

YOUTH EDUCATION IN 4TH CENTURY BETWEEN PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN ASCETIC EXPERIENCES. TESTIMONIES AND APPLICATIONS

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***Abstract:** I propose to analyze in this study several important historical and patristic texts which testify the way the Church in the 4th century confesses the main educational principles dedicated to youth pastoral. From several texts written by Saints Basil of Caesareea, Gregory the Theologian (of Nazianzus) and John Chrysostom, I propose a theological pattern in the way the Church make use of pagan and philosophical education as a first insufficient level, which needs to be developed within a personal, well ascetically assumed and ecclesial anchored youth education. My thesis consists in the idea that the pagan educational background was without exception doubled by a consistent and assumed ascetic and monastic experience. This ascetic experience never canceled the pagan and philosophical paideia, but recalibrated it as a tool for Christian theological complete education. The last one was mainly centered on the Bible and of the school of prayer. It implies participation, asceticism and direct search of God through knowledge of Scripture and prayer, with deep ontological dynamic perspectives. In the last part of the exposé I demonstrate that this pastoral pattern inspired by the patristic texts and biographies from the 4th century can (and must) be developed and applied in present Christian pastoral dedicated to youth.*

***Keywords:** Christian and Pagan Education, paideia, Youth, Patristics, Cappadocian Fathers, Saint John Chrysostom.*

Education as specific area of research, complement with many others social domains, represents a major thematic field for analyzing and understanding the main highlights and social phenomena for which we have testimonies through direct sources from Late Antiquity of the Mediterranean space, with special references for the life of Church in the first centuries. Educational principles can provide special basis and information for personal development and social relationships, which can help us better understand the importance of educational act within

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the laic and spiritual dimensions of life, as an exercise for the past, and as a challenge for the future.

If the modern cultural paradigm has violently separated spiritual and laic education, the ancient paradigm of παιδεία (*paideia* = training, teaching, education, disciplined mode of life¹) generally supports the statement that the limits between laic and spiritual was very fine and subtle (including beyond spiritual, also arts, poetry, and the unique Greek philosophical spirit)², and completely different of the European pedagogical experience that we have received and developed, as educational laic paradigm, since the Western Renaissance. If we try to understand the life of communities, their faiths and traditions, we can stress one more time that ancient education was both secular and spiritual, meaning that every aspect of life was understood, taught and practiced as an *also spiritual*, and even *mainly spiritual* item. Paradoxically, Christian ancient education, as the main texts prove, has made a very clear distinction between pagan and Christian basis or content of education³. The main scholar discussion over the relationship between pagan *and or only* Revelation basis of Christian *paideia* refers mainly to the nowadays already general assumed statement, that Christian education did not ignore Greek philosophical basis, but transcended it into a new way of life (*ethos*), a new practical and superior philosophy⁴.

¹ Cf. G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford, ¹³1997, art. “παιδεία”.

² Werner Jaeger, *Paideia*, vol. 1, Romanian transl. by Maria-Magdalena Anghelescu, Bucharest, Universitas, Edit. Teora, 2000, p. 16-17.

³ Claudio Moreschini, *Istoria filosofiei patristice (History of Patristic Philosophy)*, Romanian transl. by Alexandra Cheșcu, Mihai-Silviu Chirilă, Doina Cernica, Iași, Edit. Polirom, 2009, p. 11-13.

⁴ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Statues*, XXI (Cf. Migne), 13 (PG 49, 217): “‘Heavens! how great is the power of Christianity’, [...] teaches him to practice such philosophy (καὶ φιλοσοφεῖν ἐπαίδευσε φιλοσοφίαν) as one in a private station had not been likely to display! Great indeed must be the God of the Christians, who makes angels out of men, and renders them superior to all the constraining force of our nature!”, Eng. transl. by W. R. W. Stephens, in: coll. *The*

In the Orthodox scientific field, the patristic studies regarding Christian *paideia* focus mainly on the specificity and superiority of the Discovered Truth of the Person of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Creator and Savior of the humankind⁵. This superiority is given by the fact that Christian education is based on transcultural adherence (given by the reality of a new people of God⁶) and practical school of prayer and moral perfection, developed through the fight against the sin, and for the virtue, and proven by the martyred and eschatological victory against the Death and the world. Even if the Late Antiquity moral pagan philosophy had reached a high level of practice (mainly the stoics), the Christian asceticism gave a more profound sense in the lives of the young men of the Church.

