

# HESYCHASM AND PRIMACY. A HISTORICAL-CANONICAL ANALYSIS

**Marius-Virgil BOLEA**

*Seminarul Teologic Ortodox „Sfântul Simion Ștefan Alba Iulia  
virgil\_bolea@yahoo.com*

**Abstract:** The 13th-14th centuries opened an era in which remarkable and essential events took place, events that would mark the development of relations between East and West to the present day. The fourteenth century itself is one of the most fascinating periods in Byzantine history, although one is usually treated in this way. Although historical periods, like humans, retain their uniqueness, they are certainly the result of events that preceded them.

The hesychastic controversy was undoubtedly the most important theological dispute of the last period of the Byzantine Empire. The theological aspects that he brought to the fore allowed him to define and distinguish the specific traditions of the Orthodox East, as well as to shape the development of future dialogues with the West.

**Keywords:** *hesychasm, controversy, papal primacy, theological dialogue, synod, tomos.*

## **Preliminaries**

The 13th-14th centuries opened an era in which remarkable and essential events took place, events that would mark the development of relations between the East and the West until today. The 14th century itself is one of the

most fascinating periods of Byzantine history, although it is not usually treated this way. Although historical periods, like people, retain a uniqueness of their own, they are certainly the result of events that preceded them.

In this framework, the political and social upheavals produced by the civil wars and succession struggles during the House of Palaiologos, as well as the theological disputes they brought to the fore, allowed to define and distinguish the specific traditions of the Orthodox East, as well as to shape the future dialogues with the West.

Even if the various synods aiming at the union, held in the century following the Hesychastic controversy and shortly before the fall of Constantinople to the Turks, had theoretically remarkable results, through some compromises generated by political interests, at a practical level these results could not have been applied and failed, due to the enduring legacy of open and fair debate that characterized the Hesychasm dispute.

In this context, the holy teachings, the perpetuation of a theology drawn from the common Christian experience, rather than from philosophical speculation, as well as the goals of the spiritual life, in the Eastern vision, came into open conflict with the rationalist and Hellenistic assumptions of Western scholasticism and with the ecclesiological foundations and anthropological aspects of the theory of papal primacy, which scholasticism, knowingly or not, supported within the West.

### **I. Development of Events**

The Hesychast controversy was undoubtedly the most important theological dispute in the last period of the

Byzantine Empire<sup>1</sup>. The theological aspects that it brought to the fore allowed to define and distinguish the specific traditions of the Orthodox East, as well as to shape the future dialogues with the West<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> V. Lossky defines hesychasm as “the method of inner prayer or of the mind, which belongs to the ascetic tradition of the Eastern Church and which undoubtedly goes back to remote antiquity. Passing from teacher to disciple orally, by example and by spiritual guidance, this teaching of inner prayer was not fixed in writing until the beginning of the 11th century, in a treatise attributed to Saint Simeon the New Theologian. Later, it was the subject of special writings by Nicephorus the Monk (thirteenth century), and, above all, by Saint Gregory Sinait, who established this work at the beginning of the fourteenth century in the Holy Mountain” (Vladimir Lossky, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit* (original title – *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*), translated by fr. Vasile Răducă, Humanitas Publishing, Bucharest, 2010, pp. 238-239). Father G. Papandemetriou defines hesychasm in even more precise terms: “Hesychasm is a mysticism in which, through spiritual exercises and in silence, the mystic attains the vision of the uncreated divine light and glory of God. It is not the vision of God’s essence, but of His presence and activity, of His powers. This contrasts with the Eastern mysticism of complete self-absorption through union with the divine essence. It also contrasts with Western sensual mysticism, in which the mystic physically unites with Christ (...). The hesychastic movement advocated a mysticism that was possible through *hesychia*. The monks of Mount Athos practised the hesychastic method to obtain the vision of uncreated light and eternal glory (...). The mystics emphasized the method of contemplation in *hesychia*, in which the person sits and focuses his mind on his heart, the centre of the soul while repeating the Jesus prayer: «Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner»”, according to Fr. George Papademetriou, *Introduction to St. Gregory Palamas*, Philosophical Library, New York, 1973, p. 22; for a semantic analysis of the term “hesychasm”, see J. Meyendorff, *L’Hésychasme: Problèmes de Sémantique*, in P. Lévy et al. (eds.), *Mélanges D’Histoire des Religions Offeres à H.- Ch. Puech*, Paris, 1973, pp. 543-547.

<sup>2</sup> In this sense, see the analysis of fr. Ass. Prof. PhD. Grigore Dinu Moș, *Ortodoxie și Occident: problema influențelor eterodoxe în teologia ortodoxă (Orthodoxy and the*

The main protagonists of the dispute were Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), together with his supporters, called "Palamites", and Barlaam of Calabria (ca. 1290-1348), whence the other camp is often called that of the "Barlaamites". Gregory Palamas was initially a monk of Mount Athos, and then, from 1349, Archbishop of Thessalonica<sup>3</sup>.

