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FREE WILL AND OBEDIENCE
IN THE PROCESS OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION
OF THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN

Abstract of the author's dissertation
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This dissertation of 236 pages, excluding the appendix, consists of a foreward, an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The list of references comprises of 223 titles, 79 of which are primary, 83 in Bulgarian and Russian and 61 in English and Greek. The number of footnotes used amounts to 891. At the end follow the list of self-assessed contributions of the study and a list of the three publications of the author, related to the topic of the dissertation, required to be submitted for awarding of the degree. The dissertation has one appendix, consisting of selected passages of holy fathers on topics of interest to this study.

INTRODUCTION

Mankind awaits the salvation from its sins, its new union with and growth in God ever since its original sin, with it made ill use of his free will in its disobedience to God. If the First Adam exercised disobedience, and with this he brought death in the world, then the Second and Last Adam, our Incarnated Lord Jesus Christ, with His obedience thrust wide open the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven for all men who with their free will are now able to enter through them, showing a fervent desire for perfection and obedience. They are being offered the Church as an institution for spiritual advancement and care. In the Church they pass through the various stages of development to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). All aforementioned in the context of the hurried age of a secular society, in which men today live, which does not acknowledge, nor is aware of the orthodox tradition, shows the importance of the raised scientific questions which follow below, and is the reason behind the proposed topic.

This dissertation has as its object the spiritual life and direction of the orthodox Christian. Its subject is the obedience of this Christian as an internal principle of conduct and attitude toward God, his spiritual father, and his neighbor. The purpose of this scientific study is to investigate and ascertain the place and role of the free will of man and his obedience for spiritual salvation and eternal life in the various stages of his spiritual life and direction.

The research objectives are as follows: 1. To investigate the category of free will in the context of the orthodox Christian cosmology and anthropology; 2. To investigate and clarify the role of man's free will in his salvation and its place in his spiritual journey; 3. To formulate and study the stages of the process of spiritual direction of the orthodox Christian. 4. To study the ill consequences of disobedience; 5. To study obedience as an internal behavioral principle of the orthodox Christian and a hermeneutic key for understanding the dynamics of his advancement in his spiritual labors.

The dissertation has two hypotheses. Firstly, free will, inherent to the human being which is endowed with it by God, makes possible his spiritual struggle and fulfils its purpose when it is channelled into obedience. Secondly, obedience is required for success in any of the stages of the spiritual life in the Church.

The methodology used in this study follows the tradition of theological study of the church and the holy fathers. The methods of comparative research, of analysis and synthess, among others, are utilized in the process of working with the texts of the Sacred Scripture, of the Holy Fathers and of contemporary theology scholars. Leading in this regard the God's revelation and truth, laid bare in the used sources and studies, whereby the efforts put are focused on their best and clearest exposition in the context of the studied questions. To this purpose are also used methods such as the exegetical method, as well as other logical and theological methods such as: the inductive, the deductive, the theologically systematic method, and the comparative method, among others.

It is noteworthy that the dissertation topic and the subject it studies – obedience in the spiritual path and direction of the Christian – are not studied comprehensively in theology. In Bulgaria in the monographs of Fr. Georgy Shavelsky, Fr. Christo Dimitrov and others, the obedience for salvation is not granted the requisite attention, if it ever is mentioned.

In Bulgaria the various questions relating to freedom are investigated primarily in the ethical discourse. Such scholars are Gancho Pashev, archimandrite Euthimius Sapundzhiev, and to a minor extend Ivan Panchovski (this discourse can be as a working label referred to as the

must-disource). So free will is approached as a matter of morals, and not of the ontological need of man of a connection with God for the fulfilment of the human person and his salvation and likeness to God through the unification of the will with God, the spiritual father and the neighbor. To some extent an exception are the contemporary works of Sv. Tutekov, M. Stoyadinov, St. Chilikov and others. The two categories, free will and obedience, occupy a central position in the texts and thought of the holy fathers throughout the centuries and comprise all that is requisite for the fulfilment of the purpose and meaning of man on earth, his rising up to heaven and his journey to this end.

Main sources of the teaching of obedience and free will in the so sketched theological disource include: the Sacred Scripture of the Old and New Testament, some early Christian writings such as the Didache and the Epistles of St. Ignatios of Antioch, the writings of the Capadocian fathers, leading figures such as St. Maximos the Confessor, St. John Damascene, St. Symeon the New Theologian among other philocalic fathers. With the spiritual uptake of Mt. Athos in the past century a number of spiritual athletes have recovered and reincarnated the ideal of spiritual guidance and obedience in their lives, while their spiritual offspring store, circulate and make their heritage available to everyone with an open heart. Among these spiritual laborers are St. Joseph the Hesychast, St. Ephrem of Katunakia, St. Sophrony of Essex, archimandrite Aimilianos of Simonopetra, and others. The doctrine of obedience is expounded in a monastic setting, but it has a wide application beyond the cenobitic environment, according to the evidence provided by the aforementioned elders.

Works of Bulgarian theological scholars, relating to the investigated topic, are not few. It suffices to mention Fr. Georgy Shavelsky's *Orthodox Pastoral Care*, in its treatment of freedom in spiritual direction, and Fr. Christo Dimitrov's *Pastoral Theology* with its focus on individual spiritual care, as well as his three articles on *Confession and Pastoral Care* with their accent on the sacrament of confession, sin as disobedience, and the significance of the power of the will for change. Other important titles by Gancho Pashev, archimandrite Seraphim Alexiev, Ivan Panchovski, Svilen Tutekov and Ivo Yanev serve as a great introduction to the topic and study some of its aspects. This dissertation also makes use of the work of other eminent scholars such as archimandrite Maximos Conostas, archimandrite Gabriel Bunge, archimandrite Peter Vryzas, Susanne Hausammann, and metropolitan Basilios Kodseie among others.

This dissertation submitted in Bulgarian has 236 pages. It consists of a foreward, an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The list of references amounts to 223 titles, 79 of which are primary, 83 in Bulgarian and Russian and 61 in English and Greek. The number of footnotes is 891. At the end follow the list of self-assessed contributions of the study and a list of the three publications of the author, related to the topic of the dissertation, required to be submitted for awarding of the degree. The dissertation has one appendix of 11 pages, consisting of selected passages of holy fathers on topics of interest to this study

EXPOSITION

The introduction includes a brief on the significance of the studied research question, the hypotheses, object, subject, purpose and objectives of the dissertation. A review of relevant literature is offered, divided in two parts: home and foreign literature on the subjects of free will and obedience.

I. FREE WILL FOR OBEDIENCE

1. Orthodox Christian Cosmology and Anthropology

1.1. God's Creation

God created everything and laid it before man, but man sinned and did not offer repentance. Created nature stands and awaits this repentance of his because he was intended to lead created nature to God. To this purpose man until today puts his all power, mind and will to live according to God, to limit everything which distracts him from Him, and to live only according to Him in obedience and life for the Truth.

The world as a creation of God is wrought ordered, and everything in it has its own place in this order, including the spiritual life of man in the Church where everything is done orderly (1 Cor. 14:26) and in accordance with the principle of the order, endowed by God in the principles of the universe, in agreement and obedience to the neighbor and to the highest order towards the spiritual father because as the role of the father of flesh is invaluable to the child, so also is the role of the spiritual father to the orthodox Christian.