In this context, asking ourselves what were the Christian and ecclesiastic principles and practices of education in the patristic époque, can help us discover a rich area of pedagogical research, which can provide better understanding of contemporary practical Christian education and help us nowadays harmonize modern principles of education with good practice from a religious and spiritual, and nethertheless orthodox and traditional, point of view.

In my exposé, I will focus on the biographies of the Cappadocian Fathers and of Saint John Chrysostom, as the ones that represent the highest model of Christian education during the 4th century, and I propose myself to stress the relationship between the pagan and Christian background of their education, highlighting their personal ascetic effort for spiritual perfection.

Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (from now on *NPNF*), series II, vol. 9, Albany, Sage Software Albany, OR, 1996, p. 892.

⁵ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homily on Saint Barlaam, the Martyr*, IV, (PG 50, 681): “If all those were forbidden in the time of the Ancient Testament, better now, during the time of grace, when the philosophy is greater (ἐνθα πλείων ἡ φιλοσοφία!)” (romanian transl. by Rev. Dumitru Fecioru in vol. Sfantul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Predici la Sărbători Împărătești și Cuvântări de laudă la sfinți*, Bucharest, Edit. IBMBOR, 2002, p. 495).

⁶ Cf. *Hebrews* 4:9; 11:25.

The Capadocian Fathers: models for monastic and domestic asceticism

We know for sure that the young Basil (b. 329/30-d. last days of 378), originated from the Anatolian province of Cappadocia, reached Athens in 351 for his studies⁷. Regarding the main factors that have influenced Saint Basil of Caesarea, the Cappadocian Father that had the most important (historically and conceptually) influence in the development and flowering of the Cappadocian Orthodox (i.e.: anti-Arian, anti-Semi-Arian, and anti-Eunomian) Theology in the 4th century, the distinguished Orthodox Patristic Professor Stylianos Papadopoulos synthesized those factors as:

“(a) *The family medium*, in which he lived and knew empirically the Tradition of the Church. [For him], Tradition became to be alive and normative, a non-forcibly canon. We can explain the love and the respect that he had for Origen, following his grandmother, Saint Macrina the Elder. The reason is simple: Saint Macrina the Elder was the disciple of Saint Gregory the Wonderworker, who studied many years in Origen’s school in Caesarea of Palestine. (b) *Education* that Saint Basil gained in Caesarea, Constantinople and Athens, represented the most of what human spirit was able to offer at that moment. He loved with passion Greek culture and dedicated to it a lot of his time; he learned it in all its majesty and studied it in all its depth, as humans rarely succeed. His instruction became a river that gave power to the last fiber of his existence. [Greek culture] charmed and abducted him. He studied also astronomy, mathematics and medicine. He only put aside music. (c) *Monasticism and Christian asceticism* represented for Saint Basil the most touching school. In Egypt, specially, he met, admired and started to imitate the way of life of the anachorets and God-contemplatives from the desert. What he loved, he always transformed in his live. The

⁷ G. Bardy, art. *Basile (Saint), évêque de Césarée de Cappadoce* (“Saint Basil, bishop of Caesarea of Cappadocia”), in ”Dictionnaire de Spiritualité”, I, col. 1273-1283, here 1274.

greatness of Christian asceticism became measure of his judgment and of all that he had in his soul: Christian faith and classical education”⁸.

A good Christian tradition in Cappadocia, combined with a strength desire to assimilate Hellenic *paideia*, defines Saint’s Basil educational background for his study voyages in Caesarea of Cappadocia, Constantinople and Athens. Saint Gregory the Theologian (of Nazianzus, 329-390) describes the atmosphere and the principles that lead the two young Christians (the very best friends Saint Basil and Saint Gregory) organize their studies in Athens:

“We seemed to have one soul, inhabiting two bodies. And if we must not believe those whose doctrine is ‘All things are in all;’ yet in our case it was worthy of belief, so did we live in and with each other. The sole business of both of us was virtue, and living for the hopes to come, having retired from this world, before our actual departure hence. With a view to this, were directed all our life and actions, under the guidance of the commandment, as we sharpened upon each other our weapons of virtue; and if this is not a great thing for me to say, being a rule and standard to each other, for the distinction between what was right and what was not. [...]. Our most cherished studies were not the most pleasant, but the most excellent; this being one means of forming young minds in a virtuous or vicious mold. Two ways were known to us, the first of greater value, and the second of smaller consequence: the one leading to our sacred buildings and the teachers there, the other to secular instructors. All others we left to those who would pursue them — to feasts, theatres, meetings, banquets. For nothing is in my opinion of value, save that which leads to virtue and to the improvement of its devotees. [...] We had but one great business and name – to be and to be called Christians (ἡμῖν δὲ τὸ μέγα πρᾶγμα καὶ ὄνομα, Χριστιανούς καὶ εἶναι, καὶ ὀνομάζεσθαι)”⁹.

