
SAINT PAISIOS THE ATHONITE – REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY MAN

Dragoș DOMINTE

PhD, Universitatea „Lucian Blaga” din Sibiu, Facultatea de Teologie Ortodoxă ”Andrei Șaguna”,
Institutul de Studii Universitare de Doctorat

Abstract: *The question of the meaning of life has constantly preoccupied philosophical and theological reflection. The quick pace of technology, the abundance of information and the ever-visible trends toward secularization have led to a weakening of the spiritual landmarks of today's man. The spiritual thought and experience of Saint Paisios the Athonite offer a relevant perspective on the spiritual state of contemporary society and on how the authentic meaning of life can be rediscovered.*

The analysis starts from philosophical landmarks on the meaning of existence, reflected in authors such as Aristotle, Descartes, Nietzsche and Lucian Blaga, underlying the limits of a rational interpretation of the human condition. But the theological perspective of Saint Paisios the Athonite shows that the deep meaning of life is discovered in man's relationship with God and in the orientation of existence towards salvation.

The saint's spiritual reflections also offer a diagnosis of today's society, marked by materialism, individualism and the loss of moral landmarks, and directions for spiritual healing: repentance, confession, the simplicity of spiritual life, by cultivating a living relationship with God. His message is so relevant today, offering man authentic spiritual landmarks to rediscover the deep meaning of life and to overcome the moral and spiritual crisis of the modern world.

Keywords: *meaning of life, Saint Paisios the Athonite, contemporary man, spiritual crisis, repentance, Christian spirituality.*

**Contact details
of the author:** Email: domintedragos@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of communication, mass media, and information technology in general invites us to live our lives in a world of words and images, where everyone gives advice and teaches others, but it seems that no one listens to anyone anymore, in such an inflation or avalanche of information.

Because of existential slippage, but also alienation from God, today's society is agonizing, perceiving existence as meaningless and absurd, and this lack of cultivation of the sacred thrill makes



it possible for the whole order of the world to be altered, because "The crisis that contemporary society is going through today—despite what is generally claimed—is not so much a social and economic one as a religious and moral one. Today's man suffers from deficiencies not horizontally (material goods, services, etc.), but vertically, through the loss of true landmarks that place him in a correct relationship with the elements of the world (which are nothing more than gifts from God) (Pavel, 2014).

And today's man, "weary from the toil of worldly thoughts (Akathist of Saint Parascheva, n.d.)", assaulted by an explosion of information, seems to need more than ever concrete examples, models of faith and authentic Christian living, to encourage him in his search for the saving Truth, and these models can only be the saints – "for their souls are like animated icons that show on their faces the various colours of virtue (Chrysostom, n.d.)." And so, people today seek true models that are discreet and most of the time, when we talk about saints or read about their lives, there is a tendency to consider them nostalgically as people from immemorial times when holiness could be attained, which today would no longer be possible in reality, but "the saints stand at the top of the table of values, because they make it possible to experience the absolute on a human scale (Țuțea, 2017, p. 86)."

Only 22 years have passed since his death, and his writings have been printed in hundreds of thousands of copies in the main languages of the Orthodox peoples. Also noteworthy is the unprecedented influx of pilgrims, especially young people, to the saint's tomb, many of them declaring that their lives have been decisively changed by discovering him, as well as the impressive number of miracles performed both during his lifetime and after his passing away to the Lord.

This work by Father Paisios was also seen as "a divine sign, a prophetic, admonishing, and corrective phenomenon addressed to today's world, to us priests, and obviously to theologians, who are responsible for the smooth running of things (Paisios the Athonite, 2016, p. 85)."

Certainly, the chosen theme will touch on delicate and vulnerable aspects of contemporary life, relating to human anxiety viewed both from a medical perspective and as "good anxiety," for which the Saint found "the right solution," because "he had that discernment of the Fathers through which he could see beyond the manifestation of a disease, its physical, psychological, or spiritual roots (Faculty of Orthodox Theology Arad, 2017)." Saint Paisios the Athonite responded to those who asked for his help in their suffering that the true medicine is "spiritual joy because it spreads the grace of God in the soul (Paisios the Athonite, 2003, p. 240-241)."

In the same spirit as the Holy Fathers, Jean-Claude Larchet summarizes the cause of illnesses in his work "The Therapy of Spiritual Illnesses," in which we find that "in a world where the pressure of the restless spirit of this age is constantly increasing the number of those who are spiritually mutilated, the only 'reparative surgery' with a chance of success is practiced only in the hospital of Christ (Larchet, 2001).

Through this work, we propose an alternative to the struggles and searches of today's man in his attempts to draw closer, regardless of time and place, to Christ the Saviour, and to show that "blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it (Luke 11:28)", that it is truly possible to encounter Him. "The physical eyes will not see Him, but the spirit will leap for joy, for love calls love and the Ghost calls ghost (Barbarin, n.d., p. 7)."