1.2. Cosmology

In the beginning God created man and the universe. Creation has its own peculiar characteristics weaved into it, but it is not created unsubdued or self-standing, but is oriented towards man. The latter is called to unite in one all difference, a purpose to which he is called by His Creator. The task of man is to gather together everything into one, into one love.

With his knowledge, equal to the angels, of the principles of the creation, man would make the whole creation single, unified, unseparated by him into known and unknown, in the teaching of St. Maximos the Confessor. However man fell, and thus until the Incarnation of Christ there existed no other hope for him or for the world. Only with Christ's Resurrection man can see what the universe truly is, what is the world, knowledge, available for all free men with good attitude of their will – filled with God, with his light, and glorifying him.

The world is created so as to become whole, unseparated and undivided, which is accomplished thanks to Christ's work in this world. The Word of God inscribed Himself in its Creation, as a word that has been spoken, typed into text, and thus He became legible for men – in and through what is created by him. The hidden meaning of all is Jesus Christ, apparent to men in and through the material forms of the natural world, as writes archimandrite Maximos Constas. Man is called to do what is in his own power, and namely, he himself, one another and his whole life – to dedicate to Christ, our Lord.

1.3. Anthropology

Man is a creature of communion with everything which is inherent in him: that is to say, love, compassion, and care for the fellow being, that which was prescribed by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Man is created also as a free-willed being which always accepts and understands only what

he wants to accept and understand, being in this manner guided by his own impulses. God gave him a creative power to realize what he wants to conceive.

His natural powers man can exercise for good, with good will, in accordance with God's commandment, or towards ill use, in violation of God's commandment. God created him in His Own image and likeness, whereby He gave him the ability to move in closer proximity to Him through the natural use of his powers. When man sinned however and turned away from God in the violation of His commandments, God condescended, and, which is awesome, acquired man in a manner more wondrous and suited to God than the first, and namely, with Christ's incarnation and work on earth, and the given opportunity to imitate Him in his Deed. Therefore, man is called to renounce his own will, which constitutes the purpose of the life of the orthodox Christian and a mechanism for his spiritual guidance in collaboration with the spiritual pastors and the Church as an institute for spiritual advancement. And this is something remarkable: man is called to acquire the same life, which God possesses, to be equal to Him in everything (except in essence). Clearly, in Creation God puts in man the strength to keep all commandments which he received; this is in his nature and through this he fulfils his calling on earth because man is able to accept, in the limits which he can, all divine beauty, as equal in honor to the Father in the free gift of grace.

2. Free Will

2.1. Free Will for Salvation

God who is a sovereign ruler of the universe, from the excess of his compassion to man, allowed something to exist which is entirely and only under man's authority. This is free choice (προαίρεσις), something which cannot be enslaved, which is self-ruling (αὐτεξούσιον), due to the freedom of the human mind (ἐν τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ τῆς διανοίας), in the words of St. Gregory of Nyssa. The Greek word αὐτεξούσιον relates to the self-ruling of man, the use of his free will; the power of his inclination (βούλησις) points to the starting moment of the commencing activity through the desiring and exercising of the will. Βούλησις demonstrates the intent of a free acting human person, while βουλομαι relates mainly to the planning and thought which precedes action.

Man is created by God and is dependent on Him, as God is the only one with true being, but he remains independent in its will and freedom for action. He is made in the image of God with the ability and potential to exercise his free choice and to move in closer proximity to God, to liken himself to God, from the image to ascend to His likeness by building his own destiny and future. In order for man to be able to find his own authentic God-given freedom, he runs to God, subjects himself to His will and becomes His servant. Being obedient to God is affirmation of one's freedom, while His servitude is an entrance into freedom, such as God Himself possesses it, in the words of G. Mandzaridis, summarizing the teaching of the Holy Fathers on this subject. That man who is truly reasonable and rational has only one care – to be obedient to and dear to God, towards which goal he exclusively guides his soul, so as to be dear to God. And up until today there is no change in the orthodox teaching that the elder unifies his disciple to God. The spiritual father has an assisting role in the unification of man's will with Gods. Examples for the successful end of this endeavour can be found in the lives of all saints.

2.2. Likeness of the Image

God created man in his superfluous love. Being all-good, He does not exercise His goodness partially, giving man only a part of his goodness, and thus robbing him of his participation in the remaining part because the perfect form of His goodness is in that he at the same time moves the

human being from inexistence into being, and does not preclude his being from any good gift, as writes St. Gregory of Nyssa. Only man acquired being as a model of that true Light in contemplation of which he becomes what he is. Man is made in God's image and likeness, which is the reason why he is free, given with this as his task the imitation of God in virtue, as far as this is possible for him. The end and limit of the maturing into God and the perfection of the virtuous life is the likeness of the Divine.

In the Fall man lost his graceful state of being to a certain extent like God and his Goodness, but not his capacity to become and come closer to God in imitation of Him, to grow from the image into His likeness, as his assignment on earth, albeit heavy-laden by sin. Unsuccessful to perfectly fulfil the requisite until the Coming of Christ on Earth, man is called to imitate His deeds, and follow His example.

Man with his free will adds the likeness to the image of God, acquiring in this way God himself. He does everything voluntarily, free of coercion, and this is significant because virtue is itself when it is unforced, and he who by an established habit of behavior takes part in virtue, without a doubt has a part in God, who is the essence of virtue, as writes St. Maximos the Confessor. Thus the image conforms to the likeness.

2.3. Genesis and Essence of what is Evil

In the section is brought forward the orthodox teaching of what happens when the free will of man inclines in a different direction than the one that is natural. In the tradition of the fathers evil has no being of its own, it does not possess an unchangeable nature because such a nature is inherent only to God. Evil is nothing material, it has no hypostasis, essence, independence; it is more close to being 'nothing', than anything else. Its origin lies only in the will of him who does it. Evil is nothing different than an absence of love in the same manner that darkness is an absence of light, in the eminent definition of St. John of Damascus. Death has no dominion or place of habitat that she is entitled to.

Therefore, evil mixes with what is good. What is evil would have no success if it did not avail itself of the beautiful. What is good, on the other hand, is simple and uncomplicated in nature, alien to any ambiguity and mixing with that which is contrary to it. Evil is entirely a fruit of man's actions. Denying his own will and doing what is pleasing to God, man denies what is evil and cancels its existence. This is the future of man because if God will be everything in all that exists (and He is, was and is to be), clearly evil in the future will not be among the things that exists. In the end, man can do nothing without Christ because through Him is possible the salvation of the human soul and all that is good. He who has mortified his inclination to sin has organically joined himself to the body of Christ, participating in His death, and he who has resurrected his inclination to do good, also participates in Christ's Resurrection, as per St. Maximos' own witness. Given this opportunity, man step by step takes back his primal complete freedom. If he chooses what is good, he uses his free will in other to support his freedom, but if he chooses what is evil, he uses it to destroy the authentic freedom, as explains St. Gregory of Nyssa.

2.4. Unification of the Will with God

Created beings as a matter of necessity move towards God as their own blessed eternal being, in the famous phrase of St. Maximos the Confessor. That is why if only man were to direct his whole heart, his whole soul, his whole mind, his whole strength, he would achieve that which is good. Which is what everyone is doing: they acquire a submission of their spirit, when they have instead of Christ

their own spiritual father, guiding them in every step of the way, they have agreement with him in one and the same will on all matters. Mindless are they who strive to acquire the Kingdom of Heaven and inherit eternal life without ceasing to live by their own desires and ceasing to follow them. A pure mind and a spiritual success require as a first step the denial of the arbitrariness of the will.