⁸ Stylianos Papadopoulos, *Patrologie (Patrology)*, II/2, Romanian transl. by Adrian Marinescu, Bucharest, Edit. Bizantină, 2013, p. 45-46.

⁹ Saint Gregory the Theologian (of Nazianzus), *Oratio XLIII*, 20, 21 (*Panegyric Discourse in honor of Saint Basil the Great*), (PG 36, 521C-524B); English transl. by Charles Gordon Browne, in: coll. *NPNF*, series II, vol. 7, Albany, Sage Software Albany, 1996, pp. 775-776 (romanian transl., introd. and notes by Ioana

The basic Christian education received in family by Saints Basil the Great and Gregory the Theologian didn't change the practical purpose of Christian *paideia*: that is *to be* and *to be called* Christian. The clear distinction between *to be* and *to be called* show us that in Cappadocian Fathers' perception, the Christian *paideia* is superior and implies a concrete ontological direct perspective. Christian education means information, but also participation, inner and complete spiritual development. To reach this ontological perspective, Saint Gregory the Theologian, the f says that they had only "two ways known", but the first one (the one leading to the sacred buildings, the Church, where teachers who are in the Church teach the philosophy of Thuth) is more important than the limited way specific to a philosophical education granted in a great metropolis, through interethnic and intercultural exchanges.

Saint Basil of Caesarea confesses in one of his Epistles the relationship he had with the pagan, laic and philosophical culture:

"Much time had I spent in vanity, and had wasted nearly all my youth in the vain labor which I underwent in acquiring the wisdom made foolish by God. Then once upon a time, like a man roused from deep sleep, I turned my eyes to the marvelous light of the truth of the Gospel, and I perceived the uselessness of 'the wisdom of the princes of this world, that come to naught.' I wept many tears over my miserable life and I prayed that guidance might be vouchsafed me to admit me to the doctrines of true religion. First of all was I minded to make some mending of my ways, long perverted as they were by my intimacy with wicked men. Then I read the Gospel, and I saw there that a great means of reaching perfection was the selling of one's goods, the sharing them with the poor, the giving up of all care for this life, and the refusal to allow the soul to be turned by any sympathy to things of earth. And I prayed that I might find some one of the brethren who had chosen this way of life, that with him I might cross life's short and troubled strait. And many did I find in Alexandria, and many in the rest of Egypt, and

Costa, in: Sfântul Grigorie Teologul, *Panegiric în cinstea Sfântului Vasile cel Mare*, coll. *Credința ortodoxă*, Edit. IBMO, Bucharest, 2014, p. 32).

others in Palestine, and in Coele, Syria, and in Mesopotamia. I admired their continence in living, and their endurance in toil; I was amazed at their persistency in prayer, and at their triumphing over sleep; subdued by no natural necessity, ever keeping their souls' purpose high and free, in hunger, in thirst, in cold, in nakedness, they never yielded to the body; they were never willing to waste attention on it; always, as though living in a flesh that was not theirs, they shewed in very deed what it is to sojourn for a while in this life, and what to have one's citizenship and home in heaven. All this moved my admiration. I called these men's lives blessed, in that they did in deed show that they 'bear about in their body the dying of Jesus.' And I prayed that I, too, as far as in me lay, might imitate them"¹⁰.

As it is common nowadays, also it was in the 4th century, that the highest level of education in the most prestigious institutions or universities was not able to assure a spiritual proper quench thirst for youth. It was the case of Saints Basil and Saint Gregory the Theologian. Saint Basil did not stopped searching a good model and personal example for the new and superior Christian way of life (*ethos*), that he did not find in Athens, but he travelled so far to the traditional sites of monasticism, especially in Egypt (in 356, together with Eusthatus of Sebaste¹¹), where he met experienced ascetics. For him, those meetings represented a good confirmation that "Person proceeds the letter (the teachings)"¹².

¹⁰ Saint Basil the Great, *Epistle 223*, II (*to Eusthatus of Sebaste*, dated: 375); (*PG* 32, 824AD); Eng. transl. by Philip Schaff, in: coll. *NPNF*, series II, vol. 8, Albany, Sage Software Albany, 1996, pp. 603-604 (Romanian transl. by Rev. Teodor Bodogae, revised transl. by Tudor Teoteoi, in: *Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, Epistole*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, New Series, 3, Bucharest, Edit. Basilica, 2009, p. 351-352).