1. Defining the meaning of life in a philosophical and theological perspective

In traditional philosophy, the problem of man has been understood mainly as the problem of defining him. It was believed that a definition would allow the identification of a human nature or essence, respectively a set of essential traits, which are given to man and through which it is possible to determine the identity of the human being, the humanity in man.



At the same time, attempts were made to differentiate humans from other entities or types of beings. Aristotle, for example, believed that humans distinguish themselves from other beings through language and morality; according to their essence as social beings, humans fulfill their purpose of practicing virtues-temperance, wisdom, courage, and justice-in community with their fellow humans. Humans need their fellow humans in order to fulfil themselves, to perfect themselves as rational beings; by contributing to the good of the city through their own good, they manifest their own nature: sociability.

In the modern era, René Descartes, the founder of classical rationalism, believed that man should be defined from the perspective of his duality, as both body and soul (and extended substance and thinking substance), but also from the perspective of his essence, which is thought. Through the principle of classical rationalism, "I think, therefore I am," the philosopher introduced into philosophical anthropology the understanding of the unique condition of man as a knowing subject. In his "Notebook," the philosopher Descartes wondered about the meaning of his life: "What path in life shall I follow?"

It has been claimed that the use of the phrase "meaning of life" appears for the first time in modern philosophy, in the work of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) in his work "New Philologists." Until then, references to the "meaning of life" had been made through phrases such as "the reason for life" or "the justification for life." In relation to the issue of the meaning of life, in order to avoid remaining in the realm of mere concepts, images have been used to designate the meaning of life. We often encounter expressions such as "the path of life" (especially in literature), "the circle of life" (for the plant world), "the thread of life," "life as a movie," "life as a novel," or life seen "as a pattern in a carpet" (in prose).

The concern for finding the meaning of life is also found in the Romanian philosophers Lucian Blaga and Constantin Noica. For Lucian Blaga, the meaning of life lies in "the creative destiny of man." Blaga also states that "once we have discovered that life has no meaning, there is nothing left for us to do but give it meaning," and for Constantin Noica, the meaning of life is synonymous with "a culture of excellence," man giving meaning to his life only to the extent that, as an individual, he manages to comprehend a whole horizon of values.

However, philosophers themselves acknowledge that without God in the equation of their lives, "everything is meaningless, even myself. Everything that exists is born without reason, remains powerless, and dies by chance" (Jean Paul Sartre).

Looking at the struggles of contemporary man, the monk from Rohia, Nicolae Steinhardt, wrote in his book "The Diary of Happiness": Why is man hungry for today? For love and meaning.

Searching for the meaning of life without God is a futile endeavour, and we find the answer in the One who created us: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3).

When Saint Paisios was asked about the meaning of life, "Father, what exactly is the meaning of this life?", he replied: "What is it? To prepare ourselves for our homeland, for heaven, for paradise. Everything is for man to grasp this deep meaning of life, which is the salvation of the soul. When man believes in God and in the life to come, then he understands that this life is vain and prepares his passport for the other. We forget that we will all leave. We will not take root here. This life is not for us to enjoy ourselves. It is for us to take exams in order to pass into the other life. Therefore, our goal must be to prepare ourselves so that we may depart with a clear conscience and fly to God when He calls us. When Christ blessed the five loaves of bread and fed thousands of people, the world said one thing: "This is exactly what it takes to be king!" They ate the five loaves and two fish and were thrilled. But Christ told them not to worry about this food, because we will not remain here. In this life, everyone is tested to see if they will correspond to what God requires."



The pious Paisios the Athonite believed that the greatest need of the world and of the contemporary human soul, "increasingly troubled and tormented," is that of repentance and confession. The saint believed that the greatest enemy of the soul, even more powerful than the devil, is the "worldly spirit" that "draws us in sweetly and ultimately embitters us forever."

For this reason, Father Paisios shows that in such a world and in such times there is "a generalization of sin that has become fashionable and is considered a sign of progress," while the attempt to adhere to high and pure morals is considered a sign of backwardness.

Saint Paisios, like a skilled and knowledgeable "radiologist" of the human soul, observes with "love and pain" that the frightening familiarity with sin has led to the disappearance of the fear of God - "the beginning of wisdom" - and with its disappearance, man is moving further and further away from God, the Source of his life. And such a way of life is considered by Saint Paisios "hell"—there is no greater pain for God than to see man in hell, and for this reason He seeks by various means to turn man to repentance and, through it, to the discovery of the profound meaning of life as a preparation for the future and eternal existence.

