

Prayer in XXth century: the Noul-Neamt Brotherhood

The influence of collectivist ideas and practices inherent in communism, fascism, tribalism, and socialism had catastrophic results during the 20th century. Entire populations were subjected to social experiments on the basis of socio-economic and political theories, leading to predictable and horrific increases in human suffering. For the Russian Orthodox Church the 20th century was marked by persecution as well as prayer. Both clergy and laypeople struggled to merely survive, albeit facing different challenges. Prayer helped believers to preserve and transmit their faith and to resist.

Where were the strongholds of prayer and what gave prayer its impetus? The concentration of prayer was located in “correctional” camps and hospitals for “the insane”. People in intense suffering and need pray fervently. In spite of persecutions, monasteries and monastics became strongholds of prayer. Even though collectivism permeated the entire Soviet system, people could still retain their personal mind and conscience.

I will speak about the practice of prayer in the Moldavian Noul-Neamt Monastery. The monastery was founded by the successors of St. Paissios Velickovski in 1864. Great attention was paid to the prayer of the heart from the beginning of this monastic community. The monastery was closed in 1962, but the last 18 years of its life - namely from 1944 until 1962, were reported to have been particularly rich, intense and even dramatic because the brothers and lay people were linked through prayer. Even after the monastery’s closure the brethren continued to practice the Jesus Prayer of the Heart. Archival documents contain many individual accounts of this and for us it’s very important to rediscover and to proclaim our predecessors’ experiences.

The Saint Paissij experience and teaching on prayer

The Noul-Neamt monastery entered the Soviet period adhering to a rich tradition of individual and common prayer based on Saint Paissius’s rule. The brothers attached preeminent importance to the preservation of this rule.

Let’s begin by discussing Saint Paissij experience of prayer. The rules of Saint Paissij give prayer a central role and to which monks must devote themselves day and

night. Paissij wrote down his experiences on prayer and contemplation and taught them to his brothers:

"In the monastic cell, the brothers must stand in the fear of God. According to the tradition of the Holy Fathers, they must prefer to every ascetic feat the Mental Prayer which realizes in spirit, in the heart, the love of God and the source of virtues, according to the teaching of many spiritual fathers"¹.

The rules of Paissij strongly associate prayer with manual work. The brothers are invited to work persistently and diligently in various trades:

"Since the Brethren are engaged in various trades for the common good, the whole community can safely meet its own needs. It is then not necessary for them to go out into the world, therefore escaping spiritual evil"².

It is important to point out that the starets Paissij did not have disciples in the classical sense of this word, but rather he had confreres and collaborators. The rules of Paissij are addressed to his brothers, the monks, but they can also be useful for all those who want to live according to a rule, a discipline and learn the prayer of the heart. The rules offer people access to a disciplined foundation and to advance in spiritual life.

The works of Saints Paassij dealing with prayer are as follows:

1. The dispute with The Monk Athanasius Moldovean, written around 1757,
2. Six chapters concerning the prayer of the heart (1770) and
3. The basis of the prayer of the soul (1793).

From a chronological point of view, we can see that Saint Paissij was preoccupied with prayer throughout all his life.

Saint Paissij was inspired by the writings on prayer of a large number of Eastern or Patristic saints. He wrote :

"There is a prayer other than that which the lips alone can say : it is secret, invisible, speechless and addressed to God from the depths of the heart. God accepts it as a

¹ Les règles de saint Païssij (Véličkovskij). ANRM (Arhiva Nationala a Republicii Moldova. Translation: The National Archive of the Republic of Moldova) F. 2119 Inv. 2. D. 22. F. 14-14 (v°).

² Ibidem. F. 18.

pure sacrifice, as the aroma of a spiritual fragrance; He rejoices because He sees the intellect turned towards Him as it should be and which joins with Him through prayer"³.

To justify his prayer practice, Saint Païssij was obliged to argue with his opponents who did not accept the inner prayer or the prayer of the heart.