¹¹ See a description of the ascetic teachings deduced from the relationship between Saint Basil and Eusthatus of Sebaste, by Charles A. Frazee, "Anatolian Asceticism in the Fourth Century: Eustathios of Sebastea and Basil of Caesarea", in: *The Catholic Historical Review*, LXVI, 1/1980, p. 16-33.

¹² Expression inspired by *2 Corinthians* 2:3, attributed to Styl. Papadopoulos, *Viața Sfântului Vasile cel Mare (The Life of Saint Basil the Great)*, Romanian transl. by Rev. Cornel Coman, Bucharest, Edit. Bizantină, 2003, p. 59.

From this point of view the *enkyklios paideia* (elementary and basic *Curricula* for ancient Greek education), which consisted in the levels of: (1) *trivium* (Grammar, Rhetoric, Dialectic) and (2) *quadrivium* (Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy and Music)¹³, needed to be completed with a good catechetical formation, within the rules and under a spiritual leadership offered by a real School of prayer and impassibility (freedom from sin). As it is evident from the autobiographical texts that we have available, this need was assured by an intense practice of asceticism.

“With my advice and earnest encouragement on the point, he set out from the place with me into Pontus, and presided over the abodes of contemplation (τὸ φροντιστήριον) there. He himself too founded one worthy of mention, as he welcomed the desert together with Elijah and John, those professors of austerity (τῶν φιλοσόφων); thinking this to be more profitable for him than to form any design in reference to the present juncture unworthy of his philosophy, and to ruin in a time of storm the straight course which he was making, where the surges of disputation were lulled to a calm. Yet wonderfully philosophic though his retirement was, we shall find his return still more wonderful”¹⁴.

This place for contemplation, meditation (*frontistirion*, i.e.: literary: monastery) becomes a higher school for practicing the Christian virtues. This school had different professors and different ascetic lessons, keeping the constant principle expressed by the patristic literature (both theological and practical), that the presence of an elder (γέρον) is always necessary into a monastic context of education. In fact, Saint Basil becomes himself latter the founder and the leader of a monastic community on the Isis River in Pontus region. The special

¹³ Shortly described by † Nicolae Corneanu, “Pregătirea școlară a Sfinților Trei Ierarhi” (“Academic Education of the Holy Three Hierarchs”), in vol. *Patristica mirabilia, pagini din literatura primelor veacuri creștine (Patristica mirabilia, Pages from the First Centuries Christian Literature)*, Iași, Edit. Polirom, 2001, p. 103-111, here p. 107.

¹⁴ Saint Gregory the Theologian, *Oratio XLIII*, 29, (PG 36, 536BC); English transl., pp. 781-782 (romanian transl., p. 41-42).

paideia of this school of prayer and meditation consists in the anthology constituted from fragments of Origen (184/5-253/4, *Origen's Philokalia* realized by Cappadocians Basil and Gregory being dated around 358). The texts were synthesized, selected and presented into a coherent first collection of spiritual texts regarding the relationship between philosophy and theology, ancient Greek culture and culture of Gospel, knowledge and truth, Revelation and history. The purpose of this anthology consists in proving that harmony between faith and ration is possible¹⁵. In fact, by the way Saint Gregory the Theologian describes the tension between faith (Church experience) and ration (University formation) in Athens, how can we not be more surprised for having this relation approached within a veritable monastic experience? From this point of view, intellectual included, the experience of an authentic desert monastic life represents, in the biographies of Saint Basil and Gregory the Theologian, the highest level of personal, ontological and practical self-making as a Christian, and later, as bishops of the Church.

The role of the asceticism in the lives of the Cappadocian Fathers did not cancel the intellectual aspect of Christian *paideia*. The life in monastery presumed a personal program for the interpretation of the Bible (the bases of later *Homilies* of Saint Basil are to be dated within this period of monastic experience), interpretation of Tradition (the role of Origen in theology, and the fine correction of his difficult expressions and visions in the final version of his *Filokalia*¹⁶) and interpretation of current monastic life (synthesized in the so-called

¹⁵ Anthony Meredith SJ, *Capadocienii (The Cappadocians)*, romanian transl. by Rev. Constantin Jinga, Bucharest, Edit. Sophia, 2008, p. 87.

¹⁶ I believe that the main discussion about the way a Christian philosopher (theologian) should integrate within his formation an experience of monastic or ascetic retreat, can be explained better if we consider that Origen himself asked for his disciples to adopt a life of solitude and personal asceticism. Cf. John Anthony McGuckin, *Sfântul Grigorie de Nazians, o biografie intelectuală (Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, an intellectual biography)*, Romanian transl. by Adrian Podaru, Cluj-Napoca, Edit. Renașterea, 2013, p. 81.