God's will is all to be one. When man unifies his mind and will to God's, he becomes capable of receiving God's activity and to become holy – separated from everything else, belonging only to God. In Christ everything is to gather, every will and desire. Man with the power of his own free self-determination, received by the Holy Spirit, teaches himself this freedom, he enlarges it and thinks it over, because without it and the free will, the human person is not authentic, as is the opinion of metr. Kallistos of Diokleia. This freedom man is called to join to the Divine freedom in order to acquire the true freedom of the true existence in God.

The unification of the will occurs in the denial of the own free will. Self-control comprises not of abstaining of unwise food consumption, leading to the damaging of the body, against which wrote the Apostle, but of perfect disassociation of one's own will, as writes St. Basil the Great. The inverted mirror is a metaphor which synthesises the sketched questions of the free will and the unification of the human being: man's mirror in the world gives the reflection not of God, but of what is visible and fallen. However it was supposed to bear only the resemblance and stamp of God, if it was to have His will done on earth.

2.5. Christology

Our Lord Jesus Christ as a Second and Last Adam represents mankind, where He endured for it humiliation, suffering and death. The Godman fulfilled the Law and took upon Himself the requisite payment for sin not as a separate or random individual from among men, but as their Head, Who fills everything in all and in Whom all are united and participate in his perfection and blessedness. As the limits were reached of the ability of man to change towards and for good, the Sun of Righteousness rose above this heavy winter and brought forward the spring of the Spirit which melts the ice and with the rise of its sun rays, melts all that is beneath it, writes St. Basil the Great. Man sinned and brought the sin of his betrayal of God to the utmost limit, but God took on flesh and destroyed this death, in order to give to the man who believes in Him eternal life. As the disobedience of Adam and therefore the overturning of his free will into evil led to death, so the obedience of Christ and his unswerving from what is good, brought life. Man's being is ontologically open, and called to join in the new manner of existence in Christ, and to advance dynamically in Him as an organic member of the body of the church, in the word of Svilen Tutekov.

As writes Fr. Dimitru Staniloae, in Christ the action and the reaction coincide with the divine center, from which exudes His divine work, whereby as a result his own human essence is not outside of God, but is concentrated entirely upon God. In this line of thought, the acquisition of Christ by the faithful is inseparably treated as part of and part of the dynamics of the receiving of the Sacrament and the Sacraments of the Church, as well as of the institute of spiritual direction in the teaching of the church. Christ once and for all brought close to Himself the deathly essence of the flesh, which He received through untainted virginity and always sanctifies the common dough of this nature, feeding His Body, the Church, in the person of those who are unified with him in the communion of the Sacrament, in the witness of St. Gregory of Nyssa. And this communion occurs only through the free approachment and will of man. The maxima holds that all that is required is one's free will, the inclination of one's will to stay true to Christ, which is in every believer, helping him in the labors,

freeing him from the passions and recovering his ability to communicate spiritually and achieve unification with God, through the help and prayers of his spiritual father.

3. Obedience

3.1. Obedience for Freedom

Man's freedom was received as a free gift from God with the potential to return back to Him, bringing with it the human person. Commandments are a way, through which the believer conforms his created will and freedom to the uncreated will and freedom of God and this process is lived in the Church through obedience to the spiritual father. This obedience is hidden in the secret of the Holy Trinity and is revealed to man with the Incarnation of Christ who gives the ultimate example in obedience – obedience unto death. Free man cannot express his internal reality and uniqueness without inclining his will towards that which is good, which in its part has its expression in the attitude of obedience of the person who loves. Obedience is given freely as a token of love. It does not violate or belittle in any manner love... which gathers in one those who are separate and which can create among many, among all indeed, an identical inclination of the will, free of any controversy, as clarifies St. Maximos the Confessor.

Through obedience to the spiritual father in the context of freedom and this particular objective – freeing oneself from the arbitrary and the sinful, man lives his life in unceasing repentance. The context of freedom requires the role of the spiritual director to be not in subjugating the person of the disciple or student and in putting limits to his freedom, but in assisting him in his spiritual advancement through spiritual direction, partly expressed in guidance and teaching, for entrance into life eternal.

With obedience to the faith man purifies himself from sin, denies it, and renews the smooth beauty of his nature. In the center stands one man – the spiritual father. On the one side is the obedience to God, and on the other – the man, through whom the obedience to God can be realized. Man cannot do without a teacher.

Whoever refuses to take part in the work of obedience, no matter how many labors he undertakes, is liable to fall. Many have fallen after many spiritual labors because they trusted in their work, and did not obey the commandment: ask your father, and he will teach you. As relates St. John the Dwarf, the neighbour is the foundation which one must win because on him depend all the commandments of Christ. In the teaching of St. Basil the Great on communication with the fellow man which is natural, all men can live together, so long as man keeps before his eyes the objective of the task which is given to him, and the will of the one who gave it, whereby directing his efforts to its attainment. Man is to keep and always keep in his mind the will of him, who sent him on obedience. In the end, the obedient receives the crown of the measure of the love of God... always desiring strongly with his soul, beyond its abilities, to reach the will of God, having his Glory as its goal and desire. At the same time the spiritual father is responsible for the soul and mistakes of the faithful, and as such keeps watch over his soul (Heb. 13:17). The one under spiritual care is obedient and obeys, but the spiritual father is the one held responsible for the outcome.

3.2. The Need for Obedience. Prerequisites

Man was redeemed at the cross by Christ and the reason for him to live is hidden precisely in the light of Christ's work. He gave his life for man, therefore man also has to give his life, if he is to live, for Him, in the words of the Apostle (2 Cor. 5:15). As mankind was saved, this one thing remained in the fabric of the human being: obedience. God is eternal life, and man approaches to that

which is sweet, beautiful, he looks for it, and being convinced in the faith, he keeps the commandments. St. Joseph the Hesychast in this context teaches that obedience in spiritual life is the practical expression of love.

Man not only listens to his neighbour and believes in God, but is also obedient to the person who delivers him from hardship and death, to the person who baptised him – as an image of the spiritual father, confessor and director who guides the men and women in his parish. In such a way the faithful people of God, passing through the Red Sea, does not look at Moses merely as a person holding the staff of virtue, but in addition to this trust in God, and as is written in the Holy Scripture, they are obedient to His servant Moses. This holds until today: the faithful are obedient to their spiritual father and priest.

The ability to comprehend the Holy Scripture on the side of man depends on their spiritual obedience which is a sacrament of the church in the opinion of St. Sophrony of Essex. The principle of existence of the things created by the One Creator is that they incline towards Him as their eternal end and rest. For this reason the blessed Augustine of Hippo focuses on the keeping of one mind in one heart and soul for those who struggle for the Kingdom of Heaven because God's will is that all become one. Our Lord Jesus Christ par excellence unites the human person in one, freeing him from the influence of passions. He unites the earth and heaven by showing that the nature of sensible things is single and tends toward itself. God unites that which is sensitive and that which is on the level of the mind, uniting the Created and the Uncreated nature.

Obedience is this requisite principle and mechanism through which the free man, using his free will, unites himself to Christ. The whole man is called to join his whole life to Christ, as writes G. Mandzaridis. St. Symeon the New Theologian appeals to men to look with a sincere heart for a spiritual father, to accept his words in their hearts, and to act in accordance with them. In the epistles of St. Paul, as well as of St. Ignatios of Antioch, Tertulian and a number of saints' lives and other texts of the holy fathers the role of the spiritual father as a place of God can be established. The elder has a hermeneutical function for the believer, as he informs and guides the one who follows after him.