At the same time, Father Paisios considered it imperative for the guidance of "the weary, confused and darkened by sin and selfishness man." Without good spiritual fathers, churches will empty and psychiatric wards, prisons, and hospitals will fill up. People need to realize that they are suffering because they are far from God, to repent and humbly confess their sins."

The saint recommended confession and repentance to everyone, regardless of their state of mind or spiritual condition. If a sick person asked him to pray for their health, the Elder advised them to confess and receive communion. He said the same thing to students who wanted to do well in their exams.

2. An X-ray of contemporary human life in the vision of Saint Paisios the Athonite

Contemporary people do not think about eternity. They have not grasped the deepest meaning of life. They have not felt heavenly joys, and therefore their hearts do not leap for something higher (Paisios the Athonite, 2003a, p. 73)." The greatest need of the world today is repentance and confession, said Saint Paisios the Athonite, "because since spiritual fathers have become scarce, psychiatrists have multiplied (Zournatzoglou, 2014)."

Saint Paisios the Athonite had a profound knowledge of the contemporary world, its increasingly numerous and profound problems and anxieties, as well as of the human soul, which is increasingly troubled and disturbed.

He saw the cause of all these "wounds" in the "worldly spirit" and in the way it attracts and subjugates people, distancing them from God and their essential vocation, that of living a high spiritual life and striving for eternal happiness.

Everywhere, Saint Paisios believed, there is stress and anxiety. "The sufferings of the world are endless. Everywhere there is general decay, and families, both small and large (Paisios the Athonite, 2003, p. 24)" because "the world suffers, is lost, and unfortunately, all people are forced to live in this hell of the world (Paisios the Athonite, 2003, p. 25)."

Comfort and civilization, or, as he called them, "conveniences," instead of bringing man peace and tranquility, have made his life easier physically, but have alienated him spiritually from God, from his fellow men, and even from himself. Machines and technology have replaced "the sweat of the brow," but they have led to the stereotyping and automation of life and the scattering of the mind. Means of communication have multiplied and become more "efficient," making it possible today to speak from "the heights of heaven" and "the depths of the earth," but often this communication does not produce communion. Being external, it does not touch the human soul and no longer has the power to penetrate the depths of the heart, much less to move and change it.



With cutting-edge technology, modern man scrutinizes distant galaxies and penetrates the innermost structure of his own being, but, as Saint Paisios said, "people see the whole world, but they cannot see themselves (Paisios the Athonite, 2003, p. 149)."

Instead of improving man morally, technology has dehumanized him and divided him internally. Although much more educated and knowledgeable, contemporary man is scattered internally, according to the pleasures he seeks and desires. They have lost their original "simplicity" and, thus, have come to be unable to truly enjoy anything. And this, as the spiritual Father said, is because their hearts have turned to iron. Cars have multiplied, and man himself has become a machine for consuming things, goods, and pleasures.

It is easy to understand that a materialistic and hedonistic society, such as the world we live in, provokes and demands of man, especially biologically, physically; it stirs his senses and instincts, leading him to ignore the spiritual element in his constitution.

All the comfort and civilization that the world has created have not led to the moral progress of man. By addressing primarily the body and its pressing needs, they do not fulfill his spiritual desires, his thirst for the sublime, they do not "cultivate people's consciousness (Paisios the Athonite, 2003, p. 146)."

In such a mechanized, technical, automated world, where machines replace humans and iron replaces experience and simplicity, there is a growing sense of a lack of role models. And this general moral void is felt in the Church, because, as Saint Paisios shows, "now words and books have multiplied and deeds have diminished. We only admire the holy athletes of our Church without understanding how hard they worked, because we have not made the effort to understand their toil and thus love them and strive with magnanimity to follow them. Of course, the Good Lord will take into account the times and conditions in which we live and will ask accordingly. But if we make a little effort, we will be crowned more than before (Paisios the Athonite, 2003, p. 29)."

Sins that were once avoided and criticized have now become "fashionable" and widespread. People in ancient times shunned, with all their moral strength, not only great and serious sins, but also minor ones, and when they happened to fall into one, they experienced a deep sense of sinfulness and repentance. Today, any approach to a problem is no longer viewed through the prism of high morality, but must be adapted to the "spirit of the world," to conform to it, starting with general laws and norms and ending with individual private behavior.

Before, as Saint Paisios said, there was much good and much kindness in the world, which covered the few sins that were committed, just as the sun, with its bright rays, coming out from behind the clouds. In the past, as Saint Paisios said, there was much good and kindness in the world, which covered up the few sins that were committed, just as the sun, with its bright rays, coming out from behind the dark clouds, makes the world beautiful and good. Today, we observe that sins and passions have become widespread, cultivated, and protected, to the detriment of virtues, which seem to be mocked, humiliated, and exiled in the pure souls of fewer and fewer people, eager to discover the higher meanings of their passage through this world.