Moralia and *Asketika* – known in Romanian space as *The Rules* of Saint Basil).

The probably constant perception in the Patristic literature that faith and Revelation are superior to philosophical and human originated social and political concepts, is more provocative in the case of the Cappadocian Fathers, as they best integrated – as instruments, only – the values of Greek *paideia*, and as they continuously stressed that Revelation and Christian *ethos* represents a new and superior philosophy. “Our philosophy (ἡμᾶς φιλοσοφοῦντας)”¹⁷, as it is called by Saint Gregory the Theologian in his epistolary corpus, represents the single correct frame for true spiritual perfection.

The ascetic formation of Saint John Chrysostom

Saint John Chrysostom (b. 349-d. 407), as the only Orthodox representative of the so-called *Antiochian Catechetical School* or *Tradition*, proves one more time, at the most distinguished level, that true practical *paideia* consists in Christian education focused on the study and interpretation of the Holy Scripture, as the Revealed Word of God transmitted to mankind, and on the construction and practice of an Orthodox *ethos*.

Saint John Chrysostom has received during his youth a good philosophical education. The main testimonies regarding his intellectual formation till the age of 18, comes from the Sozomenus’ *Church History*: “John, a man of noble birth and of exemplary life, and possessed of such wonderful powers of eloquence and persuasion that he was declared by the sophist, Lybanus the Syrian, to surpass all the orators of the age”¹⁸. We have enough arguments to consider that those

¹⁷ Saint Gregory the Theologian, *Epistle* 58 (PG 37, 113C).

¹⁸ Sozomenus, *Church History* (from now on *CH*), VIII, 2, (PG 67, 1513B); Eng. transl. by Chester D. Hartranft, in: coll. *NPNF*, series III, vol. 2, Albany, Sage Software Albany, 1996, p. 892. See also, Socrates, *CH*, VI, 3, (PG 67, 665AB); Eng. transl. by A.C. Zenos, in: coll. *NPNF*, series III, vol. 2, Albany, Sage Software Albany, 1996. p. 327.

sophist and intellectual maximal descriptions of his philosophical formation in Sozomenus' testimonial does not represent a hagiographical later historical retouch. We know for sure that between Lybanus the Syrian (311-392/3) and Saint John Chrysostom there was a continuous competition for imposing in the city situated on the Orontes river, the real spiritual and intellectual Capital of the East, the values of the mythical Greek pagan religion that Lybanus warmly thought for, or the Bible-based moral and intellectual values of the Church, praised by the young lecturer and later priest in Antioch, Saint John¹⁹.

In his biography, the turnout to Christian intellectual and practical formation represented a real shock, in counter fact with his first classical rhetoric education and his foreseeable destiny. He made this astonished Christian education start probably in 360/1.

“He learned rhetoric from Lybanus, and philosophy from Andragathius. When it was expected that he would embrace the legal profession and take part in the career of an advocate, he determined to exercise himself in the sacred books and to practice philosophy according to the law of the Church. He had as teachers of this philosophy, Carterius and Diodorus, two celebrated presidents of ascetic institutions”²⁰.

The same pattern that we have seen in the biographies of the Cappadocian Fathers is now totally applied also in the biography of Saint John Chrysostom. After a prodigious and promising formation and rhetoric carrier that already begun, a complete 180 degrees return to the school of the Bible and to the harsh ascetical conditions of the *Askitirion of Antioch*. Even that he had a Christian education assured by his mother in family, we stress the fact that his publically assumed

¹⁹ Adrian Podaru, „Ioan și reformarea Antiohiei: un proiect eşuat” (“John and the Reformation of Antioch, a Failed Project”), in vol. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilii la Statui*, I (*Homilies on Statues*, Greek and Romanian text), Adrian Muraru (ed. in chief), introd. study, Romanian transl. and notes by Adrian Podaru, Iași, Edit. Polirom, 2011, p. 17-57, here p. 36.

²⁰ Sozomenus, *CH*, VIII, 2; *PG* 67, 1513C-1516A (eng. transl., p. 893).

change of career represented a complete personal and spiritual accomplishment. In fact, “the *Askitirion* was a kind of school which functioned on the monastic principles, meaning ascetic, where [the pupils] studied first the interpretation of the Scripture, and also the faith of the Church, theology generally speaking”²¹.