He wrote no less than sixty works in defence of Hesychasm, one of which in particular against the scholastic identification of the essence and attributes of God. He found fifty heresies in his opponents and spoke vehemently against the Latins, writing a work refuting the Latinizing work of Patriarch John Bekkos (John XI, 1275-1282)<sup>4</sup> and giving the

---

*West: The Problem of Heterodox Influences in Orthodox Theology*), Renașterea Publishing, Cluj-Napoca, 2013, in particular pp. 214-249.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding the life and teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas, see in particular Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama (The life and Teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas)*, Scripta Publishing, Bucharest, 1993, 303 p. (and reed.), in particular, pp. 9-14 and 24-165 (with the related bibliography). Other significant bio-bibliographical works have also been written by John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (reed.), St Vladimir's Seminary, 2010, 248 p. and *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (and the Romanian translation by Adrian Alexandrescu and Măriuca Alexandrescu, Nemira Publishing, Bucharest, 2014, 616 p.); George C. Papademetriou, *Introduction to St. Gregory Palamas*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005, 190 p; C. Athanasopoulos (ed.), *Triune God: Incomprehensible but Knowable – The Philosophical and Theological Significance of St. Gregory Palamas for Contemporary Philosophy and Theology*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, 357 p. and *St. Gregory Palamas, (Neo-) Platonist and Aristotelian Metaphysics: the response of Orthodox Mystical Theology to the Western impasse of intellectualism and essentialism*, in C. Athanasopoulos and C. Schneider (eds.), *Divine Essence and Divine Energies: Ecumenical Reflections on the Presence of God in Eastern Orthodoxy*, James Clarke&Co, 2013, pp. 50-67 a.s.o.

<sup>4</sup> His main work, *Despre unirea și pacea dintre Bisericile Vechii și Noii Rome (On the Union and Peace between the Churches of Old and New Rome)* is found in PG 141, col. 151-157.

treatises used against the double procession of the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup> His opponents called him a ditheist, while he considered them Arians, Sabellians, and Epicureans<sup>6</sup>.

Varlaam, his main opponent, was a monk of Greek origin from Calabria<sup>7</sup>, a “Westerner”, as Vryonis<sup>8</sup> calls him, who came to Constantinople during the reign of Andronicus III Palaeologus (1328-1341). At first, he opposed the Latins, as Papadakis<sup>9</sup> notes, but eventually, he wrote in defence of the union with Rome, the Filioque, and papal primacy. He won a prominent place in Constantinople, where, as Hussey

---

<sup>5</sup> The work of Saint Gregory was published in Greek in PG, volumes 150-151.

It was translated into Romanian under the original title *Opere complete* (*Complete Works*), by a team made up of priest Cristian Chivu, deacon Cornel Coman, Adrian Tănăsescu, Caliopie Papacioc and Cristina-Costena Rogobete, Gândul Aprins Publishing, Bucharest, 2013-2016.

<sup>6</sup> I. Ševčenko, *The Decline of Byzantium Seen through the Eyes of its Intellectuals*, in I. Ševčenko (ed.), *Society and Intellectual Life in Late Byzantium*, Variorum Reprints, London, 1981, p. 171.

<sup>7</sup> Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama* (*The life and Teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas*), pp. 14-21; see also Martin Jugie, *Barlaam de Seminara*, in Alfred-Henri-Marie Baudrillart (ed.), *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques*, volume VI, Letouzey et Ané, Paris, 1932, col. 817-834; John Meyendorff, *Un mauvais théologien de l'unité au quatorzième siècle: Barlaam le Calabrais*, in *Irenikon* 2 (1955), pp. 47-65 a.s.o.

<sup>8</sup> Speros Vryonis Jr., *Byzantium and Europe*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1967, p. 170. Beyond this observation, Barlaam was certainly an Italo-Greek born in southern Italy. Although Hussey describes him, in imprecise and potentially misleading language, as "a monk of the Greek Rite from southern Italy" (J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire*, p. 256), he was, of course, an Orthodox monk of Greek origin, like many of the Calabrians and southern Italians.

<sup>9</sup> Aristeidis Papadakis, *The Christian East and the Rise of the Papacy: The Church 1071-1453 A.D.*, p. 287, states verbatim that "his devotion to the Eastern Church was unquestionable".

observes, he was a “*persona grata*” in the influential circles of the Byzantine aristocracy<sup>10</sup>. In 1339 he was part of the Byzantine delegation sent to Avignon. In 1348 he left Constantinople and became bishop of Gerace, in Calabria<sup>11</sup>. The date of his death is unknown, probably around 1350. From this Barlaam, Petrarch learned the Greek language. Other opponents of the Hesychastic movement were Gregory Akindynos (ca. 1300-1348)<sup>12</sup> and Nicephorus Gregoras (1295-1360)<sup>13</sup>. Akindynos, a friend and contemporary of Barlaam, himself a monk, wrote a work against the Hesychasts, entitled *Peri ousias kai energeias*, in six volumes, of which the first two are nothing more than translations from the work of Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentes*<sup>14</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire*, p. 256. Although it can be argued that Barlaam was loyal to the Eastern Church, he was still very much a product of Western thought. He indeed enjoyed an excellent academic reputation among the theologians in the Byzantine capital, where he held courses including at the University, but his Aristotelian inclinations influenced his perception of Orthodox spirituality. As Professor C. Tsirpanlis rightly observes, Barlaam's view was dominated by “Manicheanism or Western rational dualism” (C. Tsirpanlis, *Introduction to Eastern Patristic Thought and Orthodox Theology*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1990, p. 7).

