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***The Sacrament of Confession, the Spiritual
Guidance and the Psycho-Spiritual Healing of
the Human Person within the Church.***

***The current mission of the Church regarding the mental
and spiritual sufferings of the contemporary man***

PhD Thesis Summary

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Summary

The Church has always manifested the desire to meet the challenges of the age in which it pursued its mission of leading man onto the path of salvation. Whether it had to formulate dogmas, or it gave concrete answers to various issues which have appeared within the bosom of the Christian communities, using, where appropriate, the terminology or explanatory theoretical models, which proved themselves to be a useful tool in developing responses.

The 19th and the 20th centuries are marked by the scientific and technological progress, which has been achieved in a dizzying pace. This aspect had its consequences: in addition to the positive aspects offered by the many facilities, man's life has become agitated, unfolding itself at a pace that has disturbed and it is still disturbing man's inner balance. The ever deepening alteration of man's communion with God, deed which generates multiple disorders on a psychical and spiritual level, have led to the apparition of the diverse psychical pathologies and to the worsening of some of them, such as anxiety and depression. In the absence of some spiritual landmarks, in the absence of a feeling of safety and of inner peace which the Christian acquires it from being aware that nothing happens without God's will, man becomes prey to his own inner conflicts, feeding on illusions. Not coincidentally, the evolution of the depressive phenomenon is monitored by the World Health Organization, being a phenomenon that rises exponentially.

Within this context, the Church is obliged to meet the unhealthy members, having its own methods of intervention, but using also the data recorded by modern science that exhibit concerns of healing those suffering from this emotional disorder, too.

The **Introduction** shows that the Church, through its statute, has the duty to come forward meeting the needs of its suffering members, especially in the context of this epoch troubled by many problems, which constitutes a favourable environment for the development of numerous mental pathologies. Not infrequently, man lives in an illusory world and is troubled by many complex internal conflicts. Without psychologising how it is accomplished the serving work of the Church, beyond the scientific and academic dialogue, there is the need to form and inform the spiritual fathers regarding any kind of means that are useful in the pastoral work.

Therefore, in **Chapter I** there are analyzed the *repentance*, *the Sacrament of confession* and

the spiritual guidance themes, emphasizing their therapeutic, healing role. The repentance is defined as being a continuous work and a permanent state of vigilance. Essentially, this means (re)orientating the mind, the heart, the values, the interests, and the concerns towards God. Beyond the sacramental aspect, repentance means the whole variety of Christian asceticism and ascetic, oriented towards acquiring likeness to Christ, through Christ, Who is the only source of repentance and its sole aim.

Subchapter 1 deals with the scriptural and patristic foundation of repentance. Repentance means a new beginning, integration into the community of the Church and adherence to the commandments of Christ. A special role in addressing the topic of repentance had St. John Chrysostom. One of his fundamental ideas relates to supporting the *therapeutic* role of the Church in opposition to the legalist one, claiming that the main quality of the Church is that of a **hospital**, not of a court. Another aspect stressed by St. John is linked to the foundation of repentance as a continuous work on the sacramental life of the Church, the Sacrament of Confession playing a major role, of cleansing the soul's dirt accumulated due to its diseases.

Subchapter 2 deals with practical issues: integrating personal repentance into the parish life. In this respect, the parish is seen as a „spiritual hospital”, where one can restore the health of one's soul, attaining the purpose of Christian life.

There are two parts to this subchapter: **(a) the necessity of a spiritual father** – *the spiritual paternity* and *the qualities of the spiritual father* – and **(b) Therapeutic Practices: Confessing Thoughts and the Sacrament of Repentance**. The Church has essential tools without which it would be impossible any profound intervention upon the soul: *the confession of the thoughts and the Sacrament of Confession*. Confessing the sins is a liberating deed, eliminating the evil nestled deep down into the soul, from where, if man carries it alone, secretly it bears fruit, and it leads to the increment of the disease. Although alike to confession, it differs from this primarily by not having a character of a sacramental mystery. The role though is very important, as through this practice it operates a deeper and more thorough knowledge of the soul, i.e. of the weaknesses and the passions that rule it over, deed which can improve and make more efficient the sacramental ministry of the priest.

We must emphasize, however, that Confession is not psychotherapy, even if we talk about it as a therapeutic act, and it cannot be replaced by psychotherapy. The act of Confession is not based on rational techniques, but on the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Even if there occur psychological discharges, first of all it is an act of repentance, and the healing power is not part of a method created by the human mind, but it is based on the work of the Divine Grace. The Sacrament of Confession has consequences in the ontological order of the human

existence versus the psychological and psychiatric therapies, whose leniency on God's behalf cannot be denied.