In this ascetic school, Saint John had several future famous colleagues: Theodor, future bishop of Mopsuestia (350-428), Maximus, future bishop of Seleucia. The Syrian theology is marked by a profound sense of ascetic effort, by a very severe and rough approach of the personal human overfulfilment, and, nether the less, by a very profound, mystical and lyrical theology. It is evident the fact that Saint John participated in this special and intensive theological context as a definitive educational program. But it is also evident, that for his thirst of knowledge, and for his desire of Christian accomplishment, even the severe *Askiritikon* was not enough.

We have testimonies of a totally 6 years of severe ascetic singular experiences between 372 and 378. After the death of his mother he experienced a retreat in the Silpios Mountain, near Antioch, first 4 years in the company of a syriac elder (γέρων), a spiritual leader of a small 3-4 persons community, and afterwards, 2 more years in total solitude, practicing prayer and Bible reading and interpretation.

“Being pushed by the conscience (ὕπὸ τοῦ συνειδοτήης), he did not thank himself with the labors within the city, being in the prime of youth (τῆς νεότητος), although he was in all the power of his mind (εἰ καὶ σῶον ἦν τὸ φρονοῦν), he ran to the nearby mountains. After he had meet there a syriac elder, who was fighting for abstinence, he followed him in this tough life (σκληραγωγίαν = ascetism, discipline of life), living with him for twice two years”²².

²¹ Styl. Papadopoulos, *Viața, activitatea și opera Sfântului Ioan Hrisostom (Life, Activity and Work of Saint John Chrysostom)*, romanian transl. by Octavian Gordon, Bucharest, Edit. Bizantină, 2013, p. 29-30.

²² Paladios of Elenopolis, *Dialogue about the life of Chrysostom*, V, (PG 47, 18); Romanian transl. by Rev. Constantin Cornițescu, in vol. *Viața Sfântului Ioan*

The fact that this spiritual and ascetic retreat had an educational reason is explained even more by the same hagiographer Paladius of Helenopolis:

“He retreated himself in a cave, wishing to remain hidden. And living in there for three times eight months, he spent the most of the time without sleeping, researching the Testaments of Christ, for the banish of the ignorance (πρὸς ἐξοστρακισμὸν τῆς ἀγνοίας)”²³.

This veritable ostracism of the lack of knowledge represents, in the view of Saint John’s main biographer, the sense of his extreme monastic experience. From this point of view, we can propose a link through his entire intellectual and practical formation, understanding the fact that his prominent rhetorical career needed to be completed, first with the organized Christian knowledge provided by the *Askiritikon*, and secondly, needed to be enforced by a personal fight against his entire lack of knowledge.

The pattern we have observed is one more time proved to be the way rhetoric and Bible, philosophy and theology, pagan and Christian formation are combined in the lives and the teachings of the Fathers of the Church in the 4th Christian century. Nevertheless, the term *experience* (πειρα) ensures the main explanation of this special *Curriculum vitae*, which contains almost mandatory (1) the achievement of the highest level of Greek culture and the perspective of a laic career, (2) the return – through asceticism and personal *inner and complete reconstruction of the paideia* – to the culture of the Revelation (Bible, prayer and Liturgy), and (3) to the serving of the Church, of the Christian theology (as teacher and priest), and

Gură de Aur în relatările istoricilor bisericești: Paladie, Teodor al Trimitundei, Socrates, Sozomen și Fer. Teodoret al Cirului (The life of Saint John Chrysostom in the narrations of Church historians: Paladios, Theodor of Trimitunda, Socrates, Sozomenus, Saint Theodoret of Cyrus), Bucharest, Edit. IBMBOR, 2001, p. 18.

²³ Paladios of Elenopolis, *Dialogue...*, V, (PG 47, 18); romanian transl., p. 19.

afterwards, when the times need it, to the governance of the Church (as archbishop of Constantinople).

Pedagogical Patristic Patterns

A correct application of pedagogical principles requires mainly that we have assumed proper hierarchies of all priorities which define the educational act. The Fathers of the Church have always made education according with their new and (if we can say) revolutionary Christian anthropology, that the Incarnation of Christ had made possible and actual. This is the context in which we are called to understand the lesson of Christian practical *paideia*. Teaching and learning the texts and the values of the Christian *paideia* requires each time an inner reconstruction of all personal achievements that one had previously won in education. That doesn't mean that the principles of Greek ancient education are undesirable, but that the so-called εὐσεβία (*eusebia* = literal: good-godliness, literary: ethos, good way of life)²⁴ is better. In the vision of Saint John Chrysostom, this *eusebia* is appropriated through prayer, fast, reading and interpreting the Bible, exercising Christian communion in the body of the Church, monastically, i.e.: in desert or monastic schools of prayer, but also within the walls of the main cities of the Empire.