<sup>11</sup> G. V. Gianelli, *Un Progetto di Barlaam per l'Unione delle Chiese*, Vatican, 1946, pp. 185-201.

<sup>12</sup> Juan Nadal Canellas, *Le rôle de Grégoire Akindynos dans la controverse hésychaste du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle à Byzance*, in Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala (ed.), *Eastern Crossroads: Essays on Medieval Christian Legacy*, Gorgias Press, Piscataway, 2007, pp. 31-60.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding his life and work see in particular Rodolphe Guiland, *Essai sur Nicéphore Grégoras. L'homme et l'œuvre*, Paul Geuthner, Paris, 1926, 308 p.

<sup>14</sup> Barlaam's work was published in PG, vol. 151.

The historian Nicephorus Gregoras was also one of the main rivals of Hesychasm. He arrives at the court of the young emperor and is educated by the most famous scholars of the time, the patriarch John Glycus (John XIII, 1316-1320), and the great orator Theodore Metochites (ca. 1270-1332), becoming himself, probably the most distinguished scholar of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Greek world<sup>15</sup>.

He wrote books on theology, philosophy, astronomy, history, rhetoric, poetry and grammar. His best-known work is *On Roman History*, in thirty-seven volumes, which describes the period between 1204 and 1329<sup>16</sup>. Among so many concerns, he meets Barlaam, with whom he allies himself against the Palamites and the Hesychasts. He wrote a series of controversial works to contradict them, recounting this dispute in his *History* (volumes XV, XVIII, XIX and XXII), obviously subjectively<sup>17</sup>.

Like many of the anti-Hesychasts, Gregoras was an outspoken Latinist. When Barlaam opposed the Latins, Gregoras wrote against him; with Palama he discussed the question of union with the West in a friendly and conciliatory manner. Eventually, Gregoras falls out of favour with the Byzantine imperial court and is deposed.

On the other hand, the Athonite monks could have contemplated the uncreated divine light without drawing

---

<sup>15</sup> Regarding his life and work see in particular E. de Vries-van der Velden, *Théodore Métochite: Une reevaluation*, J. G. Gieben, Amsterdam, 1987, 276 p. a.s.o.

<sup>16</sup> The main work of Nicephorus Gregoras, *Romaïke historia*, was edited by L. Schopen in two volumes in Bonn, between 1829-1830; it is also found, along with other writings, in PG, vol. 148-149.

<sup>17</sup> T. Hart, *Nicephoros Gregoras: Historian of the Hesychast Controversy*, in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 2 (1951), p. 171.

attention to the matter had not the endless Latin-Byzantine controversies and political influences intervened. They had already been practising their system for a considerable time, when Barlaam, on reaching Constantinople, began to proclaim it “laden with superstition and absurd”. However, some opposition existed before<sup>18</sup>.

Some contemporaries claimed to have heard Palamas boast that he could see the light of God with his own eyes and accused him of blasphemy; but since Isaiah, Patriarch of Constantinople (1323-1334), himself a former monk of Athos and disciple of Palamas, supported him, the opposition was not very successful. However, from the year 1339, when Barlaam arrived in the city, the real dispute began, which for twenty years tore Byzantine theology apart, caused enormous agitation in Constantinople, the Holy Mountain and all the great centres of the Orthodox Eastern world, even leading to active persecution<sup>19</sup>.

Barlaam, like all the opponents of Hesychasm, based his objections chiefly on a vehement denial of the possibility of the existence of an uncreated light, which nevertheless was not the essence of God; throughout the controversy, he and his followers used the arguments they had learned in the West to show the impossibility of such special qualities in God. These were largely influenced by rationalism and Aristotelianism<sup>20</sup>.

---

<sup>18</sup> Hans-Georg Beck, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe din Imperiul bizantin* (original title, in German – *Geschichte der orthodoxen Kirche im byzantinischen Reich*), translated by Vasile Adrian Carabă, Nemira Publishing, Bucharest, 2012, pp. 444-445.

<sup>19</sup> C. N. Tsirpanlis, *Byzantine Humanism and Hesychasm in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, in *The Patristic and Byzantine Review* 12 (1993), pp. 13-23.

