak»⁸.

These words show the certainty of Saint Isaac's theological tradition, whose work was brought back into the debate of the Athonite neo-Hesychasm in the second half of the 20th century. As one of the most erudite and spiritual contemporary monks Elder Vasilios Gondikakis is a specialist and promoter of Saint Isaac's work, spirituality and theology⁹.

III. St Isaac of Syria – Elder Joseph the Hesychast

One of the exemplary figures of the Athonite monasticism of the first half of the 20th century is the venerable Joseph the Hesychast (1897-1959), also known as Spileot¹⁰. Along with Saint Silouan the Athonite, he will

⁸ Arhim. Vasilios, *Frumusețe și isihie în viața aghioritică*, trad. pr. prof. Ioan Ică, Editura Epifania, Alba Iulia, 2008, pp. 61-65.

⁹ In this regard, we recall some studies of Archimandrite V. Gondikakis: Archimandrite Vasileios, *Abba Isaac the Syrian an approach to his world*, Alexander Press, Montréal Québec, Canada, 1997; Arhim. Basilios, *Abbas Isaak o Syros, ena plēsiasma ston kosmo tou*, Editura Sfintei Mănăstiri Ivir, Muntele Athos, 2003; Arhim. Basileios, *To Agion Oros kai ē paideia tou genous mas*, Editura Sfintei Mănăstiri Ivir, Muntele Athos, 2003; Arhim. Basieios, *Eisodikon*, Editura Sfintei Mănăstiri Ivir, Muntele Athos, 2003; Archimandrite Vasileios, *From St Isaac the Syrian to Dostoyevsky*, Alexander Press, Montréal Québec, Canada, 2004; Arhim. Basileios, *Theologiko Sholiotis toihografies tēs Ieras Monēs Stavrovikēta*, Editura Sfintei Mănăstiri Ivir, Muntele Athos, 2004; Arhim. Baileios, *Leitourgikos tropos*, Editura Sfintei Mănăstiri Ivir, Muntele Athos, 2004.

¹⁰ See a first monograph in the Romanian theology area, praiseworthy both scientifically and spiritually, that includes an exhaustive bibliography of Greek language, referring to the biography and opera of the venerable Joseph the Hesychast, editions of his works published by his disciples, works and studies of consecrated theologians: Pr. Cristian Groza, *Gheron Iosif Isihastul: viața și învățătura*, Editura Sf. Nectarie, Arad, 2017.

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give the Church and the entire world a testimony of the hesychast tradition and of an exceptional experience. By his real name Francisc Kottis, Elder Joseph was born at November 2nd /14th 1897 in Paros Island. He arrived at the Holy Mountain in 1921 after having previously lived an ascetic life around Athens, trying to imitate as much as possible the harsh asceticism and the philanthropic acts of the Athonite monks. His ascetic experiences are greatly enriched by contact with the famous elder Daniel the Katounakiotis (1846-1929), his first spiritual father. Also during this time, the young novice received the gift of unceasing prayer, but his charismatic precocity made elder Daniel send him to have the experience of obeisance at the Annunciation hermitage of the two elders Ephraim and Joseph, bodily brothers. Elder Joseph's experience about the calendar is also worthy of *Paterikon* pages - the period when the Ecumenical Patriarchate demands the transition to the new calendar. He will be got out from the error which he persisted in from pure simplicity through the exceptional way of divine direct revelation¹¹.

It follows a period when he retires to the hermitage of Saint Basil, in the wilderness of the Holy Mountain, together with Arsenios and Ephraim, ascetics like him. This time will be one of great ascetic labours following great victories and spiritual gifts. The practice of unceasing prayer will open the happy vision of the uncreated light up to the rigorous monk as well as the dramatic moments of being abandoned by the divine grace. The direct body confrontations with the demons and the tensed fight with passions that ended in experiences of ecstasy and contemplative vision, put Elder Joseph into the Athonite hesychast descendancy of an unbroken chain from the 14th century, from Saints Gregory Palamas and Gregory the Sinaite and more from the experience of the great mystic and hesychasm precursor of Iran distant mountains, Abba Isaac the Syrian. In fact, without the argumentation of an elaborated theology Elder Joseph confessed the real possibility of man's deification and the experience of the eschatological state¹².

Another stage in Elder Joseph's life will be the establishing of a true community of disciples who will carry forward the hesychast spiritual heritage. We remember only two names: Ephraim of Philotheou (n.1927) and

¹¹ Iosif Monahul, *Bătrânul Iosif Sihastru. Nevoințe – experiențe – învățături*, trad. ieroschim. Ștefan Nuțescu, Editura Mănăstirea Izvorul Mureșului, 1998, pp. 19-31.

¹² Iosif Monahul, *Bătrânul Iosif Sihastru*, pp. 32-69.

Joseph of Vatopaidi (1921-2009), who are both linked to the perpetuation of neo-hesychast spirituality and to the authentic restoration of the monastic experience in Mount Athos through their numerous disciples who become abbots or spiritual fathers at almost half of the great Holy Mountain monasteries¹³.