"I am filled with fear and trembling at the thought of mad accusations. But I would also like to ask you this one : do you blaspheme against holy prayer after seeing or hearing someone who has practiced it and who has lost his mind and has been affected by this or that illusion, or has fallen spiritually ill ? Did you consider that the prayer of the heart is the cause ? But no ! The holy prayer of the heart, which is born of the grace of God, purifies man from all passions and makes him strong in the respect of the divine commandments. It makes him invulnerable to enemy attacks and to any illusion"⁴.

Saint Païssij warns that beginning the prayer of the heart without a teacher and without humility can lead to serious consequences . What is father Païssij's advice ?

"If anyone dares to experience the prayer of the heart in an arbitrary manner, without the support of the teachings of the fathers and without the guidance and help of a spiritual father, if such a man is, moreover, arrogant, passionate and weak in his faith, living without being compelled to obey, perhaps even as a solitary hermit (...)-I declare that this one would quickly fall into the traps of the devil, source of all illusions"⁵.

Then, he gives as examples a knife and a sword which can be dangerous for people who are not used to using them. He invites us to think logically, comparing prayer with knives and swords.

"Just as neither the knife nor the sword are guilty of the evil they inflict, so the holy prayer of the intellect, which is the spiritual sword, is free from reproach"⁶.

³ Michel Aubry. Saint Païssius Vélichkovsky. L'âge d'homme. Lausanne, 1992. P. 73.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem. P. 74.

Saint Paissij explains that prayer is a weapon that helps us in our struggle with evil spirits.

The Typicon of the Prayer of Jesus

Joseph of Neamt, a disciple of starets Paissij Velichkovski, wrote in 1810 a typiquon for the prayer of the heart. This typiquon remained unpublished although being used by the brothers of the Noul-Neamt monastery. I rediscovered this manuscript in the monastic Archives, conserved in the National Archives of the Republic of Moldova. The introduction warns that,

" no one should begin the practice of prayer of the heart without the blessing of his spiritual father. If one dares to do so, one can lose one's mind (reason) and his spiritual salvation. This can happen, for the practice of prayer of the heart is not a trifle insignificant. So we shouldn't joke about or start this practice in a trivial way"⁷.

Then he gives practical explanations about how to begin the prayer of the heart.

"In the morning, after the sound of the bell, one wakes up immediately and settles in his usual place before the iconostasis of his monastic cell, with humble thoughts and broken heart ".

The Typiquon contains an arrangement of phrases which need to be pronounced and interspersed with prostrations : to the Lord Jesus Christ, to the Mother of God, to the Holy and life-giving Cross, to the Holy Angels and to all the saints. After that, one says the initial prayers and, immediately after the Our Father, one reads the prayers of the morning, the Psalm 50, the Symbol of faith, the troparies to the Mother of God and to Saint John the Baptist. There is a final blessing and the confession of one's sins. After this, one remembers family, friends and loved ones, one makes fifty prostrations and reads a prayer from one' spiritual father.

⁷ ANRM F. 2119. Inv. 3. D. 35. F. 3 (verso).

Having completed this introduction, one can begin the prayer of the heart, which should be done for a quarter of an hour. During the day, it is recommended to pray 5 times: 1. In the morning ; 2. After the office of Matins ; 3. During the prothesis (preparation of the Holy Liturgy), 4. Before the evening service and 5. After the Office of Compline).

The monks of the Neamt and the Noul-Neamt Monastery practiced this typiquon regularly and left written accounts of the fruit of this prayer. These include inner peace, love for neighbours and especially the love for God which comes from above, surrounds us and gives us the opportunity to grow in our faith.

Of course, this practice of the prayer of the heart and contemplation is recommended for monks and fraternities who live in monasteries with a regime of regular services, but even those who live in the world can rely on this practice. This may seem difficult, but if one organizes to begin one's day according to such a rhythm, one can enjoy good and effective results. Each person will have to find their own way to begin the practice of prayer, the practice of contemplation.

How was it during the Soviet period?

The practice of prayer during the Soviet period was very important. It helped the believers to survive in the face of ungodly and cruel systems. The common worship in the Noul-Neamt monastery continued until 1962, but individual prayer never stopped. The Soviet ideologists sought to replace religious practices and to replace prayer by meditations and secular ceremonies.