Subchapter 3 deals with the connection between repentance and psychological problems. Father **Petre Vintilescu**, in his work *Confession and Spirituality*, allocates a subchapter to the issue of mental illnesses and confession. He shows that the management of these sufferings requires a delicate handling on behalf of the priest, full of compassion, but also a careful research in order to understand the type of the disease, its severity, and the responsibility capacity of the sufferer. The priest is called, in his quality of a spiritual guide in the confession booth, to be also equipped with elementary knowledge of psychology and psychiatry, "not to give accurate diagnoses or to deal with the process of healing itself, deed which falls within the competence of the specialist doctor, but to have more acumen, understanding of the state of the soul, of accommodating and harmonizing the spiritual treatment with the one indicated by the human medicine." (Pr. Peter Vintilescu, *Confession and Spirituality* p. 197)

Chapter II of the work refers to the elements of Christian anthropology around which revolves the vision of man within the Orthodox theology. This part consists of **two chapters**, designed to facilitate the understanding of some key elements used within the Orthodox theology. Within **Subchapter I** there were defined a series of concepts: *nature, soul, reason, passion, sin, salvation*, that make up working paradigms which have been crystallized within the Eastern theology. In **Subchapter II**, there were actually analyzed the elements that make up the human being's spiritual structure from a scriptural and patristic point of view. Created in the image of God and tending towards likeness with Him, man has planted within his being a number of elements, which, according to the purpose imprinted by God, shall support him in the process of acquiring the divine resemblance, of deification, that have been affected by the fall: *the heart, the mind, the consciousness*.

The fall has caused the loss of the internal unity of the powers of the soul that made the soul to be simple, unitary and having the same goal: uniting itself with God. Christ, by fulfilling the plan of salvation, has made that in the assumed humanity to be restored the natural order of these constituents. The man has thus the opportunity to become a "new man", to emerge from the tyranny of sin, to renew and to ennoble his soul. St. Paul's vision of man's constitution helps in understanding his conception regarding salvation fulfilled through Christ, but also understanding man's reference stance in relation to sin and towards God's

grace. The terminology of the Pauline anthropological system was also later adopted by the Church Fathers. The one who has admirably succeeded to coagulate and to nuance the anthropological system specific to the Eastern theology was St. Maximus the Confessor. The central idea of St. Maximus is that the soul as mediator is the one that has the role to lead the body (matter) towards the fulfilment of the divine purpose, thus man's spiritual one.

Chapter III of this work addresses man's composition in terms of the anthropological vision specific to psychology. This part contains three chapters. **The first Subchapter** makes a survey, from a historical angle, of how man's preoccupation evolved for deciphering the mechanisms that make up man's psychic structure, as well as the emergence of the scientific methodology for investigating the internal phenomena. A special attention has been given, **in Subchapter 2**, to the concept of *self*, which has a significant weight in defining the human identity, from a psychological point of view. There have been analyzed six elements that play an important role in defining personality: *the consciousness, the cognition, the intelligence, the motivation, the behaviour, and the emotion*. All of them have an important role, both in the psyche and in the spiritual levels.

Subchapter 3 focuses upon the incursion into what is called the *Five Factors of Personality Model (FFM or Big Five)*. The developing process of this explanatory theoretical model was based on the psychologists' interest to capture those distinct and unique traits that confers identity to a person. These traits are defined by man's certain *emotional and mental* characteristics that influences the way the social relationship takes place. This theoretical model represents the newest and the most dominant approach of understanding and explaining personality and is part of what is called the *theory of personality traits*.

Chapter IV brings into discussion the issues related to the fall of the first people and the consequences of human existence: the emergence of diseases, sufferings, impaired cognitive abilities, and the appearance of spiritual pathology states. **Subchapter 1** examines how the man's soul came under the spell of the passions, knowing the sorrow and the suffering states due to his rupture from the communion with God, the Spring of happiness and goodness. It is shown the way how *the rational, the irritable, and the wanting* parts were diverted from their initial meanings, the man directing them towards the sensitive realities of the created world.

In **Subchapter 2** it is shown, according to the Church Fathers, that the aetiology of the spiritually disorders rests on: a) *external causes*; b) *internal causes*. The external causes are the events in life which have a strong negative emotional impact. Here too, the Eastern

patristic spirituality also includes stimuli with role of temptations that may be of demonic origin. The soul is attacked on a rational level through a series of thoughts and, simultaneously, or separately, it is engaged the level of imagination, too. In this way, it is weaved a mental network designed to confuse and convince the mind to accept the suggestions offered by the devil.

With regard to the *internal stimuli*, these are regarded as being reactions to the external ones. Every human being acts basing himself on some stimuli that are triggering factors of the *stages of temptation* (suggestion, receiving inside the mind or the process of rationalization, processing the thought / image, committing the sin, repeating it / becoming addicted to it). The addiction, subsequently developed upon these premises, can trigger spiritual disorders reflected in different behaviours and actions that can also lead to mental disorders.