As far as his writings are concerned, they are summed up in letters to his spiritual sons and in writings of his disciples. The general feature of these writings is simplicity, doubled by a mystical incandescence. We cannot speak of the coherence of a theological discourse, but we can notice the spontaneity of the event and the pathos of the spiritual guidance¹⁴. Their reading reveals a great deal of references to the teachings and experience of abba Isaac. We could say that every ascetic and mystical theme of the Athonite monk's spiritual journey is also reported to abba Isaac. The following testimony of one of his closest disciples, Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi is suggestive in this regard:

“Our elder had a special devotion to St. Isaac's book, which he almost kept as a prayer book. He could tell us by heart entire chapters especially those about order and model in our monastic life, from the introductive *praxi* to contemplation and man's deification. I remember the seventh word: «About the beginners' order and what they are permitted to do». The most important thing which I still remember is the following: «Wherever you are, think of yourself as the smallest and serve all your brothers»¹⁵.

Another testimony comes to reinforce our statement:

“Because we were also directing our steps to the same end, he often read abba Isaac's word saying that a prerequisite for the monk's increase is «closure in one place and everlasting fasting»¹⁶.

¹³ The ideas about the life and spiritual personality of the venerable Joseph the Hesychast were taken from: Arhid. prof. dr. I. I. Ică jr., *Gheron Iosif Isihastul și înnoirea monahismului ortodox contemporan*, în: Pr. Cristian Groza, “Gheron Iosif Isihastul: viața și învățătura”, Editura Sf. Nectarie, Arad, 2017, pp. 7-13 și Iosif Monahul, *Bătrânul Iosif Sihastru*, pp. 70-98.

¹⁴ A detailed presentation of his work is: Pr. Cristian Groza, *Gheron Iosif Isihastul*, pp. 67-97.

¹⁵ Iosif Monahul, *Bătrânul Iosif Sihastru*, pp. 111-112.

¹⁶ Iosif Monahul, *Bătrânul Iosif Sihastru*, p. 112.

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In one of his epistles elder Joseph himself calls abba Isaac: “The praise of the hesychasm and the comfort of the ascetics”¹⁷. It is easy to understand the place the Syriac ascetic’s teachings in the spiritual formation of elder Joseph and his disciples.

We even find entire quotations of Isaac’s writings given by elder Joseph to support and animate his disciples. Talking about holiness and dispassion he brings to light a series of philocalic texts, among which the following *Ascetic Writings*:

“Abba Isaac the Syrian tells us: «Dispassion does not mean not to feel passions, but not to receive them, because of the manifold hidden and manifestly virtues some gained, who weakened the passions in them, so they can no longer easily rebel against the soul. And thinking does not need to always remember them!»”¹⁸.

Ascetics made their primary concern the love for Christ the Saviour. The same love motivates their retreat into deserted places. To refine this idea, once again he appeals to the writings of St. Isaac:

“Departed from the places of cause and reason, where our fallen nature is withdrawing, they continue this unequal struggle, «wandering through deserts, mountains, caves, and the cracks of the earth», according to St. Isaac”¹⁹.

We find a striking similarity between the teachings of the two ascetics, related to the spiritual path of the ascetic. St. Isaac’s teachings show us a tripartite scheme of the spiritual path, which we have discussed extensively in a previous chapter on the connection between asceticism and mysticism. If we synthetically resume we will understand that according to abba Isaac this path comprises three stages or ages: the age of the beginning, characterized by fear, suffering and sadness; the middle age, characterized by repentance, hope and the temporary thrill of joy and the age of fulfilment, characterized by living above nature²⁰. In one of his epistles, Elder Joseph describes the three states of nature to which “man is ascended

¹⁷ Gheron Iosif, *Mărturii din viața monahală*, vol. 2, trad. pr. dr. Constantin Coman, Editura Bizantină, București, 1996, p. 164.

¹⁸ Iosif Monahul, *Bătrânul Iosif Sihastru*, p. 102.

¹⁹ Iosif Monahul, *Bătrânul Iosif Sihastru*, p. 103.

²⁰ See: Isaac Sirul, *Cuvinte către singuratici despre viața duhului, taine dumnezeiești, prorie și judecată. Partea II, recent descoperită*, studiu introductiv și traducere, diacon Ioan i. Ică jr., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2003, Capitolele IV, 42-47, pp. 212-214; și S. Chială, *Dall’ascesi eremitica...*, pp. 150-151., [trad. rom., pp. 197-198].

or descended”²¹. And complementary to this scheme he also presents the three states of grace that may be experienced in the spiritual ascension. It is the cleansing grace, similar to the beginning state of abba Isaac schema and also to *praktikē* step (purification) from the general schema proposed by the Fathers of the 4th century; the enlightening grace, similar to the middle state and to *physikē* step (enlightenment) and the perfection grace, similar to the state of fulfilment and to *theoria* step (union):