<sup>20</sup> Ostrogorsky believes that in these debates, “Barlaam was defeated because his rationalist and Aristotelian approach did not resonate with



He satirizes intensely what he calls the “homphalopsychia” of monks who sit with bowed heads reflecting on their own person and makes various accusations against Palamas’ life and manners. Following Isaiah, John XIV (Ioan Calecas, 1334-1347) becomes patriarch. Barlaam called for a synod to settle the matter. For a while, the patriarch refuses to take the matter seriously; finally, as the dispute grew fiercer, on June 10-11, 1341, the first synod of the Hesychast controversy was convened in Constantinople, presided over by Emperor Andronicus III<sup>21</sup>.

This first synod deals with only two issues: 1) whether the light on Mount Tabor (that of the Transfiguration), was created or uncreated and 2) whether or not a particular prayer used by Hesychasts contains ditheistic elements<sup>22</sup>. The enormous influence of the court monks and the lack of energy of the patriarch (who was on the side of Barlaam), turned this first synod into a victory of Hesychasm<sup>23</sup>. On both counts the Hesychast monks and their theory are approved,

---

the Byzantine public” (G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1969, p. 512).

<sup>21</sup> Regarding this synod, see J. Bois, *Le Synode Hesychaste de 1341*, in *Echos d’Orient* 6 (1903), pp. 50-60, and concerning the synodal procedure, see G. D. Dragas, *The Synodical Procedure followed in the Hesychastic Disputes*, in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 45 (2000), pp. 631-646.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory Palamas, *Dialogue between an Orthodox and a Barlaamite* (translated by Sara J. Denning-Bolle), Binghamton, New York, 1999, pp. 3-4; A. Carile, *Η Θεσσαλονίκη ως Κέντρο Ορθοδόξου Θεολογίας- Προοπτικές στη Σημερινή Ευρώπη*, Thessaloniki, 2000, pp. 131-140.

<sup>23</sup> \*\*\*, *Conciliar Tome of 1341*, in G. E. H. Palmer (ed.), *The Philokalia: The Eastern Christian Spiritual Texts*, volume IV, Athens, 1961, pp. 418-425; a summary of it at Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama (The life and Teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas)*, pp. 84-98.

and Barlaam is forced to withdraw his charges. Shortly afterwards he left Constantinople forever, his cause being taken up by Gregory Akindynos<sup>24</sup>.

The emperor dies a few days after the council. The new emperor, John VI Cantacuzino (1341-1354), who gradually usurped imperial power, was always a friend of Palamas and the Hesychast monks. The second Hesychast council, held under Cantacuzino, but without a patriarch, condemns Akindynos and introduces a new element, namely that of presenting him and all his opponents as Latinists who were trying to destroy Orthodoxy<sup>25</sup>.

In 1345 the patriarch Ioan Calecas convened the third synod. By now he had certainly made up his mind to resist the Hesychasts. This synod, under his leadership, excommunicates Palamas and Isidore Buchiras, bishop-elect of Monembasia in Thessaly, one of Palamas' disciples. Buchiras and Palamas retract their "heresy", deciding to wait for a more suitable occasion. This came in 1347. Then, their protector, John Cantacuzino, entered Constantinople triumphantly, being crowned emperor.

The other group (that of the minor emperor John Palaeologus and his mother Anne of Savoy) was now helpless. The controversy is complicated by a political issue. Cantacuzino and his friends were Hesychasts; those in the group of the Palaiologos were Barlaamites. As long as Cantacuzino

---

<sup>24</sup> The work of Grigorie Akindynos was published in PG, vol. 151.

<sup>25</sup> In his dispute with Palamas, Akindynos criticized Palamas, accusing him of distorting the patristic writings to defend the Hesychasts, acting "not as a theologian building on a time-consolidated tradition, but as an innovator", cf. J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire*, p. 259.

triumphed, the Hesychasts triumphed as well. If he realizes that Hesychasm is identified with the cause of the Orthodox Church against the Latins, the other group has failed. On February 2, 1347, the fourth Hesychast Synod takes place<sup>26</sup>.

It deposed the patriarch Ioan Calecas and excommunicated Akindynos. Isidore Buchiras, who was excommunicated by the third synod, now becomes patriarch (Isidore I, 1347-1349). In the same year, 1347, the Barlaamites convene the fifth synod, refusing to recognize Isidore, and during which they excommunicate Palamas. From this moment Nicephorus Gregoras becomes the main opponent of Hesychasm<sup>27</sup>.

Isidore I dies in 1349, and the Hesychasts replace him with one of their monks, Callistus I (1350-1354). In May 1351, a sixth synod meets in the Palace of Blachernae, under Cantacuzino. Gregoras defends his point of view boldly and skilfully, but the Hesychasts, deposing the Barlaamite bishops, win the day. During this synod, six questions concerning the essence and attributes of God are answered, all in the Hesychastic manner, while Palamas was declared without doubt orthodox, and Gregoras condemned<sup>28</sup>.

---

<sup>26</sup> Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama (The life and Teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas)*, pp. 125-130.

<sup>27</sup> J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire*, p. 259. Objectively, he does not consider Gregoras to be a philolatin, as he had been mistaken for centuries.