Several reports of the Plenipotentiary dealt with the influence of the monastery on the local population. On August 22, 1954, Romenskij reported :

"at the monastery Chițcani (Noul-Neamt), during the feast of the Holy Trinity, which is the patron's feast of the monastery, there were at least three thousand faithful persons. People had come not only from neighbouring towns and villages but also from remote areas of Moldova and even from the regions of Odessa and Ismail"⁸.

⁸ GARF (Gosudarstvenniji arhiv Rossijskoj Federatsii. Translation : The State Archive of the Russian Federation). F. 6991. Inv. 1. D. 1210. F. 210.

In the newspaper "Moldova Socialistă" dated February 14, 1963, an article was devoted to the Orthodox Church. The author spoke about the nuns of the recently closed anachoretic Monastery of Vărzărești. They continued to attend the village church "neglecting scientific progress", that is, in spite of all obstacles and propaganda among the population. The author tried to give an optimistic conclusion by insisting on the decrepitude of the faithful : "previously all the villagers gathered in the Church, for the feast of the Nativity, now there were only a few old women and nuns" ⁹.

The Plenipotentiary, however, indicated in their reports that the monks and nuns had influence on the population. Let's take a few examples: in 1969, Plenipotentiary C. Tanasevskij stressed the "peril" of monks and nuns, who represented a problem to the atheist propaganda :

"attention should be drawn to the abundant remnants of former priests, monks, activists and fanatics who had an important influence on ecclesiastical life in the Republic"¹⁰.

On March 11 of the same year, the CC (The Central Committee) Office of the CP (Communist Party) of the Moldavian SSR decreed:

"writers, composers, painters, artists and directors of cinema are obliged to have in their projects atheist works that reflect the anti-popular state of religion. They must develop the unexpected process that leads to the abandonment of the faith through the influence of technical progress and scientific-atheist propaganda"¹¹.

In the same document, workers involved in the mass media, were instructed to take measures to ensure the development of the scientific-atheist education of youth, as well as special programs aimed at different categories of believers, of course the monks and the nuns¹². At the same time, a series of articles appeared in the local and Central Press

⁹ ANRM. F. 3046. Inv. 1. D. 131. F. 17-18.

¹⁰ PASAT (V.), *Pravoslavie v Moldavii*, Moscou, ROSSPEN, 2011, Vol. III. P. 405.

¹¹ AOSPRM (Arhiva organizațiilor social-politice a Republicii Moldova. Translation : The Archive of socio-political organizations of the Republic Of Moldova). F. 51. Inv. 30. D. 8. F. 16.

¹² Ibidem. F. 17.

ridiculing monasticism and representing it as the epitome of an obscurantist and backward institution.

One should note that the brothers of Noul-Neamț continued their pastoral activity discreetly in the towns and villages of the Republic. Among the best known are the hieromonks Heracles (Flocea), Salathiel (Chiperi), Vadim Tretyacenco and Nicodemus Onu..??

The practice of prayer in Noul-Neamț monastery: The examples of Fathers Iarclie and Selafiil

I would like to present and to speak about two brothers of the Noul-Neamț monastery: Fathers Iarclie Flocea (1893-1964) and Selafiil Cheperi (1908-2005). They can be considered the most significant practitioners of the Paissian tradition. Both fathers spent several years in detention and had experiences of prayer in a gulag. Father Iarclie Flocea lived in a gulag 8 years, Father Selafiil 5 years. After the death of Stalin they returned to Moldova. They practiced and taught the Jesus prayer and both of them died in the village of Chitcani or Noul-Neamț monastery. Father Iarclie received a good education and graduated to the Chisinau and Iasi University and spoke several European languages; Father Selafiil was simple and semiliterate. Father Iarclie was a scholar, writing books and articles and teaching students and lay people. Several articles, books and memoirs in Romanian and Russian make up his literary heritage. The most famous titles are: *The miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary of Hîrbovăț*; *Concerning the dignity of Christianity and the indignity of Christians*; *On the road to Jerusalem* ; *The heart of Orthodoxy* ; *The Church and the Kingdom of God* (in collaboration with Father hieromonk Basil); *The literary Mosaic* and others. The first three books are devoted to Christian morality, religious piety and pilgrimage, and the last two have a dogmatic and philosophical character with the aim of defending the faith¹³. As a result, they were considered by comrade Kozačenko as "the pamphlets of anti-Soviet propaganda".