“And the three modes of divine grace that man’s nature can receive when he has good will and struggles, are these: cleansing, enlightening and perfection. When man first comes to repentance for the sins he committed before, he endeavours to remain within the divine law and suffers great wrestling and suffering from the habit of passions. Then, in secret, the divine grace gives him comfort and joy, cry, pleasure and sweetness from the divine words he reads, as well as power and courage for the spiritual struggle. This is called cleansing grace and in a mysterious manner it helps the repentant to purify himself from sins and to keep himself in the state of his nature. [...] And the light of the mind and of divine grace is non-material, unmatched and colourless, smooth and brings peace. This is and is called the enlightening grace, which illuminates the mind and makes it understand the safe ways of the spiritual journey, so the traveller does not wander and fall. [...] If we remain in this state and no evil happens to us because of the unceasing struggles and disturbances of passions, then we will receive the gift of God, the perfection grace. It makes us perfect and it is and is called over-natural, because

²¹ “Listen, son, about the three kinds of nature to which man is raised or lowered. We say: the natural state of man, after breaking the commandment of God and falling from heaven, is the Divine Law which was given to us in writing after that exile. And if he desires his salvation every man has to force himself, to fight with passions, beating and being beaten, struggling and being fought, overcoming or being overcome. In general, he must strive to remain within the divine laws of nature. [...] The state against nature is when man is outside the divine law, and as a savage resembles the animals that have no law. [...] Whoever walks outside the divine law, dragging himself in the various sins we have spoken of, is in the state against nature. And the state above nature is the dispassion that Adam had before breaking the commandment of God, violation by which he fell from divine grace and kindness” (Gheron Iosif, *Mărturii din viața monahală*, vol. 2, pp. 185-186).

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it is above nature. [...] From the moment that perfection and above nature grace comes, all passions disappear. And virtues stay as being our own nature, without special endeavours”²².

The spiritual experiences of the Holy Mountain monk are amazing, especially those related to the contemplation of the uncreated light, common to the hesychasts experience that was plenty shared by the ascetic bishop. Abba Isaac calls this ecstatic state “dark”, the mind remaining motionless and sharing only the uncreated light:

“«The dark» is characteristic to the spiritual step when mind is swallowed by wonder and spiritually receives an understanding that falls unexpectedly upon his soul and keeps his mind still. Meanwhile all of the seen things hide from its gaze in an ignorance and insensibility of the thing it tries to look at. This darkness makes the mind non-working as when a cloud envelops one thing and steals it from the sight of our eyes”²³.

Elder Joseph equally experiences the uncreated light. Here is what he confesses indirectly in one of his epistles:

“I know a brother who one day passed through many temptations and spent all that day in tears without any taste of peace. After sunset, sitting on a stone he gazed at the Church of the Transfiguration from the top of the Holy Mountain and he painfully prayed crying and saying: «O, Lord, as You have changed for your disciples, change Your face in my soul too. Make the passions stop and calm down my troubled heart! Give prayer to the one who prays to You and guard my free mind!» While he was saying this sighing, a gentle breeze of sweet smell came from the church and filled his soul with joy, light and divine love. And the everlasting prayer began to work in his heart as a honey sweet. Then he got up and went into his shelter because it was dark already. And bowing his head to his chest, he began to feed from the sweetness that came from the prayer that had been given to him. And suddenly he was abducted to the spiritual seeing [*theoria*], being completely beyond himself, without being surrounded by walls and rocks. Beyond any will, in an indescribable calm, in abundant light, a borderless width, without

²² Gheron Iosif, *Mărturii din viața monahală*, vol. 2, pp. 186-189.

²³ Isaac Sirul, *Partea II, Capitolele I*, 52, p. 125.

flesh. And only this thought was in his mind: not to return to his body, but to remain forever where he was²⁴.

In conclusion to our attempt to draw closer to the teachings and experiences of this great ascetic, we can say that by putting practice above it as a foundation and contemplation, he walked the way of his life with great struggles, climbing all the steps of the spiritual ladder and making himself God-bearing through grace [*theofor*], offering us the old tradition of the Fathers and showing himself their worthy follower and successor.

IV. St. Isaac the Syrian – Venerable Paisios of Mount Athos

The well-known Venerable Paisios of Mount Athos is another outstanding spiritual personality of the Athonite monasticism and of contemporary Orthodoxy in general (1924-1994). His fame went far beyond the borders of the Holy Mountain, lately becoming one of the most popular spiritual persons. He was born on July 25, 1924 in far away Pharasa, a settlement in Asia Minor, a few hundred kilometres from Caesarea of Cappadocia, in a very pious family deeply connected to the national values. Even in the early days of his life he experienced people's pain and torment. Alongside his family he passes through exile and population exchange, caused by the great and painful disaster from Asia Minor. Around 1950, he started to seek to enter the monastic life. He reached the Holy Mountain, but he did not remain there for a long time. However on the second journey he decided to remain for good. He started the life of *dokimos* at Esphigmenou Monastery and then he settled at Philotheou Monastery. The year 1958 finds him outside the Holy Mountain, in a monastery dedicated to the Mother of God in Konita, where he remains until 1962²⁵. From here he goes to Sinai Peninsula, living in the cell of St. Galacteon and Episteme. He returns to the Holy Mountain and sets himself up in the hermitage of Iviron. These spiritual pilgrimages enrich his spiritual experiences and knowledge. His contact with various improved fathers settles the ascetic practices and teachings in his mind and heart, which will later raise him to the climax of perfec-

²⁴ Gheron Iosif, *Mărturii din viața monahală*, vol. 1, trad. pr. dr. Constantin Coman, Editura Bizantină, București, 1996, pp. 122-123.