<sup>28</sup> Aristeides Papadakis, *The Christian East and the Rise of the Papacy: The Church 1071-1453 A.D.*, p. 292. Donald M. Nicol states that "it is disappointing that a historian and philosopher of Gregoras' stature degenerated into a fierce polemicist towards the end of his life", cf. Donald M. Nicol, *The Last Centuries of Byzantium, 1261-1453*, p. 234.

The synod finally issues a decree in defence of Palamas and his views (*Tomos*)<sup>29</sup>, which eventually came to be regarded as a dogmatic definition of the Orthodox Church regarding the doctrine of uncreated and existent energies<sup>30</sup>. From this moment it can be said that Hesychasm defeated all opposition. Gregoras was arrested and held in custody in his own home. He was not released until Cantacuzino (who will have the eternal infamy of being the first to invite the Turks to Europe) was deposed, and the Palaiologos triumphed in 1354<sup>31</sup>.

Cantacuzino then retires to Athos, becoming a monk under the name Joasaph, and will spend the rest of his life writing a history of his own times and meditating on the uncreated light<sup>32</sup>. This history in four volumes covers the period 1320-1356, that is precisely the era of the Hesychast controversy<sup>33</sup>. Being written by a violent partisan, it forms an interesting contrast to that of Gregoras. After the deposition of Cantacuzino, the Barlaamites convene an anti-hesychast synod in Ephesus, but the patriarchs of Constantinople and the great mass of the faithful have already become too firmly convinced that Hesychasm is part of the treasury of Orthodoxy.

---

<sup>29</sup> The text of this tomos can be found at Gregory Palamas, *Tomosuri dogmatice. Viața. Slujba. Scrieri I (Dogmatic Volumes. Life. Work. Writings I)*, translated by Archdeac. Ioan Ică jr., Deisis Publishing, Sibiu, 2009, pp. 271-332.

<sup>30</sup> Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama (The life and Teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas)*, pp. 141-164.

<sup>31</sup> J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire*, p. 259.

<sup>32</sup> He dies on June 15, 1393, at the age of 90 or 91, cf. John Meyendorff, *Introduction à l'Etude de Grégoire Palamas*, in *Patristica Sorbonensia* 38 (1959), p. 178.

<sup>33</sup> The main work of Emperor John VI Cantacuzino, *Historiai*, was edited by L. Schopen in 3 volumes in Bonn, between 1828-1832; it is also found, along with other writings, in PG, volumes 143-144.

From this moment on, Hesychasm will always be triumphant. Around 1360, Palama dies<sup>34</sup>. In 1368, a seventh council held in Constantinople (regarding this matter), under the patriarch Filothei I Kokkinos (1364-1376), excommunicated the Barlaamite monk Demetrios Cydones<sup>35</sup>, attests the *Tomos* of 1351 as “the perfect canon of the true faith of Christians” and recognizes Grigorie Palama as a saint, with the date of honour November 14<sup>36</sup>.

By the end of the 14th century, Hesychasm became the dogma of the Orthodox Church<sup>37</sup>. There was a very faint echo

---

<sup>34</sup> According to some, on November 13, 1359, according to others, in 1357; on these controversies, see A. Rigo, **La canonizzazione di Gregorio Palama (1368) ed alcune altre questioni**, in *Rivista de studi bizantini e neoellenici* 30 (1993), pp. 159-161.

<sup>35</sup> Regarding his views on the Hesychast theology, see in particular Anna Koltsiou-Nikita, *Gregorius Palamas' Theology, as Viewed by the Scholar Demetrios Cydones*, in C. Athanasopoulos (ed.), *Triune God: Incomprehensible but Knowable – The Philosophical and Theological Significance of St Gregory Palamas for Contemporary Philosophy and Theology*, pp. 246-264.

<sup>36</sup> The text of the Synodal *Tomos* of 1368 is found in the Migne collection, PG, 141, col. 693-715 (698b-699b, *Actul de canonizare*). The critical edition of this *Tomos* was published and presented by the Byzantinologist A. Rigo (a cura di), *Il Tomo Sinodale del 1368, in Gregorio Palamas e oltre. Studi documentati sulle controversie teologiche del XIV secolo bizantino*, Firenze, 2004, pp. 55-134. The *tomos* was also translated into Romanian by Archdeac. Ioan I. Ică jr.: “The synodal *tomos* (1368) against the monk Prochoros Kydones who thought those of Barlaam and Akindynos, from which it is shown not only the sanctity of Palamas but also that his annual commemoration in the Church was synodically defined”, in *Gregory Palamas, Tomosuri dogmatice... (Dogmatic Volumes...)*, pp. 409-446.

