

FROM SOCIAL DEATH TO SPIRITUAL REBIRTH. THE BEGINNINGS OF MONASTIC LIFE FOR CHRISTIAN WOMEN BETWEEN LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES (4th-6th CENTUIRES)

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to highlight the way that female monasticism was perceived in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. The process involving women's transition from the social life to the ascetic one was seen, both by laymen and by the nuns, as a social death. However, if for seculars, women's social withdrawal did not have other significations, for nuns, it also meant climbing the steps from sin to holiness. Their purpose was to be reborn spiritually, achieving the biblical ideal of living with Christ.*

Keywords: *female monasticism, social death, spiritual rebirth, nun, monastery, Late Antiquity, Early Middle Ages.*

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to highlight the way that female monasticism was perceived in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. We will discover that the process involving women's transition from the social life to the ascetic one was seen, both by laymen and by the monks themselves, as a social death. However, if for seculars, women's social withdrawal did not have other significations, for nuns, it also meant climbing the steps from sin to holiness. Their purpose was to be reborn spiritually, achieving the biblical ideal of living with Christ: "For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God"¹ (*Colossians 3,3*).

In the beginning, this subject requires some clarifications regarding the meaning that a few key-concepts will have. The *Church* was, on the one hand, the organized community of those who believed in the Christian deity, and on the other hand, it was the institution providing the exercise of religious authority over that community². Monasticism could be defined as a way of life with ascetic tinge, specific to the Church, primarily characterized by isolation from the community. Generally, monks and nuns had a withdrawn existence, in solitude. They were renouncing family, possessions and even their own will, in order to dedicate themselves to prayer.

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¹ All *Scripture's* verses were quoted from the Oxford 'Authorized edition' of the *King James Bible*, 1769, <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>, 8th October 2010.

² Ecaterina Lung, *Ev mediu timpuriu sau antichitate târzie? Limite cronologice, limite conceptuale (Early Middle Ages or Late Antiquity? Chronological Limits, Conceptual Limits)*, in „Studii și articole de istorie” (“Studies and Articles on History”), nr. 67, 2002, p. 65-78.

We start from the premise that in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages, the idea of women's propensity to fall into sin was unanimously shared. In early Christianity, women were a certain manifestation of the devil, under the influence of misogyny that characterized clerical environment³. Therefore, women have internalized the conceptions of their demonical potential, which explains the increase of their isolation.

In the first part of the paper, *Woman's vocation in the domestic space*, we will try to show the way that the idea of women's withdrawal from society has spread. Part of conceptions about woman from the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions have been inherited by the Late Antique and Early Medieval society. Church Fathers have nuanced them, explaining the differences in status between virgins, widows and married women. In time, some clerical writings have gained a connoted vision about women, so that the image they were contouring them in, compared to the image of the perfect being, associated to men, was not favorable. Trying to overcome inferiority determined by their own gender, but also in order to overcome the barriers enforced by that misogynistic society, some women have decided to emulate the model of Saint Thecla, wearing clothes for men and living until their death in monasteries for men.

The second part, *First Steps to Monastic Path: Social Withdrawal*, will explain the factors that have led to this ascetic trend, both in eastern and western Christendom. But world renunciation, especially for women, had been different perceived by seculars or monks. For parents, their daughters' (and sometimes, even their sons') social withdrawal was not preferable, because it was equivalent to a loss of matrimonial alliances, which could have been very profitable for the whole family. Perhaps this was one of the reasons that some parents felt their children had died when they entered the convent. On the other hand, monks and nuns chose to leave the world in order to escape from passions. For them, because of Christ's triumph over death, the fact of living in the world was equivalent to the real death and the eternal life, free of passions, could be obtained only through physical death⁴. Thus they could prepare for the eternal life only through isolation, perpetual virginity, poverty and continual prayer, the only means that could determine the death of all carnal aspects.