²⁵ Ierom. Isaac, *Viața cuviosului Paisie Aghioritul*, trad. ieroschim. Ștefan Nuțescu, Editura Evanghelismos, București, 2005, pp. 23-142.

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tion. Due to surgery, after which a large part of a lung was extirpated, he decided to struggle in Katounakia wilderness. The sordid state of his body caused him to move to the cenobitic life, establishing himself at the Holy Monastery Stavronikita. After a new surgery, Elder Paisios is taken to St. John the Theologian Monastery in Souroti to be taken care of. He remains here until the end of his life²⁶.

In the last part of his life, Elder Paisios dedicated himself to the people of the world and their problems – “with pain and love” – offering them advices, counsels and spiritual comfort. His epistles, writings and instructions printed by Souroti’s sisterhood are testimonies for his work. Through the endeavours of the nuns from that monastery and especially Abbess Philothea’s today we have hundreds of printed pages with his teachings. His work is of amazing simplicity. He makes reference, similarities and comparisons, most often unpredictable, sometimes between the seen and unseen war, evoking even historical figures; other times he makes us pay attention to the observation of terrestrial and marine flora and fauna and to anagogical understandings of great spiritual significance and profundity. From themes of astronautics, walking on Moon, athletics, telegraphy, banking, even fashion and football, Elder Paisios astonishes us by his anchoring in the contemporary world. But more he amazes us by treating these themes and issues in the traditional sense of *Philokalia* and *Patericon*, giving each one and all, the deepest, clearest and actual spiritual advice.

From his writings we deduce he was a theologian in the true sense of the word, his theology being a practical one, mastered by ascetic labours. Just as the other spiritual Fathers, theology was perceived as a state of grace. His practical advice and mystical experiences sprang up from such an understanding of theology. Tens of stories about deeds, works, happenings and divine revelations prove the spiritual relationship between the Elder and the great saints of the Eastern tradition: Maximus Kavsokalivit (†1375), Andrew the Fool for Christ (†911), Symeon the New Theologian (†1022) and Abba Isaac the Syrian, for whom he had an extraordinary devotion.

His great devotion to venerable Isaac is shown to us by the way in which Elder Paisios referred to his writings and teachings:

²⁶ Ierom. Isaac, *Viața cuviosului Paisie Aghioritul*, pp. 145-334.

“He had St. Isaac the Syrian’s *Ascetical Homilies* at the head of his bed and he always read them. For six years this was his only spiritual reading. He took a sentence and repeated it all day in his mind, deeply researched it and put it into practice. The Elder «chew» all the saint’s words as «animals chew their food» according to his expression. He gave as blessing a collection made up of the most beautiful words of the saint to urge as many to read it. «The study of St. Isaac the Syrian’s *Ascetical Homilies* helps a lot» said geronta «because they help the man who believes in God to grasp the deepest sense of life and to chase away any kind of small or large complex. A little reading of St. Isaac’s words changes the soul with their many vitamins»²⁷.

This experience reminds us of Desert Fathers’ practice who memorized the Holy Scripture. This demonstrates the familiarity of the ascetic with the Word of God and its interiorization. Similarly, Elder Paisios internalizes abba Isaac’s teachings and meditates for hours to his words, and then this internalization becomes an ascetic practice consistent with the whole ascetic tradition of Christian East.

Also related to the devotion for St. Isaac, it is worth mentioning the vision that the Elder had in connection with his holiness. The vision does nothing but to entrust him even more about the Orthodoxy of St. Isaac’s teachings²⁸. The note the worthy geronta made in the book *Ascetical Homilies*²⁹ shows us the appreciation Isaac’s teaching had in the ascetic journey of the Athonite monk. The full communion with Saint Isaac is also apparent from the experience Paisios had at the saint’s feast. During all-night vigil the old man was seen in a Tabor light, arose from the earth and transfigured³⁰.

It was natural that Paisios would recommend and share with his disciples this intimacy he had with abba Isaac. In one of his letters addressed to Abbess Philothea when speaking about spiritual study he recommends especially St. Isaac’s writings. Their reading helps the struggler to discover and understand the meaning of the ascetic life. He also states that the one who reads St. Isaac’s writings must have a lot of discernment and be on a

²⁷ Ierom. Isaac, *Viața cuviosului Paisie Aghioritul*, pp. 232-233.

²⁸ Ierom. Isaac, *Viața cuviosului Paisie Aghioritul*, p. 232.

²⁹ „My Abba, give me your quill to highlight your whole book” - the idea is the whole text of the book is of overwhelming value in the spiritual formation of the ascetic (Ierom. Isaac, *Viața cuviosului Paisie Aghioritul*, p. 233).

³⁰ Ierom. Isaac, *Viața cuviosului Paisie Aghioritul*, pp. 223-224.

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certain stage of ascetic labours. This is in order to assimilate as accurately and profoundly as possible the teachings of the Syrian ascetic³¹.