<sup>37</sup> I. Ševčenko, *The Decline of Byzantium Seen through the Eyes of its Intellectuals*, p. 172.

of hesychasm in the West. On the other hand, the confrontation between Palamas and Barlaam reveals to us the clash between two different ways of theologizing: a Western one (even if Barlaam was an Orthodox monk), speculative and rationalist, and an Eastern one, descriptive and existentialist<sup>38</sup>. In this sense, Professor Matsoukas states that “in the 14th century, especially in the framework of the conflicts and discussions between Hesychasts and anti-Hesychasts, not only the image of the vital difference between Eastern and Western theology but also that of the distinctive theological methodology of the Fathers of the Orthodox Church is shaped”<sup>39</sup>.

## **II. Hesychasm and Primacy: The Canonical Comments of Barlaam of Calabria (1290-1348)**

Barlaam's comments against papal primacy, most likely composed around this time<sup>40</sup>, reaffirm and refine many of the arguments made in the twelfth century and later used by the Mesarites at the beginning of the following century. He recognizes that “the See of Rome is the first among the others and that the most pious pope must be the leader of all the hierarchs in the world... for it is much better to be a single

---

<sup>38</sup> Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, *Relațiile dintre ortodocși și romano-catolici de la cruciada a IV-a până la controversa isihastă (Relations between Orthodox and Roman Catholics from the Fourth Crusade to the Hesychast Controversy)*, translated by Mihaela Popescu and Raluca Precup, Vremea Publishing, Bucharest, 2001, p. 207.

<sup>39</sup> Nikos A. Matsoukas, *Δογματική και συμβολική θεολογία*, Pournaras, Thessaloniki, 1990, p. 137.

<sup>40</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 51.

decisive authority. We differ only in terms of the source of this primacy and its importance"<sup>41</sup>.

Barlaam claims that the pope's primacy does not come from Peter, but is acquired "from the authority of synods and emperors"<sup>42</sup>, who guaranteed this rank "because Rome was an imperial city", bringing as arguments in this sense the famous *Donatio Constantini*, canons 3 of the II Ecumenical Synod, 17 and 28 of Chalcedon, novella 131 of Justinian and canons 13, 36 and 55 of Trullan<sup>43</sup>. In what Kolbaba calls one of Barlaam's few original arguments, he claims that before the meeting of local synods, there was no hierarchy of bishops, otherwise, this would have been specified in *Church Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite<sup>44</sup>.

Barlaam states that the pope "perhaps acquired the privilege of being bishop of Rome from St. Peter"<sup>45</sup>, but that he alone is not Peter's successor, since all who share Peter's faith "are equal in rank and have received the same rank and the same authority from the Apostles"<sup>46</sup>. If the Latins were

---

<sup>41</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 76.

<sup>42</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, pp. 84.

<sup>43</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, pp. 82-84.

<sup>44</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, pp. 76-78. Another unique argument, in Kolbaba's opinion, is his reference to the legend of Pope Joan, "the woman of easy morals who became pope", cf. p. 112.

<sup>45</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, pp. 76.

<sup>46</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, pp. 76. In this sense, he claims that "if the apostle Peter ordained only the bishop of Rome, he can appoint him

right and the pope was “the only vicar of Christ on earth and if he departed from Orthodoxy, then the Orthodox faith perished... and the Church reached its earthly end”<sup>47</sup>. The fact that any bishop was a follower of Peter made this impossible, because “even if all the bishops of the world were to depart from the true faith and only one remained faithful to the right faith, that one would be Christ’s vicar on earth, and Peter’s faith will be kept alive in him”<sup>48</sup>. Moreover, Barlaam states that “the Church of Rome is a local Church”, and its bishop, a local one, while the Catholic Church “is spread over the whole world”, in other words, it is universal, but without being led by an “universal bishop”<sup>49</sup>. He brings canon 101 of Carthage as an argument<sup>50</sup>.

Barlaam makes a comparison between the apostleship and the episcopate, noting that the apostles were appointed “shepherds and preachers of the whole world” and not “bishops of some city or land”. If Peter has only one successor in the person of the bishop of Rome, where are the

---

as his successor, but since then he has ordained several bishops in other cities, without considering them inferior to the bishop of Rome ...”

<sup>47</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 86.

<sup>48</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 86.

<sup>49</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 57.

<sup>50</sup> "It was also decided to write to the most holy Pope Innocent regarding the misunderstanding between the Church of Rome and that of Alexandria, so that both Churches may preserve the peace that the Lord preaches", cf. Archd. Prof. PhD. Ioan N. Floca, *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe. Note și comentarii (Canons of the Orthodox Church. Notes and Comments)*, p. 288.



successors of the other Apostles, or do the Latins keep “one successor for one apostle and none for the rest?”<sup>51</sup>. Just as Peter was not „lord over the other apostles, but rather a brother and equal”, the pope was not the leader of the bishops, his title (*papas*) being only an honorary one and not an “indicator of any precedent or rank”<sup>52</sup>. Peter himself accepted Saint Paul’s rebuke and “none of the other apostles seemed to receive orders from Peter”<sup>53</sup> and yet the pope claims to be “sovereign over all, to rule over all and to have authority over all”<sup>54</sup>. Indeed, the pope had the right “to hold the highest office, to be called the first brother and to be mentioned in the prayers of the Holy Liturgy”<sup>55</sup>, but the jurisdictional authority in the East was something foreign to the canons and the thinking of the Holy Fathers who preached that “only the Western Churches were administered by the pope”<sup>56</sup>.