Unlike the Orthodox spirituality, which takes into account the role of demonic action in "handling" the stimuli and triggering the whole process of temptation, the cognitive psychology does not take into account the demonic factor but confirms the stages that are covered from the moment that an external or internally stimulus appears. All these interior events do not remain without consequences. Becoming estranged from God because of a faulty thinking style and by accepting the demonic temptations suggestions by undergoing the stages of temptation represents important factors in the aetiology of various mental ailments such as anxiety and depression, increasingly present in the life of contemporary man.

Consequently, it was necessary to analyse the *depressive phenomenon*, addressed in **Chapter V** from two perspectives that have some complementary elements: *the psychological perspective*, and that of *the Orthodox spirituality*. Thus, in **Subchapter I**, analyzing depression from a psychological perspective, we find that this represents a serious problem worldwide. On a personal level, the disease can cause serious psychological problems such as reducing the quality of life and increased mortality due to heart diseases, various accidents, suicides, etc. It can also be the cause of serious disorders in the dynamics of the family. Thus, this disease is considered by medicine as being a health problem of public interest.

Further on, were presented the types of depression defined over time. There are presented the causes of depression and various theoretical models that have analyzed the phenomenon of depression and have led to the development of various therapeutic intervention strategies. Special attention was paid to the **cognitive theory regarding depression**, developed by the American psychologist Aaron T. Beck, as well as to the **maladaptive cognitive schemas theory**, developed by Dr. **Jeffrey Young**, upon which it is based the therapy focused on

cognitive schemas. The paid attention was due, on the one hand, to the partial resemblance with the vision of the Orthodox spirituality regarding the role of the thoughts within the spiritual pathology, and on the other hand, due to the practical utility which these models can have in the priest's pastoral activity.

Subchapter II deals with depression in patristic terms. The Holy Fathers assign to this disorder a strong demonic component, being one of the powerful means by which the devil tries to throw man into the abyss of despair. Based on the experience of the Holy Fathers, the intervention plan to counteract the effects of this demonic action upon the soul has three essential components: 1) *the cognitive intervention* - aiming for the thinking errors caused by the fact that man's reason is under the domination of the passions; 2) *the intervention upon the self* - oriented towards the development of man's interior capacity: will, feeling, thought, closely related from a psychological perspective with personality disorders regarding identity, emotions, attachment, and relating schemes; 3) *the intervention upon behaviour* - developing self-control, self-discipline.

To provide a thorough support to the process of spiritual healing, based on the saint's ascetic experience, there could be established *five fundamental aspects* of prevention and of shunning the passions: 1) *maintaining the concentration of the mind towards God through prayer, fasting, remembrance of death and judgment, studying the Holy Scripture and, especially, practicing the Jesus Prayer or the prayer of the heart*; 2) *guarding the powers of the mind and of the soul, stimulating them positively using the teachings of the Holy Scripture, the life of Jesus Christ, and constantly focusing on the purpose of union with God*; 3) *avoiding to maintain in mind thoughts of demonic inspiration and decreasing the activity of the imagination*; 4) *the fight for the removal of pride and assuming humility through understanding the self in the light of man's relationship with God and according to God's will and not to the values of the world*; 5) *exercising self-control in order to progress in these skills by practicing asceticism, fasting and obeying the will of the spiritual father*.

This entire process of shunning the passions, of man braking away from the bondage of passions, is part of the extensive works of *repentance*, which involves two aspects: a subjective one, related to engaging all the powers of the soul of the Christian in the ascetic struggle; and an objective one, related to his assistance on behalf of his confessor through spiritual guidance and the sacramental act of forgiveness of sins within the Sacrament of Confession, all of these having a strong therapeutic component in healing the spiritual disorders.

The **Conclusions** drawn from this academic endeavour are considering the practical implications within the priest's mission. He is obliged to understand the complexity of the inner universe of man, the aetiology of the spiritual and psychic diseases, in order to know to shape his intervention according to the facts that he obtains them and interprets them: either limiting himself, if necessary, to his own pastoral means, or doubling the spiritual intervention with specialised intervention. Without deep knowledge of the human structure, of the problems facing him and their causes, there cannot be performed an act of spiritual guidance correctly and completely.

The Sacrament of Confession cleanses the traces left by the sin, but the shunning of passions, healing, and deification process requires constant and sustained work over time. The intervention of the priest in this direction is not by any means a simple task, but it is important that he understands that the suffering can become *a means of turning inward and of self-knowing*, a moment when the one who experiences it becomes more receptive to and more cooperative with in order to receive the divine aid. Although usually the mental illnesses represents some profound sufferings, that may contain strong accents of revolt, the priest's gift is to help the sick to reach the moment of his soul's cleansingness statute, denying the inner strength, full of tension and rebellion, and to reach the state of repentance that saves and heals.

Keywords: theology, psychology, spiritual pathology, the Sacrament of Confession, repentance, anthropology, therapy

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