There are many similarities in the ascetic teachings of the two great Fathers. If the bishop of Nivives work is abundant in references to the labours of the monk's ascetic path, the same thing we can say about Paisios' writings. For example, the theme of passions is one of Isaac the Syrian's favourite themes. Paisios also reserved a special place for this theme. For him, passions are "some powers of the soul" because

"God does not give weakness but power. But when we do not capitalize these powers to do good deeds, the devil (Old Nick) comes and exploits them and they become passions"³².

Pride is enumerated among the principal passions. In this respect, he is part of the Evagrian tradition which inspired abba Isaac in turn. For the wise geronta Paisios pride is the "general command of all passions". The struggle against this passion brings to the ascetic the victory over all passions:

"So, if you hit pride, you will hit all the passions and then humility and love come inside you. That is why I think it is enough to take care or rather to open a battle front against pride; to direct all the attacks against the city of pride that separates us from God"³³.

Abba Paisios considers the source of all falls is self-love. It is superfluous to recall that also in St. Isaac's teaching self-love [*philaphtēa*] occupies the same position. Here is how the worthy old man describes it:

"to please your old man, that is to love your old man. Greed of the womb, selfishness, stubbornness and envy are all drawn from self-love. And you see, one seeks comfort and personal quit of self-love, without taking account of anyone. Another meticulously cares about his food and sleep, lest his health suffers. Another seeks to be taken into account and to be appreciated by others"³⁴.

³¹ Paisie Aghioritul, *Epistole*, trad. ieroschim. Ștefan Nuțescu, Editura Evanghelismos, București, 2005, pp. 59-63.

³² Paisie Aghioritul, *Patimi și virtuți*, seria „Cuvinte duhovnicești”, vol. 5, trad. ieroschim. Ștefan Nuțescu, Editura Evanghelismos, București, 2007, pp. 17-18.

³³ Paisie Aghioritul, *Patimi și virtuți*, p. 55.

³⁴ Paisie Aghioritul, *Patimi și virtuți*, p. 35.

Like Isaac of Syria, geronta Paisios is a fine observer of the spiritual life. We understand this from the importance he gives to thoughts in the birth of passions. Abba Isaac distinguishes between good thoughts and bad thoughts; the same thing we encounter in Paisios' writings:

“Passions are rooted deep within us, but pious and good thought help us not to be enslaved by them. When man cultivates only good thoughts and strengthens a good state, the passions cease to work, as if they no longer exist. That is because the pious thought does not uproot the passions, but it fights them and it can even defeat them”³⁵.

We even come across identical phrases, such as “thoughts from right side and thoughts from left side”³⁶.

Another common theme is humility. If to abba Isaac humility is “God’s garment” to Paisios of Mount Athos humility is the virtue par excellence, which enlightens man to avoid hindering in his spiritual path, but to overcome all the obstacles tempter puts in his way³⁷. Humility is the virtue that makes us advance in spiritual life:

“Everyone who found the way of humble thought advances in the spiritual life quickly, steadily and without difficulty. We have not yet understood what humility is - this great power! All spiritual growth lies within it. The more humble man is the more grace he receives from God and even more he grows. How much power humility has, and yet people do not value it”³⁸.

Prayer is one of the dominant themes of Isaac’s thinking. Of course it could not miss from the ascetic thought of geronta Paisios. A whole volume with his notes on this subject is published. From its simple definition to the prayer for the whole world and even for the devil, we see similarities between the two fathers. A point that brings them closer is the doxological aspect of prayer. The Paisian teaching emphasizes two states of the doxological aspect of prayer. The first state belongs to the struggler at war with his passions; the second state belongs to those who passed the stage of repentance reaching dispassion:

³⁵ Paisie Aghioritul, *Nevoință duhovnicească*, seria „Cuvinte duhovnicești”, vol. 3, trad. ieroschim. Ștefan Nuțescu, Editura Evanghelismos, București, 2003, pp. 17-18.

³⁶ Paisie Aghioritul, *Nevoință duhovnicească*, pp. 20-23.

³⁷ Paisie Aghioritul, *Nevoință duhovnicească*, p. 187.

³⁸ Paisie Aghioritul, *Patimi și virtuți*, p. 189.

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“In the space of doxology there are two states. If man does not pass the first, he cannot reach the second. The man who has bitterness, but put all aside is in the first state. [...] All who have passed the stage of repentance and have felt the divine comfort that brings the remission of sins are in the second state. That is, they have passed the joyous sorrow and have come to doxology”³⁹.

We end our reference to the Paisian thinking by highlighting the apostolate the old man made when he reached dispassion. This happened after a long ascetic struggle for the fulfilment of the divine commands carried on until martyrdom that Saint Isaac of Syria so wonderfully wrote about – whom geronta Paisios so much loved and followed. He received the Spirit of understanding and wisdom from above, and the word by which he spiritually comforted and strengthened countless flocks of believers, like all the great spiritual Fathers of Orthodoxy.

V. St. Isaac the Syrian – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov is one of the remarkable ascetics, monks, mystics and theologians of the twentieth century (1896-1993). Educated in Tsarist Russia and then in Europe, his spiritual growth and perfection is linked to the Holy Mountain. Being a descendant and follower of the great spiritual Tradition of the Eastern Church, his experiences and writings share to the world truths of faith equivalent to those of the great Fathers and at the same time assure him a place in the Synaxarion.