Therefore, Peter did not appoint either the bishop of Rome or another bishop responsible for the other bishops. Instead, “the pope was made bishop of Rome”, that is, of the city, and later, “by the decision of Emperor Constantine the

---

<sup>51</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 90.

<sup>52</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 86.

<sup>53</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 90.

<sup>54</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 94.

<sup>55</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 106.

<sup>56</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 108.

Great and the first Ecumenical Council, he also obtained the other dignities". In support of his statement, Barlaam brings "as witnesses the 630 Fathers who participated in the Synod of Chalcedon and issued the 28<sup>th</sup> canon", which he quotes in full<sup>57</sup>.

Commenting on this canon, Barlaam states that it contains two fundamental arguments for the understanding of primacy. First, we understand from whom Rome received the first place and for what reason: "from the Holy Fathers and because Rome was an imperial city". But when Constantinople became the new imperial city, "the same Fathers legislated, and for the same reason, that the bishop of this city be equal in honour with the bishop of Rome, but also have the same status in church affairs"<sup>58</sup>. Moreover, "so that the Church is not divided in two and ruled by two authorities", the canon stipulates that the see of Constantinople should be second to that of Rome. It, therefore, follows from this canon that "the pope does not hold the first place by the grace of Peter, but only by the decision and authority of the Holy Fathers".

Next, Barlaam comes up with a new argument, the letter of Emperor Constantine the Great addressed to Saint Sylvester, Pope of Rome (314-335). From this, it follows that "the pope did not hold primacy from the beginning". In this epistle, the emperor "appointed the pope a kind of his vicar" in Rome, so "the pope had no authority over others if he did not receive it from others"<sup>59</sup>.

---

<sup>57</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 82.

<sup>58</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 82.

<sup>59</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 84.

Barlaam brings another argument, namely novella 131 of Emperor Justinian, which states that: “We decree, based on the canons of the holy synods, that the bishop of ancient Rome is the first among the bishops and that the bishop of Constantinople, the New Rome, is the first after him...”<sup>60</sup>. Barlaam points out that the emperor “decrees based on the canons of the synods, and not based on the authority of Saint Peter or the position received from him by the bishop of Rome”<sup>61</sup>.

Given his perspective on primacy, it is perhaps surprising that in 1339 Andronikos III Palaiologos (1338-1341) sent Barlaam to Avignon to discuss the prospects of union with Pope Benedict XII (1334-1342)<sup>62</sup>. During the meeting, Barlaam tells the pope that convincing the intellectuals is easy, “since both you and they seek only the

---

<sup>60</sup> Regarding the role of Justinian's Novels in asserting papal primacy, especially Novel 131 of April 545, see G. E. Demacopoulos, *The Invention of Peter: Apostolic Discourse and Papal Authority in Late Antiquity*, pp. 116-134 (here, pp. 122-123).

<sup>61</sup> Tia Kolbaba, *Barlaam the Calabrian. Three Treatises on Papal Primacy: Introduction, Edition and Translation*, p. 84. Barlaam concludes that the pope's authority derives not from St. Peter, but from synodal canons, so he did not have this primacy from the beginning, as he erroneously claims.

<sup>62</sup> Regarding Barlaam's mission to the papal court in Avignon see Ciro Giannelli, *Un progetto di Barlaam per l'unione delle chiese*, in Giovanni Mercati (a cura di), *Miscellanea Giovanni Mercati 3: Letteratura e storia bizantina*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome, 1973, pp. 157-208 and John Meyendorff, *Un mauvais théologien de l'unité au quatorzième siècle: Barlaam le Calabrais*, in Dom Lambert Beauduin (ed.), *1054-1954: L'Église et les églises. Neuf siècles de douloureuse séparation entre l'Orient et l'Occident. Études et travaux offerts à Lambert Beauduin*, volume II, Chevetogne, Paris, 1955, pp. 47-64.

truth”, but winning the support of the Byzantine people will be much more difficult<sup>63</sup>. The only way to obtain their consent is the convening of “an ecumenical synod in the East”, in which all the patriarchates should be represented<sup>64</sup>.

Barlaam explains to the pope that “the Greeks admit that everything decided at an ecumenical council is in harmony with their faith... so send delegates to the four patriarchs. Under their presidency, an ecumenical synod will meet that will bring about the union and all those present at the synod will say to the people: «Here is what was decided in the synod. You have to respect its decisions!»». And all will obey”<sup>65</sup>.

Benedict was not convinced, unwilling, like his predecessors, to question the doctrines already defined by the Church of Rome<sup>66</sup>. Barlaam thus returns to the East empty-handed, but he would not remain there for long, his defeat by Gregory Palamas during the Hesychast Controversies causing him to enter into full communion with the Roman Church in 1342. A few years later, writing in defence of the Latin position, Barlaam denies that “a

---

<sup>63</sup> Barlaam of Calabria, *Oratio pro Unione*, in PG 151, 1332-1342.