True desire of the Holy Spirit consists of man being fully concentrated upon God in his whole being. Other prerequisites include the keeping of attention and prayer. The biggest obstacle is self-confidence and faith in one's own works which lead to contradicting the spiritual father. In such cases the spiritual director ceases to open his soul to the disciple or to the believer, and thus the thin thread upon which threads the pure tradition may tear.

3.3. Obedience to the Spiritual Father

Monasticism can be defined as a relationship with one person. The elder or abbot becomes the visible God for the disciple and their connection is inviolable. The spiritual father is the image of Christ for the faithful since the early Christian times. They gather around him and look to him, they are obedient to him, as to a teacher who will bring them to God. The elder is the place where the disciple finds God. However obedience is given not only to the monks who give the vow of obedience.

Since all men are called by God for a heavenly marriage and communion, for the blessedness of the Kingdom, the spiritual principles from which the monks draw their rules for living are also applicable for every man, layman or not, in the teaching of elder Aimilianos of Simonopetra. The teaching of God is not only for the apostles to follow. Christ truly ordained that God's commandments hold true for all, and does not distinguish between laymen and monks. A Christian man may not have given a vow of obedience, but he is called to a spiritual obedience in reasonableness and freedom.

In the twentieth century a remarkable teacher of obedience is the Athosite elder (today St.) Ephrem of Katunakia, one of the elders who helped revive the spiritual life on Mount Athos together with his teacher St. Joseph the Hesychast and their brotherhood. He puts obedience to the spiritual father on par with the Sacrament of Confession, even for the laymen. When they edited his biography, the brotherhood remarked that this holds so far as laymen are not required to practice blind obedience, in difference to the monks. However there exist no two types of obedience, but scholars such as G. Mandzaridis explain that it is more accurate to talk about two methodologies and intensities in the practice of obedience. It is a law which cannot be ignored by anybody.

Wherever spiritual life flourished, there was a single person at the center, in the famous phrase of elder Aimilianos of Simonopetra. Obedience is a path to the true life which is seen not only from personal experience but also from the fact that disobedience led to death. In God is all that is good. Doing good and living in virtue, man lives in God. The spiritual father is instead of Christ for his spiritual children who put themselves in the hands of the spiritual director but in fact put themselves in the hands of Christ. This practical rule holds since the time of St. Clement of Rome, St. Ignatios of Antioch and through St. Benedict of Nursia. It is not something new, as writes I. Hausherr. In fact, it is deeply etched in the human being. The spiritual father is put as such by divine choice, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, he is put forwards as a teacher by God Himself, he is taught by Him, and is led by the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Christian teachers throughout the ages and the philokalic fathers teach that the disciple must believe that only what his or her elder says is the will of God.

In a monastic setting, is a sin to decide to do something of oneself internally, whatever it is, prior to and excluding external council. For a layman this can lead to a mistake, when it concerns important decisions. Every choice which is self-willed is external to the pious, writes St. Basil the Great. The monk is not allowed to have a private choice by the virtue of his own will because this has ill-effects and this principle holds for every choice he makes, whether he or she likes this or not. A decision conditioned fully on the private self-will of the individual is not allowed, whatever it may be. It is useful to apply this principle also beyond the discourse of monasticism, for example to the laymen, when the questions raised have bearing on their spiritual path.

The purpose of spiritual direction is for the disciple (or the faithful layman) to be able to live alone, without the spiritual father. The true objective of spiritual obedience is the advancement in the keeping of the commandments of God. When man begins to be like Christ in the internal motions of his heart, in his ways of thought and in his reaction to things that happen around him on earth, he will be like Him also in His divinity. Having likened himself to and known Christ, he will be truly free.

3.4. Contradiction and Disobedience

The spiritual father in the pastoral tradition of the Church is the life and death of his spiritual child, where he deserves utmost respect and even fear, similar to the fear of God. Impartiality to his personality can lead to spiritual death for the soul. Obedience is life, disobedience is death, as teaches St. Theodore the Stoudite.

St. Basil the Great speaks sternly on the sin of contradiction. When there is disagreement, rancor or struggle against the spiritual father, the work of the latter is significantly complicated up to the point of inability for it to be performed. The word of the spiritual father is a word sacred, secret, and his relationship with his child are sacred. One cannot contradict one's spiritual father, else he will not be of use as a spiritual director. At the same time the obedient person is free, as free is the layman, needing a spiritual counsel and care. Nobody forces the Christian to follow after his elder. As man's free will is inviolable, the spiritual father leads his child with the givens of the mind of the latter.

Unity with the neighbour, being of one soul, is of great importance for the internal life in the monastery or community, while the different take at the tradition of the fathers, the prayer, varying ideas and concepts violate peace and agreement in it, and as a result also the unity of the Church and the Body of Christ. Whoever defends his views is a man who introduces discord and is far from God. Man is called to have nothing of his own. St. Gregory the Great writes in this regard that when man humbly gives way to the voice of his fellow man, he conquers himself in his heart.

For spiritual direction the arrogance of the spiritual child amounts to a problem and a separating wall. The danger for the spiritual life is real. The slippery slope of disobedience leads to disbelief and disdain for what is spiritual, to a spiritual and eternal death. When he who is being led sins, the connection he has with his father is damaged. For this reason, the spiritual struggle is precisely a struggle for obedience. As writes the abbot of the Vatopaidi monastery on Mt. Athos archimandrite Ephraim, through obedience man is capable to succeed, in the example of his predecessors, to acquire Godly gifts, sanctification and deification. Through the instrument of obedience, a man is able to gain control over and conquer all temptations.

3.5. Selected Aspects of Obedience

In this section are investigated selected further questions, relating to obedience. The spiritual father is the first mover, and second follow the response of the child. The spiritual father lays down his life for the life of the child in the example of the Good Shepherd. Obedience however is directed also towards the neighbor. How fearsome is if one takes easily the offense of one's brother if this offense was possible to be mitigated with actions, writes St. Basil the Great. No matter how good an argument a person has for their actions, there may yet be another manner of behavior which can reach the same or similar result, and at the same time not offend. The practical expression of one's love towards God, the spiritual father and the neighbor is the keeping of God's commandments. Fulfilling in deeds the commandments which God ordained as a principle for the things and beings in the world and their relationships, man receives an immaterial prize.

II. GENESIS AND CONFIRMATION OF THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN

1. The Process of Spiritual Struggle and Direction

1.1. Pastoral Care by the Spiritual Father

From the cradle to the grave the Christian in the Church is guided and cared for by his or her parish priest. Genesis and conception are first steps and stages for the orthodox Christian in the Church. After receiving Holy Baptism, the new Christian makes use of the spiritual care not only through receiving counsel, regularly attending the public worship, reading Christian literature and praying by the prayer books, but also of the Sacraments of the Church: Confession, Penitence, Communion. Obedience here is what is able to transport man without difficulties and easily to the blessed future of life in Christ. Not unlike the earth which is not enriched and watered, the faithful would hardly be able to accomplish the desire of their hearts if they do not have somebody who directs them, cares for them, and whom they follow.

1.2. Selected Stages in the Process of Spiritual Direction

The stages through which man passes can be described as follows: firstly, man has a beneficial internal attitude of the soul; secondly, he makes a definite decision to turn his whole being, all the power of his will, towards the chosen path; thirdly; he realized in actions this disposition and decision – to deny oneself for the struggle of the spiritual life, as did all saints of the church.