Father Sophrony was born in Moscow on September 22, 1896, in a family belonging to the Moscow bourgeoisie. He was raised in the Orthodox tradition and in the spirit of the Russian culture from the 18th-19th centuries. He studied at the Academy of Arts in Moscow in order to cultivate his artistic talent made evident from his early childhood. Due to political changes in Russia, he decided to immigrate to Western Europe. After visiting Italy and Germany, he settled in Paris where he dedicated himself to his artistic career. It is the period when he suffered a strong inner crisis, especially under the influence of the extreme-oriental mysticism.

³⁹ Paisie Aghioritul, *Despre rugăciune*, seria „Cuvinte duhovnicești”, vol. 6, trad. ieroschim. Ștefan Nuțescu, Editura Evanghelismos, București, 2013, p. 225.

His spiritual dissatisfaction determined him to return to Orthodoxy. Eager to study and deepen theology he enrolls at “Saint-Serge” Orthodox Theological Institute, created by the intellectuals of the Russian Parisian emigration. Here he meets great Russian theologians such as Sergei Bulgakov and Nikolai Berdyaev that will mark his theological thinking. The deepest influence on Father Sophrony came from Father S. Bulgakov, who was his spiritual confessor. We will see that his vocabulary and his theological style were decisive in the theological formation of the future archimandrite Sophrony. But academic theology could not give a satisfying answer to his quests and was unable to offer him a live experience or to teach him how to overcome his passions and attain personal communion with God. In this context he decides to go to Mount Athos in search of the immediate personal experience of Evangelical revelation⁴⁰.

Two factors decisively influence his spiritual evolution: on the one hand, his own mystical experience based on profound repentance, and on the other his encounter with Staretz Silouan (1866-1938). For an eight-year period he stays near this great saint who reached the measure of the Eastern Tradition Fathers’ holiness. Although St. Silouan did not have his own theological system, his lived and expressed ascetic and theological notions formed the integral basis for Father Sophrony’s theological knowledge. During the same period, abba Sophrony became familiar with the ascetic heritage of the Holy Fathers and their writings and ideas. He gets to know the writings and theology of the most important Fathers of the Eastern Orthodoxy: Basil the Great (†379), Macarius of Egypt (†392), Isychios of Sinai (7th century), Diadochos of Photiki (5th century), Dionysius the Areopagite (6th century), Barsanuphius and John (6th century), John Climacus (†606), Isaac of Syria, Symeon the New Theologian (†1022), Philotheos of Sinai (7th century), Gregory of Sinai (†1346), Ignatius Brianchaninov (†1867), Seraphim of Sarov (†1833), Paisius Velichkovsky (†1793), Teophan the Recluse (†1891) and John of Kronstadt (†1908). He studied *Philokalia* in detail, moreover he learns Greek to read St. Gregory Palamas’ writings in original.

After Saint Silouan’s death, Father Sophrony retreats to the desert of Karoulia. Here he spends the next two years in contemplation and hot

⁴⁰ I. I. Ică jr., *Arhimandritul Sofronie și rugăciunea ca „artă a artelor”*, în: Arhim. Sofronie, “Rugăciunea – experiența Vieții Veșnice”, trad. și prezentare Ioan I. Ică jr., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2001, pp. 5-14.

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prayer to God for all mankind, prayer intensified with the outbreak of World War II. Driven by the desire to publish Abbot Silouan's life and writings, he returns to Paris in 1947. Falling seriously ill he suffered a complicated operation and was forced to settle in Paris, specifically in a Parisian suburb of the Russian emigration. This period is marked by his friendship with theologian Vladimir Lossky, whose theology will later inspire his writings and they will write together the magazine of the Russian Patriarchy for Western Europe. Now he expands his intellectual horizon through contact with contemporary theological literature and, in particular, with Russian emigrant theologians: Sergei Bulgakov, George Florovsky and Nikolai Berdyaev. He also gathers a lot of people around him because of his charisma of confessor. This leads him to found a monastic community in 1959, by purchasing an old dismantled parish house in Essex (England). This is how the present monastery was built, Saint John the Baptist being the patron. In this community, the Father restores the profound principles of monastic life, especially inner asceticism, since inner perfection was more precious to him than exterior comfort. The liturgical life was focused around the Divine Liturgy and the Jesus prayer, which they practiced in the church to replace the daily services. Such a practice reminds us of the tradition of some Athonite hermitages and of the monasteries of Saint Paisius Velichkovsky. Abba Sophrony dies in this monastery on July 11, 1993.

His writings, both from the Parisian period and those written after setting up in Essex, reveal Abba Sophrony as a great theologian and spiritual father. His ascetic-mystical experiences doubled by his intellectual formation, plus his artist finesse, bring into the 20th century theology the deep theological principles found throughout the Eastern Tradition. His writings also reveal an organic integrity and integrality between ascetic life, dogma and the Church. This is hard to find in the modern theologians' works and from this perspective, Father Sophrony can be considered a follower of the Holy Fathers.