<sup>64</sup> Barlaam of Calabria, *Oratio pro Unione*, in PG 151, 1336. The question of convening an ecumenical synod to resolve the differences between the two Churches was analyzed by D. M. Nicol in *Byzantine Request for an Oecumenical Council in the Fourteenth Century*, in *Annuaire Historiae Conciliorum* 1 (1969), pp. 69-95.

<sup>65</sup> Barlaam of Calabria, *Oratio pro Unione*, in PG 151, 1341.

<sup>66</sup> Benedict XII, like most popes of this period, believed that the Greeks were no longer members of the Church because of their “disobedience”. In this sense, he addresses a letter to the ecumenical patriarch “To the one who calls himself Patriarch of Constantinople”, cf. D. M. Nicol, *Byzantine Request for an Oecumenical Council in the Fourteenth Century*, p. 80.

synod has greater power or authority than the apostolic see”, although it remains necessary “because some questions that arise are so difficult that they require a more thorough debate”<sup>67</sup>.

### **III. Conclusions**

On a different note, and of direct interest to our research, the hesychast controversy allowed the Orthodox resistance to papal supremacy to gain a theological expression. A fundamental precept of the mystical theology of the Eastern Church claims that the ultimate goal of man is, as V. Lossky also says, “deification” (Θεωσις), for the realization of which “God has offered us, within the Church, all the means we need”. But the achievement of this objective is the task of every man, who must “produce those subjective conditions necessary to deification, in synergy, in cooperation with God”; this “subjective aspect of our union with God constitutes the way of union which is the Christian life”<sup>68</sup>. Every man, every member of the Church aspires to deification: “Deification is not reserved for a circle of initiates, but is intended for everyone... it is... the natural goal of every Christian, without any exception”<sup>69</sup>. Speaking about the

---

<sup>67</sup> Barlaam of Calabria, *De unione Romanae Ecclesiae et processione Spiritus Sancti*, in PG 151, 1270-1271. Nicol also notes Barlaam's inconsistency regarding the importance of a synod in the governance of the Church, cf. D. M. Nicol, *Byzantine Request for an Oecumenical Council in the Fourteenth Century*, p. 81.

<sup>68</sup> V. Lossky, *Introducere în teologia ortodoxă* (original title – *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*), translated by Lidia and Remus Rus, Sophia Publishing, Bucharest, 2014, p. 196.

<sup>69</sup> Timothy Ware, *The Eastern Orthodox Church*, Penguin Books, London, 1993, p. 236.

deification of man, J. Pelikan quotes a very relevant passage from Saint Simeon the New Theologian: "In Simeon's vision, Christ is united with God the Father just as we are united with Christ"; this means that the deified man is united with Christ. As Pelikan further states, "believers not only become part of Christ, but (...) Christ (...) becomes part of them: Christ is my arm and leg, and I am Christ's arm and leg..."<sup>70</sup>.

These are the ideas and traditions that received full theological formulation during the Hesychast controversy. As bold as these statements may seem, they are no bolder than the title that Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) arrogated to himself, for the first time, as we have already noted, that of "Vicar of Christ" (*Vicarius Christi*) on earth, instead of "vicar of Saint Peter" (*Vicarius Sancti Petri*), as previous popes had been titled. In many ways, therefore, the Hesychast controversy brought Orthodox soteriology into conflict with the rise of the papal monarchy. While, for the Palamites and orthodox soteriology, every man can acquire the status of "vicar of Christ", thanks to his transformation, purification, union with God and deification by grace, the papal monarchy came to claim only for the bishop of Rome – and this under his election to that seat – the status which for the Orthodox represents the ultimate goal of the Christian faith, that criterion of spiritual authority which brought together the Patriarch and the poor, in an identity of spiritual authority and charismatic power<sup>71</sup>. Here, in the clash between papacy

---

<sup>70</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*, in J. Pelikan (ed.), *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, volume II, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974, p. 257.

<sup>71</sup> Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, *Relațiile dintre ortodocși și romano-catolici de la cruciada a IV-a până la controversa isihastă (Relations between*

and Hesychasm, politics and theology, inexplicably linked in a complex web of historical events, caused the extraordinary impasse in what today we call “irreconcilable doctrinal differences”<sup>72</sup>, that lie at the heart of Orthodox-Roman Catholic relations since the 13th and 14th centuries<sup>73</sup>.

---

*Orthodox and Roman Catholics from the 4th Crusade to the Hesychast Controversy*), p. 222.

<sup>72</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*, p. 271.

<sup>73</sup> Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, *Relațiile dintre ortodocși și romano-catolici de la cruciada a IV-a până la controversa isihastă (Relations between Orthodox and Roman Catholics from the 4th Crusade to the Hesychast Controversy)*, p. 222.