Father Selafiil specialized in handicraft and in the liturgical service. He celebrated as a hierodeacon when he was accused of anti-Soviet propaganda. We have a several audio

¹³ IRÉNÉE (Tafunia), hèreoine. *Istoriya Svjato-Voznesenskogo Novo-Njameckogo Kitskanskogo monastyrja*. Translation : History of the monastery of the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, Noul-Neamț. Novo-Njameckij monastyr', 2002. P. 182.

records of his discussions and dialogues *or interviews? Who with?* . Both of them had the experience of the Jesus prayer which they clarified in both books or oral teaching.

Father Iraclie Flocea wrote:

“the limits of knowledge that poets and philosophers are trying to penetrate through (thanks of) the help of logics and allegory” can be only understood by the return of Jesus in the heart”.

Without Christ in the heart, Father Iraclie taught that:

” everything is bustle and vanity. Without God all the pride of the world, all the pragmatic purposes of man are ignorant and will fall in the dark”¹⁴.

Father Selafiil Cheperi taught:

“So we always need to do the prayer. It needs to be incessant. Let’s have the prayer of this mind: Forgive me, Lord, that I have done nothing good! And help me not to do bad! And it's not that hard, because it’s free. Nobody ask us to pay for it. It only requires us to have patience and love and to forgive. Let’s not have envy and jealousy. Jealousy turns us away from every good and towards the bad. If during the day you happen to have sorrow say before sleep: Lord, forgive all my brothers, because You are good and they are good, because I am the sinner and I can't bear it. Forgive me and I will try to have patience and forgive them all. And God forgives you if you forgive your neighbours. Otherwise you can’t work spiritually. No man can grow without sorrows”¹⁵.

Another time he answered a brother’s question about unworthy bishops:

“We're not going to answer for the deeds of the bishops, but only for ours deeds. If you fight with them, you will only do more evil, you could lose your peace, you could get on the road of exile and lose your prayer”¹⁶.

Several generations of Moldavian monks found strength and inspiration from the lives of Fathers Iracli and Selafiil. They can be considered the bridge connecting the Noul-

¹⁴ Andrei Vartic <http://www.curentul.net/2009/06/18/iraclie-flocea-un-mare-duhovnic-al-basarabiei-interbelice-andrei-vartic/>

¹⁵ <http://www.ortodoxia.md/2013/04/printele-selafiil-cel-orb-liart-m-doamne-c-n-am-fcut-nimic-bunr/>

¹⁶ <http://ortodoxiesiviata.blogspot.com/2008/06/printele-selafiil-printele-dragostei.html>

Neamt monastery brotherhood pre-1962 and post the revival. Archimandrite Barlaam (Chirița) in his memoirs calls Father Iraclii "one of the illustrious apostles of the Moldovian people". The pastoral and missionary activity of Father Heraclios was of paramount importance for the Moldovan Church in the Soviet period. His steadfastness in trial remains an example for all¹⁷. The Moldavian writer, hieromonk Savatie Bastovoi, underlines that

“The starets Selafil was a treasure, a holy and priceless storehouse for the brothers of the Noul-Neamt monastery, composed initially only of young monks. Through the advice and example of his life, and accompanied by a few elderly people who returned after the communist persecution, Father Selafil restored continuity in Moldavian monasticism after the rupture of thirty years”¹⁸.

Conclusion

The teaching of Saint Paissius and his successors about prayer continues today to be a powerful reality. Everybody can find here a source of inspiration and contemplation, can learn about the prayer of heart and begin to experience it. Ultimately, prayer and worship remain the firm roots of Moldavian Orthodoxy, enriched with our historic and more recent experiences and they continue to hold enormous importance for believers.

Panteleimon Pavlinciu

¹⁷ Andrei Vartic. Ibidem.

¹⁸ Hieromonk Savatie Bastovoi <https://www.crestinortodox.ro/parinti/parintele-selafil-la-noul-neamt-141233.html>