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**HELL AND GOD’S LOVE IN THE
THEOLOGY OF SAINT SILOUAN THE
ATHONITE**

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Saint Silouan the Athonite (1866-1938) is one of the most profound and outstanding saints of the Orthodox Church in the twentieth century. A peasant born in Russia, almost illiterate, Saint Silouan lived as a monk in the Russian monastery Saint Panteleimon in Mount Athos for 46 years. Although he lived a common monastic life in its exterior forms, together with other hundreds of monks, Saint Silouan was worthy of partaking spiritual experiences rare in the history of the Church. Through his life of asceticism, Saint Silouan reached the highest peaks of holiness, like the great ascetics in the early times of monasticism: Anthony the Great, Arsenius the Great, Paisius the Great, Symeon Stylites, Ephrem the Syrian and John Climacus. In the last part of his life, he wrote this experience. The message of his teachings, a genuine summary of the Gospel and of the Philokalia, contains the paradoxical phrase given by the Lord Jesus Christ: "*Keep thy mind in hell and despair not!*", a message addressed to the contemporary generation, a present-day prophetic message. His writings would have remained unknown, limited to only a few lines recorded in the register of the monastery, if they had not been discovered by the one that was his only close disciple in his last eight years of life, Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov (1896-1993), who was entrusted the publishing of the saint's notes and who became the first and the only biographer.

The theme of the present paper - *Hell and God's love in the theology of Saint Silouan the Athonite* – valorizes the dogmatic Orthodox character of the

experiences of Saint Silouan the Athonite and highlights the main specific features of his theology. Archimandrite Sophrony, the only disciple of the Saint and also his biographer, specified in 1991 this desideratum: “I suggest to my elder brothers and sisters the task of finding a theological expression of the experience given to us by our spiritual Father, the great Silouan. Let us assume this sacrifice. The writings of the Starets have a certain impreciseness, terms strictly adjusted, simple expressions: his writings are a simple discussion, but his words hide an unimaginably high life. They can and must be formulated from now on as dogmatic theology”.

The first of the specific features of his theology is assuming humility like Christ, up to the awareness of eternal perdition, rendered through the *words* “*Keep thy mind in hell and despair not!*”. The genuine spiritual renaissance, the genuine theology, the vision of God, theosis - the state of deification – fundamental themes of Orthodox theology, is accomplished by being aware of the darkness of the hell inside us and the vision of God’s infinite love. Through these words, Saint Silouan brings into the focus of theology a new vision: the love for Christ does not exclude and does not weaken the awareness of the absolute guilt or of hell and inversely, the awareness of hell, of the definitive fall into hell does not exclude God’s love. Modern man, in his fall into sin, does not reach that saving repentance unless he reaches the awareness that he deserves the certainty of hell. Orthodox theology mentions very little the departure from God, the darkness of hell or Christ’s descent into hell, and when it mentions this it uses adversative conjunctions, in terms of or-or. Through these terms and through his whole theology, Saint Silouan mentions in terms of complementarity between the dark night in Gethsemane and the vision of the divine light on Tabor in terms of and-and.

The second specific feature the saint brings is in the field of the soteriological dogma. Starting from the assumption of humility like Christ, Saint Silouan approaches the topic of assuming the whole human nature like Christ. This assumption is translated in the theology of Saint Silouan in the prayer for the whole world or for “the whole Adam”. Up to Saint Silouan, no theologian has exposed so

subtly and completely the unity between man as person and the other people, between people and human nature.

The work is structured in four chapters. In the first chapter, entitled *Saint Silouan the Athonite – a unique experience in the contemporary world*, we wish to present the life of Saint Silouan in the context of his epoch. Our approach highlights the contribution of Archimandrite Sophrony in making the life and teachings of Saint Silouan known to the world. The personality of Archimandrite Sophrony, endowed with multiple talents and various charismata, could understand and appreciate the spiritual evolution of this great ascetic and then promote his theological and prophetic message. The intellectual qualities, the education and his cultural formation allowed Archimandrite Sophrony to express and transmit at a theological level the experience revealed to Saint Silouan, to show its patristic origins and to reveal its originality and contemporaneity. Next, the personality of Saint Silouan is analyzed in the context of his epoch, according to three locations which influenced his life: Russia, Mount Athos and the West. Russia is his place of birth and also the source of his language, faith and robust structure, which he inherited as gifts. Mount Athos is the place where he lived his monastic vocation for 46 years in the Russian Monastery of Saint Panteleimon. The West is the place from where the spirituality of Saint Silouan radiates in the whole world through the energetic contribution of his disciple, Archimandrite Sophrony. His work, translated in more than 25 modern languages, is continuously read and fathomed.