In the teaching confirmed by St. Maximos the Confessor one can find the following categorization of the spiritual path: practical struggles, contemplation, vision of God or in his words, practical philosophy, natural contemplation and theology. In this sequence the Christian passes through the life of spiritual advancement and direction, and the spiritual father has a notable influence on this process and progress in what is spiritual. The faithful are to freely choose to follow the path of the Gospel, passing through the stages of spiritual progress. Through the next stages passes he, who has labored to make his heart pure, who knows not only the internal principles (logoi) of what is created by God, but also after passing through the varying stages, to a certain extent is able to see God Himself, which is the perfect ending of all good deeds.

Against the virtues can be placed the following types of behavior and attitudes: a complete renouncing of doing what is evil, a complete removal of the agreement of the mind with any evil thought, a complete immobility of the desire with respect to the passions, complete purification of even the faintest thought conceptions. These have made the ruling power of the soul through knowledge and contemplation a clean and transparent mirror for God. The complete and sincere obedience towards God is the mechanism for advancing through these different stages in the spiritual experience. The Holy Spirit brings cleansing to those who through fear, piety and knowledge, have become worthy for the purity of virtue.

1.3. The Unfolding of the Process of Spiritual Direction in the Life of the Faithful and Their Response

The Capadocian fathers distinguish three dispositions of those who are obedient: the denial of evil due to fear of punishment, fulfilling what is demanded as a matter of self-interest, and doing good for the love of it which makes men sons of God. At Baptism man received all the grace of sonship, fully present in potential, but present in actuality only at the end of the road. At that point it turns as a matter of freedom the whole free choice of he who has been born in such a way that it corresponds to God who is giving birth to him. This holds because after the Christian receives grace freely as a matter of gift, he is expected to use for good the gifts and talents, invested in him by God.

Those who are on the path of practical philosophy, who banish their senses and are beyond the flesh and the world, show the progress from practice to contemplation by denying the activities linked to the senses, as writes St. Maximos. The second stage, that of progress, St. Maximos sees in the Liturgy as an image of the spiritual life in the closing of the gates after the Great Entrance, the entrance of the saints, the kiss of peace and the Credo which correspond in his exegesis to the progress of the faithful from simple faith to doctrine and introduction, union and likeness to the divine in the doctrines. The third stage, that of those approaching perfection in their spiritual path, which is given to the enlightened, shows the progress from natural contemplation towards simple conceiving of the things that can be understood by the mind. Here the enlightened person begins to be obedient from love, naturally, to understand in a spiritual way the commandments and to keep them without violence. The successful, who have passed through the process of spiritual direction, having put their free will in God's desire, reach contemplation and theology.

2. Genesis

2.1. Acquisition through Word

Salvation begins with the movement of the word as a type of witness or homiletic preaching. The mechanism for approaching God is perfect obedience to the measure of a wordless state of purity which is reached when God's will is received in the soul through recourse to the truth and inviting it to stay in the home where man dwells. The spiritual child is born from the word of teaching of his

spiritual father. If the movement of the word of God is first, then second necessarily is the response of the person towards whom it is directed. The word of the spiritual father reveals the virtues before the Christian who is being taught, and for whom they did not previously exist. With the response of acceptance of God's words, are also accepted these virtues and the pious behavior which opens the path of salvation to the faithful. In order to reach to a free response of obedience and acceptance of the authority of the Church, a specific disposition of man's soul is required.,

2.2. Disposition of the Orthodox Christian

The new Christian who passes through this first birth receives grace in potential, entirely based on his faith, where he often may happen to sin anew which also shows that his freedom remains inviolable and in his own hands because the Spirit does not give a disposition of the will without the latter's desire, but gives it according to the measure of the desire of the will. The new Christian who passes through this first spiritual birth receives a grace given in potential, on the basis of his faith, whereby he can happen to sin anew which also shows that his freedom is not violated and is left in his own hands because the Spirit does not give an inclination of the will without the express desire of the same, but according to the measure of the desire of the will, He transfigures it and deifies it. The one thing necessary is missing with man, the unchanging desire to submit his whole being in the disposition of it will to the Spirit because if he prepares the disposition of his will, as St. Maximos the Confessor writes, then through the ascetic struggle he will purify his conscience and the Life-Giving Spirit will make active in him the unchanging perfection of the good through knowledge acquired by experience. All that is necessary is faith.

Man who is ever burdened by his own conception of the world, things, people, sins – which blacken his mind and deliver neuroses and fears, directly impeding his communication with his neighbor, who always has something to say and puts himself above all others, he must make his step towards God with faith unto self-denial. A prerequisite for a positive answer to the word is the solitude of the mind, the seeking of God only. At the same time in the faithful man is activated the free willing of what is good, so that he can withstand this immediate act of turning toward God. Before the soul is to trust its heart to God freely, it has sensed His sweetness. That is why so significant for the process of spiritual direction of the orthodox Christian, that one can say that without it is very difficult to succeed, is the free disposition, seeking what is good, beautiful and true.

2.3. Christian Enlightenment

Enlightenment in the holy orthodox faith occurs through the participation in three church Sacraments: Baptism, Anointment and Communion. He who approaches Holy Baptism must put to death in the water all the phalanx of evil – greediness, unchecked desires, covetous thoughts, the passion of conceit and arrogance, wild impulses, rage, anger, malice, envy and all similar to them, as writes St. Gregory of Nyssa. Baptism requires willing sacrifice of the self. Firm resolve is necessary when one puts behind oneself the deeds of dishonesty in the Sacrament which is unquestionably needed. Baptism is an ontological event in the life of the human person, it recreates and completes its created being.

The Sacrament of the Holy Anointing which is performed immediately following the Baptism, gives to and fill the baptised with the Holy Spirit who seals the New Testament in his heart, anoints him with Christ's sweet incense which the Christian is asked to spread to the whole world, to perfect and confirm in himself the powers, accepted in baptism, to struggle against the evil one and to proclaim the Gospel, as teaches Fr. Blagoy Chiflyanov. However, man has inherited the heritage

of the flesh and is such is weakened against sin because he is not perfect of and in himself. Ignoring the commandments after Baptism, the Christian can continue to have the Holy Spirit within himself, but as an inactive and immobile power until the penitence and confession of the Christian. The Enlightenment completes the process of acceptance of a new Christian in the church. When he or she is a baby, for him vouch and guarantee the parents and his godfather, they bring him to church for communion at every liturgy. So it would apply for them what applies for the grown person: the free movement of the will of every baptised Christian is to come closer and closer to the Church and God through a participation in the Divine services and Sacraments.

2.4. Repentance and Confession

Repentance is the exact one thing that God requires from man: the change of mind because it is through the mind that man walks forward. Repentance, together with humility, which goes hand in hand with it, is strong enough to present the human person before the face of God, needing nothing else, and to intercede for him. Before the first confession all enemy powers lead a serious struggle against the one man, who has little experience, and only with God's help and the prayer of his spiritual father, can deal with the temptation and authentically approach the Sacrament, and not to proceed in the easy path and stray away, remain behind or quit. A key psychological moment here is the decision, taken on the basis of internal motives, to seek confession at the moment when the soul is ripe for it because man fears to confess before others that which he never spoke aloud. St. Basil the Great in this regard answers a question on the revealing of the secrets of the heart of he who confesses with the following words: whoever is placed in the position to hear confessions, from him no movement of the soul is to be kept, in order for man to have success in the spiritual path and perfection. An important function of confession is to bring man to humility and knowledge of his place among things, so that he can make use of God's good gifts.