Father Sophrony's profound theology has many links to St. Isaac's theology, both stemming from the ascetic-mystical experience and thus overcoming the frameworks of an academic and autonomous theology. We frequently find quotes from St. Isaac the Syrian in the whole work of Archimandrite Sophrony⁴¹. This demonstrates Father Sophrony's certain

⁴¹ Citează din *Cuvântul 58*: Arhim. Sofronie, *Cuvântări duhovnicești*, vol. I, trad. din limba rusă de ierom. Rafail (Noica), Editura Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2004, p. 171.

predilection for the hesychast authors and, in particular, for Abba Isaac. The great theme of humility is found in the writings of both Fathers. For Isaac the path of humility is the way of Christ in His Incarnation. Receiving this gift of humility is nothing more than following Christ in His ways. It is humble he who goes the same path with his teacher, the path where the Spirit can descend upon man and make him like God. At this point Father Sophrony's theology comes and points out that divine humility, as a sign of Christ's love revealed in the Person of the Incarnate Word, shows itself as a state of preparation and openness to receive and carry within it all people. Thus, this humility appears as a natural attribute of the True Hypostasis of the Son of God. This is about divine humility that along with ascetic humility forms abba Sophrony's vision on humility as a fundamental condition in the ascetic-mystical way. If Isaac the Syrian insists on ascetic humility, only nuancing divine humility, Abba Sophrony creates a true theology around divine humility. He says humility shows man to be hypostasis after the image of Christ:

“The unbounded love has been revealed to us in its amazement with such an immense humility. Greatness lies in humility. Because Christ humbled Himself, he was given a name above all names: «whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted [Luke 14, 11]». Our Fathers inclined to believe that if pride alone was enough for the fall, maybe humility alone is enough for salvation”⁴².

Divine humility is nothing but kenosis which must become our kenosis, that is our diminishing and self-emptying:

“Kenosis also consists in the fact the Maker of all that exist took the “image” of the creature and the image of the slave: incarnation – that is becoming man. We know Him as a real man even if He has not ceased to be God. We discard the damaging idea of Docetism. He really is God-Man. The act of dis-embodiment was not present in his act of Ascension. And so His self-emptying (kenosis) did not end on the Cross or in the tomb or in the descending to hell, nor in His Resurrection and Ascension. It has to be understood not only within these limits, but also in the fact that He, the bearer of the same self-being that is in the Father,

⁴² Arhim. Sofronie, *Nașterea întru împărăția cea neclătită*, trad. ierom. Rafail Noica, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2003, p. 229.

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gives all to His Father. From this we see that in the birth of the Son before the ages Father has emptied all His fullness pouring it in the Born One: of the Father. Therefore, the absolute of emptying is intrinsic to God's love. Two extremes combine in God, in an incomprehensible way to us: on one hand the fullness of the Being, and on the other, the fullness of self-diminishing and humility. He, our God, is absolute in all His movements: He is absolutely "the great" and He is also endlessly «the little one»⁴³.

Prayer for the world is another common theme in the two great Fathers' theology. Abba Isaac is among the first Fathers to address this all-embracing prayer. Withdrawing from the world the ascetic prays for the whole world in a paradoxical way and he feels the pains of the whole world and empathizes with the suffering of mankind. This is due to the merciful heart acquired by him in his spiritual ascension, which also regarded as the gift of the Holy Spirit. Compassion for the world encompasses all creatures, all mankind regardless the social category; it encompasses even the demons, in one word, the whole universe. We meet this exceptional experience in the "5th Word" of Part II of St. Isaac's writings⁴⁴. In his theology Father Sophrony develops the prayer for the whole world in a spiritual and mystical continuity as a sign of the hypostatic principle - the central idea of Sophrony's theology. The foundation of this type of prayer is Christ's kenotic love that descends deeply, ascends to height and extends in width and length. Enlivened by Christ's love for the world and by the spiritual sight of the world, the ascetic turns to God in hot prayer for the whole world. In this prayer he profoundly lives the whole human tragedy because he sees man's majesty that experienced the grace of God. In Father Sophrony's theology the par excellence model of such a prayer is the prayer from the Garden of Gethsemane:

"Christ's prayer of Gethsemane is undoubtedly the highest of all prayers because of its inward worthiness and its redeeming power for the world. At the same time it is one of the most invaluable discoveries about God and Man. Given to the God-Father in the Spirit of Divine Love as a Light that never subdues, it remains eternally working in the existence of the world. As a historical

⁴³ Arhim. Sofronie, *Nașterea întru împărăția cea neclătită*, pp. 228-229.

⁴⁴ Isaac Sirul, *Partea II*, Cuv. 5, pp. 241-251.

fact, it did not take long; but as a spiritual act of God's love it began before the foundation of the world [according to *1 Peter* 1, 20] and it does not cease to this day. The presence of its power is felt at the time of prayer for the world, and especially at the time of the Liturgy. Its holiness and majesty attract the heart of those who guarded inside them the image of the Living God"⁴⁵.

The Divine Liturgy is regarded by Father Sophrony as another aspect of prayer for the world, also called "hypostatic prayer" similar to that in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the Liturgy, we imitate Christ's prayer because we resemble Him when we stand before God, bringing prayers for the whole world, with all its joys and sufferings⁴⁶.