The second chapter is entitled *Dogmatic themes in the spirituality of Saint Silouan*. In the case of Saint Silouan, we cannot refer to a coherent theological system, of theological principles or to personal teachings. However one can refer to a theological experience and to its contribution to the development of contemporary Orthodox theology. Saint Silouan is preoccupied by the vivid existential dimension in knowing God. He does not speculate about God, but refers to the knowledge of God and about the relationship, often dramatic, of man with God in this knowledge. The themes developed by Saint Silouan imply a Christological and pneumatological

perspective and, consequently, a trinitarian one on understanding ascetic life. These themes are not the result of formal logics or of imaginary representation, but are rooted in the readings of the Holy Scripture, in the liturgical texts and in his patristic readings, they are acquired as a result of direct experiences, of personal encounters. The vision of Christ marked forever the life and confession of Saint Silouan. Christ, the one he knew, is especially a Humble, Loving and Meek Christ. Another characteristic of the confession and teachings of Saint Silouan is the primordial place he acknowledges and grants to the Holy Spirit. This place is not the result of a polemic positioning towards a theological debate, but starts from a direct, immediate and concrete experience. In the entire patristic literature, there is no other writing which mentions so often the Person of the Holy Spirit, and also together with the divine-human Person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God Incarnate, as in Saint Silouan's writings. Life in the Holy Spirit and Life in Christ are inseparable for him. The theology of Saint Silouan has manifest anthropological accents. His notes regard man in general: "Our brother is our life". This formulation expresses the elements characteristic to the person, whose essential preoccupation is "being towards the others". This formulation also implies a trinitarian model, it reflects the person in its active way. Another theme we will analyze in this chapter refers to the ontological unity of the human race – the whole Adam, the consubstantiality and unity of the whole humanity. The desire and concern for the salvation of all people are constantly expressed in the writings of Saint Silouan, from an ecclesiological perspective. The relation between personal salvation and the salvation of the world is often ignored in theological debates, because of its difficulty. In the theology of Saint Silouan the connection between the two is constantly expressed. In this chapter we will analyze the particular position of Saint Silouan. He thinks of the salvation of all people, without exception, righteous or sinners, dead or alive, of any faith. Then, he thinks and prays for God's creatures, for the whole creation, including in it all the animals, all the plants and even the demons.

The third chapter, bearing the title *God's love and the existence of hell in the theology of Saint Silouan the Athonite* analyzes the eschatological and soteriological projection of the theme of love in the theology of the Saint. Hell and God's kingdom are the two borders between which man's entire spiritual life pendulates. The event of Christ's descent into hell is regarded from the perspective of God's all-encompassing love that embraces hell. Hell as loss of grace, as refusal of love, hell as dwelling of the devil, the eternity of hell as endless non-repentance – these are themes that Saint Silouan's writings approach and which bring light into the field of soteriology. Saint Silouan also makes reference to the relation between God's love and justice at the Judgment, to the prayer for the ones in hell and the issue of apocatastasis. In this sense, Saint Silouan's perspective resembles very much that of Saint Isaac the Syrian and puts forward an issue which has troubled the Church since its beginnings: the issue is who is in the Church and who is not, who is saved and who is not. The attitude of Saint Silouan remains in the tradition of the Church, that avoided the theory of apocatastasis and condemned origenism. He wants "all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth", at the level of spirituality, he wants this with all his heart, but from the point of view of the theology formulated he does not state anything, he does not claim anything.

The last chapter, entitled *The reception of Saint Silouan in the Romanian Orthodox theology* presents the Romanian contribution to knowing the life and teachings of Saint Silouan. The contribution is analyzed according to the translators of his work: Rev. Professor Ioan Ică, Deacon Professor Ioan I. Ică jr., Rev. Professor Teoctist Caia and hieromonk Rafail Noica. Among these translators is also mentioned Rev. Constantin Galeriu, who translated in 1959 the first fragment from the work of Saint Silouan in the journal *Ortodoxia*. The continuation is represented by the studies and reviews that contributed to the positive reception of Saint Silouan by Romanian theology.

Saint Silouan is not original in the sense that he puts forward a new theological position, he is not a systematic thinker, neither did he follow academic

theological studies, although, many of his main intuitions have been systematically developed by his disciple and biographer, Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov. We might say that Saint Silouan is the faithful witness of the traditional monastic tradition. The teachings comprised in his writings are based on the living tradition of Orthodox monasticism. Nevertheless, at the same time, he does not merely repeat mechanically this tradition. He lives it again, in his personal experience. He chooses to emphasize certain aspects specific to the tradition he received. His personality and writings have distinctive features, genuinely dewy and creative. His writings incorporate not only what he learnt from others, but extremely important, his own experience.

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