2.5. Choosing a Spiritual Father

The Life of the Sacraments and the mystical life is something every Christian lives under the guidance of his spiritual father. Without a spiritual father the path is so uncertain, as uncertain is every other art or science without an advisor and course of education, even more uncertain, considering that the spiritual science of pastoral direction is a science of the sciences and art of arts. The newly baptised finds himself in a situation in which he can choose for himself a church or parish which he can frequent.

The spiritual father is not changed often, nor are parishes. It is here that the Christian takes a decision with his free will unto whom he is to profess his obedience. Man is not allowed not to make this decision, albeit many ignore this and lead a fragmented life. The expression of free will in the choosing of a spiritual father is the matured decision of a wise person, and it is the first of many labors, with which is laden man, and specifically the man who steps on the spiritual path. Obedience is very suitable for those who make a new beginning since it is through it that they reach directly the place where God is, and there exists no other shorter or easier or more lofty path to salvation. If the contemporary Christian is to realize the grace which he can receive and from which he can draw in the single spiritual direction and care of the limitless vault of the church, possessed by the orthodox priest, he would leave everything else behind, and would run towards the first man who has a spiritual understanding of the sacrament of obedience.

3. Confirmation

3.1. Significance of the Confirmation of the Christian

God wants to know to what extent man is faithful to Him because His will is to bring him to salvation. That is why after He gave him His free gifts, He tests him in temptations because in no way is He willing to coerce him, to put on his path and actions anything that can tilt him in one direction or another, but is eager that man himself wins, now with his own personal efforts, labors and sacrifices, the prize of faithfulness. The spiritual man bears this calling to exist and be available to the faithful man as a flag, a light and in fact a guide or as he is called – a spiritual director. It is remarkable that often every difficulty that the spiritual child bears becomes a difficulty of his relationship with his priest. The evil thought is against him, and the old person unceasingly wages war with the spiritual father. It is no news in this context that the spiritual life of the Christian depends precisely on his own disposition and relationship with his spiritual father.

He who manages to hold his reins and remember the grace he has received, who manages to successfully stay on the path of confirmation and not quit, is now surely standing on God's path, pointing his mind towards that which is up high, where Christ stands on the right hand of God. And if he has not reached perfection at this stage, man yet looks beyond the obstacles on the road to the path that clears before him. This path is narrow, but filled with grace and truth, and salvation for him and for God's people. However, if a man does not succeed in the stage of confirmation, he cannot continue forward to the spiritual and soul-saving for him and for the Church.

3.2. Stages in the Process of Repentance

Without repentance and confession there is and can be no spiritual life, and spiritual direction is senseless, if it does not lead to repentance. Repentance is a cyclical process which is to say that man now and again returns to it in the duration of his life. The stages in this process of repentance are three, as they were expounded on by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain. First is the recognition of sin on the side of the faithful. By virtue of his free will and conception man reaches a certain state of specifying the measure of his guilt. At the same time the purity of heart, acquired through keeping the mind clean of all thoughts, i.e. through attention, cuts and uproots from the heart all passions and evil and in their place puts joy, good hope, contrition, tears, self-knowledge and knowledge of one's sins, remembrance of death, true humility, unbounded love of God and the people and a heartfelt desire for the divine. The sooner one reaches this type of decisiveness and brings to fruition the confession of the sins one is aware of, the better. St. Neilos of Sinai in this context considers as first obligation of the Christian to acquire the habit and gift of tears, in order to be able to confess with fervency and receive remittal of his sins..

The pastoral scholar Fr. Christo Dimitrov writes that the confessor can work on the delicacy of proposing to the one who is confessing a certain deepening in the understanding of guilt but without crossing the line which could damage this free association. The central thing on which one must put one's attention is the approach of the holy servant in bettering the understanding of the one who is confessing of the significance of obedience. The latter will receive much benefit if he finds trust in the priest, in the mystical institute of the Church, in God. Revelation of thoughts and sins in confession is in fact a part of this understanding of obedience in the spiritual life of the faithful. Christians do this so that God may on his side give them his grace and that it can be multiplied in them, teaches fr. Ch. Dimitrov. The third stage follows the successful Confession. It includes the decision to sin no further and to realise in deeds what was promised. The importance of the will in this stage of confession is decisive, as free will is required if one is to move from repentance to lasting change.

3.3. Holy Communion and Prayer

The Eucharist is a sacrament of the sacraments and a stamp of the effort of the free man for repentance and unity with God. The Christian is not allowed to withhold his participation in the Holy Mysteries because they are a revelation of the eternal life in each communicant, his filling with grace and preparation to become a dwelling of God. As a final end and mark of the struggles and efforts of the Christian, the Holy Sacrament is preceded by fervent preparation, consisting of fasting and unceasing prayer.

Prayer, not unlike repentance, is a close companion to the Christian because it is a concentration of all the spiritual powers of man towards God, free expression of his will, towards which he can put his own efforts and use them again and again in his path to God. The spiritual father blesses the fast preceding the confession and with this action he outlines the horizon before the one who prays, so that when it is good meet, he can receive Holy Communion. The spiritual father gives counsel to the faithful on matters relating to the latter's behavior throughout the outlined fast, such as the intensity of the fast, the type and frequency of prayers, and as a whole has the function to create the atmosphere, in which the faithful can grow and live until he receives communion. Spiritual life has no place for ambiguity, and for this reason he who skips on prayer, communion, repentance and the other stages which are considered here, walks unsteadily on the spiritual path. Spiritual direction and care for him may turn out to be sapped of strength because it is only that which one comprehends and does in his life holds power over man. Even a single fall, not unlike Lot's wife's, can lead to a falling out of the Church and faith. Unceasing attention in this context is required, so that these spiritual principles are not trampled upon by the faithful.

3.4. Good Works and Reading

Good works and the actions of man which bear good fruits and results for himself and his fellow men are an important element of the confirmation of man as a servant of God, a man of the church and a person of conscience. The same holds for the practice of the commandments, their fulfilment, and the witness of the faith, applied in deeds which lead to God. The instruments of the mind and its thoughts, the use of the god-given right to a free will and conscience, according to which man is a master of his own thoughts, man can pinpoint to good and cease their turning towards the unhelpful things in the world and the imaginary realities. Therefore, one of the first good deeds that man does is keeping silence and retreating within himself.

Good deeds as virtues express the keeping of the Law. Man is called to make straight the paths of the Lord (Isaiah 40:3 – 5; Math. 3:3) by laboring for God, and not for glory, but only for God. At the end of the process of confirmation, the Christian has passed through a certain strengthening of his powers, as he has tested his will, he has shown himself up to good, and he has withstood many temptations. Other than the attention upon oneself in ascetic sense, the orthodox Christian is also called to make use of his capacity to read and study. This he does mainly by reading the Sacred Scripture, the Holy Fathers, as well as other spiritual books and articles.