In one of his richest pages that synthesize Christian education principles, Saint John Chrysostom says:

“This is the greatest riches. Seek not how to give him reputation and high character in outward learning, but consider deeply how you shall teach him to despise the glory that belongs to this present life. By this means would he become more distinguished and more truly glorious. This it is possible for the poor man and the rich man alike to accomplish. These are lessons which a man does not learn from a master, nor by art,

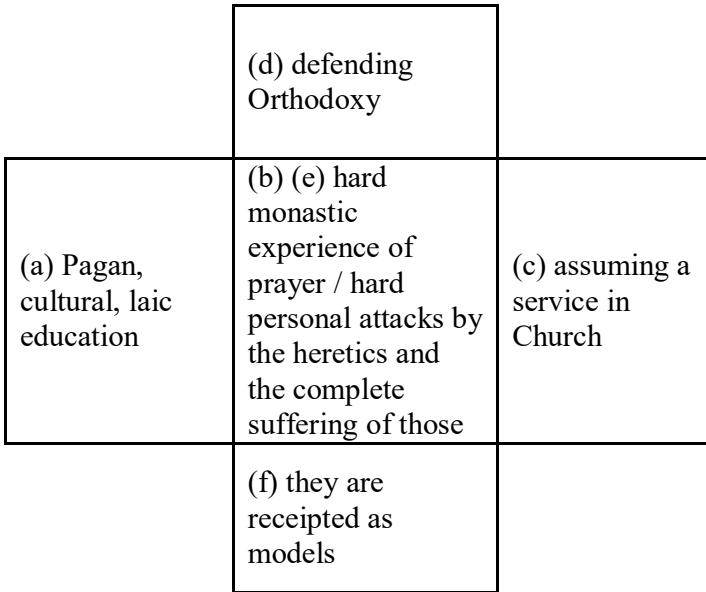
²⁴ *Eusebia* is the central concept regarding Christian ethos in Saint John Chrysostom, cf. Styl. Papadopoulos, *Gândirea teologică a Sfântului Ioan Hrisostom (Theological thinking of Saint John Chrysostom)*, romanian transl. by Sabin Preda, Bucharest, Edit. Bizantină, 2013, p. 13.

but by means of the divine oracles. Seek not how he shall enjoy a long life here, but how he shall enjoy a boundless and endless life hereafter. Give him the great things, not the little things. Hear what Paul saith, ‘Bring them up in the chastening and admonition of the Lord’; study not to make him an orator, but train him up to be a philosopher (literal: ἀλλὰ φιλοσοφεῖν παίδευε). In the want of the one there will be no harm whatever; in the absence of the other, all the rhetoric in the world will be of no advantage. Tempers are wanted, not talking; character, not cleverness; deeds, not words. These gain a man the kingdom. These confer what are benefits indeed. Whet not his tongue, but cleanse his soul. I do not say this to prevent your teaching him these things, but to prevent your attending to them exclusively. Do not imagine that the monk alone stands in need of these lessons from Scripture. Of all others, the children just about to enter into the world specially need them”²⁵.

As we can see from the schema presented below, that the term of experience relies in the center of Christian formative route assumed by the Holy Fathers of the Church, at least by those cited in this study. The Holy Fathers do not speak of an only biblical or only liturgical education, but most important, they stress – in their lives as seen from their biographies and in their selected texts – that a Christian education without a powerful and deep ontological approach is not possible.

The chronological pattern of Christian education and formation, applied in the lives of the Holy Fathers cited in this exposé, have in center of each period of their formation and activity the direct experience of God, in monastic or urban context:

²⁵ Saint John Chrysostom, *Commentary and Homilies to Epistle of Saint Paul to Ephesians*, XXI, (PG 62, 151-152); eng. transl. by Rev. Gross Alexander, in coll. *NPNF*, series II, vol. 13, Albany, Sage Software Albany, 1996, p. 329-330.



Better than information is life, better than art is prayer, better than the glory of rhetoric is the art of practical philosophy (in the sense of salvation, divinization, *theosis*). This hierarchy of principles also confirms the powerful link between theology and pedagogy, the last one being seen and understood as a mainly practical, theological way of education. The ontological experience of Christian learning, meaning the experience of inner renewal of the Christian youth as a true philosopher of the Incarnated Word, confirms the central theological pedagogy of the Fathers of the Church²⁶, and also the practical superiority of Christian education.