The view of uncreated light is also a common experience for the two ascetics and mystics. This experience is exclusively reserved to the hesychasts and represents the culmination of the spiritual ascension. Abba Isaac speaks of a divine light the ascetic is lit through from above, reaching to the view of his own soul. This point is the basis of the hesychasm, which is why Isaac is considered a precursor of the hesychast current⁴⁷. As for the theology of uncreated light in Father Sophrony's thinking, as all the themes of his theology, this is done on the basis of the hypostatic principle which defines the human being since its conception, and which is fully activated by the personal discovery of God in us through the sight of the uncreated light:

"Springing from the One Being, this Light leads to one and the same knowledge of the God of Love. There are no disparities in the consequences of showing the true Uncreated Light: they all lead to the same - the discovery of Jesus Christ's Divinity. There are moments when man's spirit is led by the power of God in His kingdom, Christ's kingdom, which «is not of this world» [*In* 18, 36]"⁴⁸.

The uncreated light is an act of divine essence that is hypostatically partaken; it is the Divinity's energy and the Trinity's life without beginning:

⁴⁵ Arhim. Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu precum este*, trad. ierom. Rafail Noica, Editura Sofia, București, 2005 p. 349.

⁴⁶ Arhim. Z. Zaharou, *Adu-ți aminte de dragostea cea dintâi*, trad. din engleză de monahia Porfirie, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2015, pp. 263-265.

⁴⁷ Isaac Sirul, *Partea II*, Cuv. 9, 7, p. 263; și Cuv. 11, 29, p. 282.

⁴⁸ Arhim. Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu...*, p. 232.

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“It is above the world by nature. Its descent upon us is nothing but God’s appearance to man: the discovery of heavenly mysteries. Through the gift of this Light, God’s knowledge was strengthened at the Transfiguration on Tabor. From the moment it shined on the Apostles on Tabor it entered the history of our world and became an “inherited heritage” from generation to generation to those who believe in Christ”⁴⁹.

Remembrance of death is a favourite theme for the two strugglers. Abba Isaac speaks of two kinds of death remembrance - the natural thought of death and the “daily death” as a gift of God and a spiritual contemplation. Abba Sophrony speaks of death remembrance as a mystical state of grace⁵⁰. Remembering death was also the starting point of Father Sophrony’s mystical experience because it “kills the passions of our body”⁵¹. In his writing *We Shall See Him as He Is*, he reserves a whole chapter to this theme⁵².

The contemplation of light brings a special experience to our consciousness at the level of each Person of the Holy Trinity. We feel the Father as Father and we rejoice in His love, the Spirit as the Comforter and the Son as a brother who carries our humanity. Consequently the personal-hypostatic perfection comes not only from the vision of a Personal God in light, but from a God in three Persons Who exists in Himself in an absolute and unconditional way:

“The light which appears to man through the faith in Christ bears testimony about His Divinity. Our Spirit understands Jesus the Lord as the unchanging Holy Truth. This light without beginning gives birth within us to words according to Christ’s teaching; we contemplate the Father in it; we see Christ in it as the Only-begotten Son of the Father. Through this experience, we know that the Three are one and of the same Essence. But in this Unity we still live the difference: I speak to the Father in a way; I pray to the Holy Spirit in a different way; and I look for

⁴⁹ Arhim. Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu...*, p. 258.

⁵⁰ Ierom. N. Saharov, *Iubesc, deci exist. Teologia arhimandritului Sofronie*, trad. diacon Ioan I. Ică jr., Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2004, pp. 192-193.

⁵¹ Arhim. Sofronie, *Cuvântări duhovnicești*, p. 140.

⁵² Arhim. Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu...*, pp. 9-20. See also a theological presentation and development on this theme at: Ierom. N. Saharov, *Iubesc, deci exist...*, pp. 283-299.

Christ in another way. Each one is accompanied by a particular spiritual sense, without abolishing the Unity of Being in any way. We feel some shades of difference in our relationship with each Hypostasis of the Holy Trinity”⁵³.

Archimandrite Sophrony’s spiritual itinerary is entirely exceptional and enrolled in the frameworks of traditional Eastern theology. It is the quest for perfection, as well as the existential relevance of theology, which developed as an integration of various theological-traditional levels in an organic synthesis through its own mystical experience.

VI. Conclusions

The spiritual and theological personality of St. Isaac the Syrian fascinates through the richness of meanings and the depth of ideas as well as the theological connections it expresses. In its vision and experience it includes the mystical ascension and ascetic demands of the Eastern Christianity. It is in unity of thought and feeling with the Greek Fathers of the Church and is continually and eloquently inspired from the Syro-Oriental monasticism to the actual neo-hesychasm materialized in the Holy Mountain of Athos. Abba Isaac’s theology and spirituality is recognized as normative both in its spiritual and academic expression. The complex work of this saint fascinates scholars from all orientations of the present Christianity from the East to the West and from the West to the Orient. The discovery of St. Isaac’s theological and spiritual thinking coincides with the re-discovery of the inner springs of the contemporary man who constantly seeks to overcome the world he lives in.

⁵³ Arhim. Sofronie, *Vom vedea pe Dumnezeu...*, p. 243.