3.5. Discipline and Spiritual Punishment

Whoever is a head of a community or a director, or a pastor, sometimes has to avail himself of measure for a type of "medical" treatment of those who are ill. He does this without being subject to passions, and the patient is not to understand this treatment as a sign of hostility or intolerance. The understanding that the state of things in their deepest essence are that sensible pain is temporary,

while what is good has no beginning or end, can aid greatly the one who is subject to suffering. Even evil at some point becomes depleted, while good remains after it. At the same time man cannot become holy, if there are no people next to him who continually wound him with their behavior, affronts, comments, leniency, passions, calumny and other types of offensive behavior. Suffering in life brings man's attention back to God, where it belongs, while behind the corner lurk joy and happiness, so long as one shows faith and hope, and drives away despair, as teaches elder Aimilianos of Simonopetra. In the case when given obedience is difficult, even in the case of difficult orders, or orders beyond the strength of a person, St. Basil the Great prescribes that one must leave the responsibility for the order to the one who gave this above the mark order, and that one should show one's obedience and submission unto death, if needed, remembering our Lord, who became obedient even unto death, and to a death on a Cross in fact. If the subjective side of the feelings felt by the one who is bearing with a sentence, rambling or something that is displeasing to him, is to show patience and long-suffering without a fallout of the mind, the objective side is in what is at this very same time happening within his being – a treatment, a spiritual surgical operation that is needed for his salvation. The reason for such a behavior is given by St. Gregory of Nyssa: the blow has a treating side effect which will turn man away from evil. In the very same line of thought, man is not allowed to argue with his spiritual director. Even if the latter is to make a mistake or sin, he who directs men spiritually is a man sanctified by God. For repentance to be effective, he who repents must not contradict the one who watches over his soul because then he would not be worthy for the forgiveness by grace, because he would want in fact only judgement and rights, and not a freely given love, as writes metropolitan Basilios Kodseie.

III. PROGRESS AND PERFECTION OF THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN

1. Progress

1.1. Confession

He who has established himself in the faith is similar to the person who spiritual directs him in that he has achieved a certain level of virtue because he has dealt with the storms which fight the beginners and has come out a victor. Still, man should not listen to his own will, but trust those with experience. This is the way of all the fathers. Speaking his thoughts out loud with the spiritual director, man can understand whether they are good or not. For this reason when one speaks of spiritual direction and care, particularly in monastic setting, where there is cenobitic life, in this life is established the practice of frequent confession of thoughts to the confessor. St. Maximos gives the analogy with the tin can which is blackened, but can be polished anew and yet shine. So the faithful, although blackened from sin, can shine anew, if they repent and confess. The mistakes, and sometimes sins, follow after man in his spiritual path and for this reason it is necessary that in each of steps to repentance and confession. St. Basil gives a prominent and leading place to the confession of sins for not repeating the sins in the future, inviting the men who lead a spiritual life to share their spiritual disabilities so that the these can be removed with the help of the skilled in this business, and namely, those who preside and guide them spiritually.

1.2. Marriage and Priesthood

When man matures physically, which preferably happens with his spiritual advancement, conditioned by his education and development in the family, the church and external environment, he is faced with a choice he cannot escape: to enter into a spiritual, or in a fleshly marriage, because to remain alone – is not good for himself, as states elder Aimilianos of Simonopetra. Monks from all

times until today walk on this path, having chosen a life, suitable for heaven, and in no way less well-disposed than the angel's. Not everybody is called to this path, and for this reason the Christian carefully discusses his desires and attitudes with his spiritual father, tests his thoughts, feelings and abilities, before he makes a definite decision.

Finding a partner in life is sometimes difficult and followed by various temptations. Such is the path of spiritual struggle and perhaps this stage is one part of it. Holy Matrimony is a crown for the passed path, a witness for the entering of a new spiritual type of development, and perhaps it is exactly at this point that the spiritual life of the orthodox Christian commences. The quality is overabundant in family life exactly because man does not live for himself, but for his partner. At the same time the married man can be called to the priesthood – a choice which he as a believer must not negate automatically, nor misjudge its importance. The right answer can be found only by the one who reasons, who knows himself, or even better, the one who trusts in the blessing of his spiritual father, who also shared this duty of making a choice on the spiritual path of his children.

1.3. Spiritual Struggle and Abandonment

Spiritual struggle relates to the regulating of the role of what is fleshly and worldly in man's life, where they play a role of relative importance in comparison to the spiritual and eternal. The role of the sensitive faculty must be negated and stripped of importance. The alternative of not winning the struggle for our freedom through continued spiritual struggle for internal attention and living in virtue, keeping the commandments, is to lose it. The first stage of this struggle is the struggle with thoughts. If man does not win this battle, then passion overwhelms him. Spiritual struggle must be continued until the end, and in it there is no time or place for leniency or rest. Whoever does not engage in spiritual struggle, cannot be successful in it. Free will plays an important role in this process so far as it inclines to and participates in evil (and its endowing of temporal being), becomes like a stone, and does not accept God's gift, if man is to allow it to follow this whim of its. For he who does not respect God and what is God's, the path is sick.

In the centre of the success of the struggle is standing behind God, behind His commandments and in the virtues, which in fact are the keeping of His commandments, standing behind the spiritual father. In this way the meek Moses was able to meet the passion of envy and stood behind his Guide without looking Him in the face, but looking only from behind. In this manner all saints were crowned in the kingdom of heaven. On the other side, St. Maximos puts a focus on the internal struggle of men, showing that without faith, hope and love nothing evil cannot be entirely driven away, and nothing good can be fully affirmed. When attacked, man enters his own inner room, gives himself to prayer, retracts his whole mind in defence, and does not let himself spread out in natural contemplation (neither then, nor before he has achieved freedom from the passions because those who are unprepared are always tempted). Only he who sees God before himself can be certain in his success. Attentiveness to oneself is like a stretched out hand, and in this hand stand all the commandments of the New and Old Testament, says elder Aimilianos because what is required from man is only to ask to fulfil God's good will and then with the help of attentiveness (*nipsis*) he fulfils it. The saying of the fathers of the Holy Mountain *give blood and receive Spirit*, spoken first in the Sentences of the Holy Fathers, well illustrates the teaching of the church and orthodox understanding of the significance of pain in the spiritual path of advancement of the human person. Without suffering there is no progress. If man, who is not temporary, but eternal, since he is created in God's image, manages to overcome this stage, because it is known through experience that in difficult situations there always follows a certain détente, then man can have success in the spiritual battle.

2. Contemplation

2.1 The Place of Contemplation

Contemplation in general terms begins at the point when the man praying has turned all his attention to God and notices the silence surrounding him, in which is revealed the Holy Spirit. Capturing this silence is part of the answer of how to find the place of contemplation in the spiritual life, in the teaching on prayer of elder Aimilianos of Simonopetra. Still, the physical place of occurrence of this phenomenon cannot be defined. Contemplation or seeing God cannot be limited, categorised or separated from the person who practices it. The Christian must learn how to pray amid the noise also, but he must strive for complete silence as far as possible.

2.2 Prerequisites

Contemplation is a result of the spiritual struggle and labor of the faithful. In the contemplation of what can be known man goes beyond the knowledge appearing through the senses. God is known in the unknown. If contemplation is an advance sensing of the deification and the future Kingdom, then the way to approach contemplation is through attentiveness (nipsis). The path of the Christian before this stage went through the practice of virtue through a correct use of the free will, a help for which was however precisely the attentiveness to oneself, the method of acquiring perfect knowledge of things, revealing the way to contemplation. As ascetic labors (praxis) raise the mind up to contemplation, so also obedience raises it up to silence (hesychia), show Sts. Kallistos and Ignatios. That is why its place is unrivalled in the setting of the Christian for spiritual life. The desire of the Christian is leading because God gives to those who ask it of him pious thoughts (concepts) of the beings, that is to say, correct spiritual principles of the doctrines of natural contemplation. Certainty in the threading of the spiritual path however comes from accomplishing a basic cleansing of what is temporal, as a precondition for contemplation.