²⁶ David Rylaarsdam, *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy. The Coherence of his Theology and Preaching*, (*Oxford Early Christian Studies*), Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 96.

Conclusions

From many points of view, the actual postmodern era seems alike the era of profound pagan syncretism and intercultural exchanges that characterized the Late Antiquity in the Mediterranean space. Why couldn't we propose also, keeping a positive sense of history and Christian mission, within the boundaries of our postmodern society, several much closer implementations of the patristic perspectives and directions, in the matter of Christian education? If we analyze the way we can apply ancient patristic patterns inspired from the experience of the Holy Fathers in the mission of the Church, we will find out that, without doubt, this can help the constant Church's effort for organizing the mission and enriching the results of spreading the *kerygma* in the contemporary society.

The most important pattern that we have identified and stressed is that laic and non-Christian formation can be transformed into Christian and ecclesiastic education only through authentic experience (πεῖρα) of God. This experience is relied with serious ascetic participation. Maybe we can say that proposing to youth nowadays a serious ascetic experience may be not so fruitfully. But in fact this kind of serious ascetic – in a very large sense of the word – experience, can offer real participation in the actual Christian modern *paideia*. The Holy Fathers of the Church, when they realized that the knowledge of the world represents real ignorance (in the sense provided by *1 Corinthians* 1:18,21,23), they assumed a proper inner reconsolidation of experience of God, maturely, within the hole data given by the real aim of Christian life, already assumed and followed. Christian knowledge understood and archived as information, without a proper school of prayer and without an experience of intensive effort for receiving the grace of inner transformation, will make the mission of the Church rest only in the cultural and religious domain. The results of an only intellectual approach may be representative, but formal, free of real power of conversion and confession. Imitating the Fathers of the Church requires imitating also their experience, meaning also their route, which involved a formative monastic retreat.

The practice of recent Orthodox mission amongst youth in Romania can testify that young people prefer better to assume a completely full Christian way of life, than to get temporarily accommodated with it, as a continuous *aggiornamento* of the real *eusebia*, i.e.: the ancient – and still valid – Christian *ethos*. Each kind of possible relief regarding the Christian way of life does not transform the non-Christian *ethos* of the contemporary society into a Christian one, but on the contrary, makes more difficult the ontological passage from one to another. Also, the testimonies of youth who have chosen to live the conversion to a full Christian way of life, even that is more and more difficult to keep it

assumed, confirm once more that without an ascetic effort, the Christian way of live remains a theory, a social or philosophical discussion, a good moral context for reporting to the actual challenges of the society, but less a real way of salvation and conversion for those who need it.

Speaking about this imitation of the educational and formation route from the Holy Fathers, as they had obligatory a spiritual father during their Christian ascetic formation (Saint Basil had the help of elders Elijah and John, and Saint John Chrysostom, of his syriac elder), we have to stress that direct experience of God must be always helped by a person capable of spiritually guidance, who has to assume consciously the task of leading this experience. The contemporary *gerons* (elders, spiritual fathers) are to be found and valorized nowadays for the mission of the Church dedicated to youth and to all in need.

Religious education in Romania has to assure, beside the formal and intellectual dimension of Christian *paideia*, also the practical and ascetical dimension. We have to offer the means for a proper and serious ontological conversion to the Christian *ethos*. We can make this offer by valorizing better the monastic educational spaces (understood as *frontistirions*). Romanian monasteries can become the proper milieu for youth to practice different Christian ascetic experiences. We mention only several experiences inspired by the patristic educational pattern that we have identified: experience of work (monastic camps, workshops and workhand activities in monasteries) and experience of prayer (monastic liturgical cycle valued for the mission of the Church). Regarding the difficult task of learning the basis of Christian culture and Tradition, the monastic librarian thesaurus valued as a space for explanation and solving the continuous tension between world and Church, philosophy and theology, human ideal – so seductive for youth – and Reveled Truth of Incarnation – so difficult to appropriate –, can assure a proper experience of this difficult, but unavoidable task.

For thus, I conclude that a proper application of the patristic pattern of personal experience and ascetic commitment in education must be assumed by the Orthodox Church in Romania (educational institutions and communities), as a real proposition. We need to invite and support youth to assume complete fast, constant and consistent prayer program, total assumption of physical pre-marriage abstinence, to which we add an enriched program for a compete route of the lecture of Holy Scripture and of the representative texts of the Holy Fathers of the Church, not as an intellectual defiance, but as personal way of assuming the life as Orthodox Christian in a postmodern society. For those responsible with the content of Christian education, it is important to assure for youth the space and the atmosphere for a proper direct and ascetic experience of God.

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