Sin is now considered progress, and morality is considered "backwardness". It is cultivated and praised, and those who oppose it are considered "reactionary" in a society that is increasingly distancing itself from God and the ideals of a moral life. This makes the world a hell and life a torment. Distancing ourselves from God, as the Source of life and eternal happiness, leads to the loss of divine grace and, consequently, to receiving "demonic influence" and demonization. As the Saint said, we have "leveled" and "mixed" everything: good and evil, sins and virtues.

The world itself seems to be turning into a "madhouse," a "mental hospital," where spiritual illnesses seem to multiply and worsen rather than ease and heal, precisely because of this general misconception of life.



Saint Paisios the Athonite recommended, as a means of liberation from all these inner turmoil and torments, a return to faith and to God, the fight against sins, towards the victory of virtue.

Saint Paisios the Athonite recommends, as a means of liberation from all these inner turmoil and torments, a return to faith and to God, the struggle against sin, toward the victory of virtue and goodness, the regaining of simplicity and unity of soul. This is the martyrdom of contemporary man, and only this is capable of restoring inner rest and peace to man.

However, in all this martyrdom, the Christian is not alone, but is protected by God and helped by divine grace. If, in the past, God guarded the world with one hand, said Saint Paisios, today He guards and protects it with both hands, because its difficulties and needs are greater. "Today, more than ever, Christ, the Mother of God, and the Saints help us, but we do not understand (Paisios the Athonite, 2003, p. 33)."

CONCLUSION

Saint Paisios the Athonite believed that the greatest need of the world and of contemporary man is repentance. In the face of the ever-increasing and ever-greater turmoil caused by the "worldly spirit," man, whether a monk or living in society and in a family, must cultivate confession and repentance.

For the Athonite monk, the crisis of the contemporary world is a crisis of repentance, in the sense that people today no longer live from the perspective of the future life, but of ephemeral, carnal, and worldly pleasures, and for this reason they miss their vocation and destiny, both here and now and in eternity.

"Contemporary people, Father Paisios observes with particular spiritual discernment, do not think about eternity; self-love makes them forget that they will lose everything; they have not grasped the deepest meaning of life. They have not felt heavenly joys, and therefore their hearts do not leap for something higher (Paisios the Athonite, 2003, p. 13)."

In a secularized, consumerist, and utilitarian world, where man has been reduced to the biological and social spheres, he has forgotten the basis of his existence and, as a result, has lost his ultimate vocation to strive for.

Saint Paisios reveals to us how we can rediscover the meaning of life, which is to actualize the divine image within us through the light of Grace and the love of Christ, and through this, what position to take in each of the particular problems of everyday life.

By taking advantage of the challenges of today's world and emphasizing "good thoughts," as Saint Paisios urges us to do, we will find spiritual benefit in the troubled world in which we live, that of making the pain of others our own and an opportunity to call upon God through prayer: "if the laity had taken advantage of the dangers they are going through, they would have surpassed us monks in prayer and would have avoided the dangers (Paisios the Athonite, 2003b, p. 23)."

We believe, like Saint Paisios, that through God's providence, evil can be transformed into good, and periods of crisis can become times of trial that crown us with glory: "Circumstances compel us and will compel us to work spiritually. It is good to do this with joy and of our own free will, and not with sorrow out of necessity: many saints would have liked to live in our time in order to struggle (Paisios the Athonite, 2003, p. 35).



REFERENCES

- Pavel, A. (2014). *Critical reflections on the Christian mission* (Vol. 1). Sibiu, Romania: Andreiana Publishing House.
- Barbarin, G. (n.d.). *Christ, friend in times of trial*. Bucharest, Romania: Bizantina Publishing House.
- Larchet, J.-C. (2001). *The therapy of spiritual illnesses*. Bucharest, Romania: Sophia Publishing House.
- Țuțea, P. (2017). *322 Memorable quotes*. Bucharest, Romania: Humanitas Publishing House.
- Zournatzoglou, N. A. (2014). *Testimonies of worshipers: Saint Paisios the Athonite* (Vol. 2). Egumenita Publishing House.
- Paisios the Athonite. (2003). *Spiritual words: With pain and love for contemporary man* (Vol. 1). Bucharest, Romania: Evangelismos Publishing House.
- Paisios the Athonite. (2003). *Spiritual words: On prayer* (Vol. 6). Bucharest, Romania: Evangelismos Publishing House.
- Paisios the Athonite. (2016). *The spiritual father*. Iași, Romania: Doxologia Publishing House.
- Paisios the Athonite. (2003). *Family life*. Bucharest, Romania: Evangelismos Publishing House.
- Faculty of Orthodox Theology Arad. (2017, October 8). *The way of salvation* [Editorial].