2.3 Achieving Contemplation

God is unknowable, but precisely in this inability to comprehend him, man can achieve a certain idea of Him. An instrument for this is presented by the free will of he who is obedient to God, who seeks Him. The mind, to the extent in which it keeps within itself the living remembrance of God, seeks the Lord through contemplation... in the fear of the Lord, that is to say, in keeping the commandments, and finds it precisely for the stated reason, points out St. Maximos the Confessor. If man renounces himself and his egoism, which leads in its stead to the retrieval of a certain heartfelt joy, then also the blessed full of grace joy of Christ will become his possession (achieved with his own effort), and this fullness can serve as a stepping ground for the higher spiritual life, says elder Aimilianos about the person, adding that however to achieve all this man must accept unto himself the the pain and suffering he meets in the world

3. Deification

3.1 Communing Christ

Having reached this stage of the spiritual path, having accepted the crown of perfection, available here on earth, man fulfils his objective and calling and receives a certain fullness of existence, for which he has panned since he took his first breath. Deification is beyond the limits of what is natural, and this makes it independent, free. This state of man is reached as a gift from God when man is to exit himself, because doing this, he also exits the limits of his nature. The soul is

desirous of God and rejects what is unnecessary in its path to Him, acquiring characteristics with this, which are His. What is lived and felt is more than what is possible to be described or related.

For the mortal man communion is what occurs again and again in terms of receiving the Sacrament, and he achieves the unachievable every time he communes. But good is one unceasing movement in which all men are called to participate. At the same time the purpose is to achieve participation in God. The man who knows God, and God who is known, become united in one single spiritual action when the beloved becomes our life, in the phrase of St. Sophrony of Essex.

3.2 Prerequisites

It has been put that when the mind is entirely clean, it reflects God, receives it as a clear and shining mirror. If man cleanses himself of the filth of the mind and his actions in the world, he in a natural way will not only approach God, but also become a recipient of God's activities. At the same time keeping the commandments is a precondition for this last, categorised, spiritual stage of the perfection and direction of man, a true guarantee. God gives according to the desires of the heart of man, but when the heart is not in the commandments, when it is disobedient in its deep insides and in its movements, what could it expect of God? Participating with virtues in God and living in accordance with what is given to him, man places himself entirely and exclusively in God, forming and shaping only God in his whole being in such a way that he himself by grace is and is called a god, just as God by His condensation is and is called man for the sake of man. A precondition for deification, linked to the aforementioned, is the desire of God. It together with love is the connecting element, the highly precise instrument, through which man approaches what is unapproachable. The heart of the effort of man for communion with God is the raising of himself in the desire of his will for God.

3.3 On the State Itself

When this divine, godlike thing, the mind, is mixed with what is close to kind, when the image is elevated to the archetype it desires, writes St. Gregory the Theologian, then is the time of deification and acquiring of the Kingdom of Heaven. Man has accomplished the limits of his nature and stands at the edge of the abyss which is the eternal blessedness, which he forethought in his entire conscious spiritual path, towards which he was led by his spiritual father, which was promised to him in the Gospel. The soul is overtaken and overwhelmed by God, being engaged entirely with Him and dwelling entirely in Him. It is filled with His energies, becomes to understand in an out-of-logic manner what prior to this was not in her capacity to know. God, other than accepting it, gives it everything which is His except his divine nature and essence, He deifies it. Free will in this context is shown as able to cancel the mortality of the body because it is immortal in nature. In the final path of the human soul this transcendence of mortality is led to its logical conclusion in deed, shown to men way back with the Raising of Lazarus, as an image of the Resurrection which is to be for every and all men who believed in Him. Man becomes sinless because he cannot anymore turn back from the good, because he knows what is good, as a result of his deification, in the teaching of St. Maximos. The end of the road shows the unmitigated blessedness. The image has ascended to God's likeness.

3.4 Life in the Age to Come

Man accomplishes his perfection even before death. If he does not become holy before he dies, after he dies there is nothing that will be waiting for him. Mankind will turn into what is immortal when the age passes and time stops, when the list of men whom God foreknew to be born in this

world, is filled with the last name. After Christ's Incarnation all men await the end of the times when all human action will be cancelled, and man will passively experience what is given by grace – deification. This will be an existence of eternal well-being, or eternal punishment. For the faithful God will be everything, and evil will not exist any more even as a revelation of the absence of good. At the Resurrection, the body of man will be renewed in a better beauty. All mortal and temporal will cease to exist, such as giving birth, growth and death. The life in the age to come will be given to those who prior to their death did what is good because they possessed their free will to do or not to do, they availed themselves of self-will and rationality, for which they will be made to give an account.

CONCLUSION

The proposed study investigates in depth the questions of free will and obedience of man in his spiritual path of struggling and spiritual direction by the chosen spiritual father. The laid out in this dissertation unequivocally points to the groundbreaking role of the free will of man who is called to use it for good in the world and to direct it to God, in order for him to benefit from it and receive a good existence here on earth. The best way to achieve the latter is the use of obedience as an internal movement of freedom and love on the side of the faithful Christian, which he also directs to God, but also to his spiritual father and to his neighbor, in accordance with the given commandment of our Savior and the tradition of the Church and the Holy Fathers.

Obedience, usually understood and practiced chiefly in a monastic setting, is often understudied and misunderstood, and its goal – undervalued. It remains unfulfilled in practice in many places. The proposed dissertation contextualised the free will for obedience of man in the various stages of the process of his spiritual direction by proposing clarifications on difficult questions, solutions to timely problems, but also counsels, tested and taken from the spiritual vault of the Orthodox Church: the wealth of texts and witnesses of the lives and advice of the holy fathers and church writers, in addition to the contemporary scholars who use a scientific approach to extract the most valuable from the existing bulk of literature on the related questions. Last, but not least, the understanding of the process of spiritual direction and the place of obedience in it is of unquestioned importance for all who struggle in the church, who pass through the described stages or who are spiritual directors of others who will be facing the challenges of the contemporary spiritual life in the Orthodox Church.

SELF-ASSESSED CONTRIBUTIONS

1. The study is the first scientific work of its kind in Bulgaria which lays out in a systematic fashion the teaching of the free will of man, by contextualising it in the stages of his spiritual life and direction.

2. The study is a first attempt at a comprehensive analysis of obedience as a manner of progressing throughout the stages of the spiritual life of the orthodox Christian and of achieving salvation.

3. The study has a practical importance and application in the spiritual care and direction and in the personal experience of the orthodox Christian as it describes the paths of approaching communion with God, marking some problems on the different stages of his progress.

4. The study uses a wide array of sources of the texts of the holy fathers which until the present time have not been translated, published or studied in Bulgaria, and with this it places on a proper ontological grounding the scientific question of the spiritual path and direction of the orthodox Christian.

PUBLICATIONS ON THE TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION

1. The Ministry of the Priest Chaplain in Educational Institutions. *Bogoslovska misyl*, 2, 2022 (2023);

2. Passions, Types of Passions and Their Development according to the Holy Fathers. Preconditions. *Misyl, slovo, tekst*, 13 (19), 2023;

3. The Threats of Technology and AI against the Spiritual Life of the Orthodox Christian. *Harmonia v razlichinata X*, Sofia, 2023.