The third part, *The Beginnings of a New Life: Ingress into Monasticism*, will analyze the main coordinates of female monastic life. From the beginning of the 4th century to the 6th century, there were no precise monastic rules, available for all feminine communities. However, once the nuns had entered the convent, the new way of dressing, eating, working and praying were characteristics of their spiritual rebirth.

³ Eadem, *Mentalități și cultură în Evul Mediu (Mentalities and Culture During the Middle Ages)*, București, Ed. Fundației România de Măine, 2007, p. 96.

⁴ Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, New York, Ed. Knopf, 1981, p. 13, apud Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Dead to the World? Death and the Maiden Revisited in Medieval Women's Convent Culture*, in Vera Petch Morton, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, *Guidance for women in twelfth-century convents*, Woodbridge, Ed. Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2003, p. 159, http://books.google.ro/books?id=Uw1DmYJ1If4C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_atb#v=onepage&q&f=false, 17th October 2010.

I. Woman's Vocation in the Domestic Space

In Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages, the defining of woman's condition is due to the Church Fathers, based on Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions.

In Greco-Roman world, woman's inferior position in family and society, in fact a characteristic of Mediterranean societies, was justified by doctors and philosophers, who offered in their works an ideological motivation in this regard. The woman was seen as an incomplete, imperfect human being, in opposition with the man, the perfect being. The female body was known largely only because of Hippocrates's (460-377 BC) works, recopied by Oribasius (320-400 AD) in the medical treaty *Collectiones* and through the Soranus of Ephesus's (53-117 AD) *Women's Diseases*, dedicated to midwives. Doctors stated that there were similarities between the woman's body composition and the man's, but women were physically weaker, leading to an intellectual inferiority. Heat was considered the essential vital principle. It was believed that if heat was present in sufficient quantity during pregnancy, the newborn's body would gain the complexity of male frame. But lack of heat caused the birth of a girl, a child with an imperfect body, a missing mans.

From the Judeo-Christian point of view, the woman's inferior position was theologically justified, so therefore, indisputable. In the *Book of Genesis* from the *Old Testament*, two distinct stories about the creation of humans are narrated. The first one, corresponding to the first chapter, shows that man and woman were created simultaneously, in the image and after likeness of God (*Genesis* 1, 26-27: "And God said, Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them").

But medieval clerics retained the one recorded in the second chapter, against the first one. This story details, talking about the creation of woman from the man's rib (*Genesis* 2,22-23: "And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man"), with the only purpose of being "an help" for him (*Genesis*, 2,18: "And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him"). *Old Testament* Books outline the rules of woman's life, later assumed by Judaism.

The existence of a hierarchy between women and men is also supported by Saint Paul. Boasting the Corinthians for the preservation of doctrinal, moral and liturgical teachings of the young Christian Church, Paul indicates the true hierarchy of authority: Christ-man-woman (*1 Corinthians* 11,3: "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God"). This idea is repeated in his letter to the

⁵ Ecaterina Lung, *Mentalități și cultură în Evul Mediu (Mentalities and Culture During the Middle Ages)*, București, Ed. Fundației România de Măine, 2007, p. 88-89.

Ephesians. In the context of explaining the rules of a perfect life, based on mutual submission of men and women (*Ephesians* 5,21: “Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God”), Paul insists on the woman’s duty of obeying her husband (*Ephesians* 5,22-24: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the Saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing”).

Although it was not taking the whole teaching of Jesus Christ, Who considered inexistent the inequalities between people, regardless of ethnicity, social status or gender (*Galatians* 3,28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus”), Church has brought some improvement in the status of women, compared to the Greco-Roman tradition, and even to the Jewish one. But Saint Paul⁶ has not detached the fundamentally misogynist environment of the early Church, which accepted the equality between women and men only before God, denying it in the family or in society (*Colossians* 3,18: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord.”, *Titus* 2,3-5: “The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed”). Apostle Peter circumscribes the same idea, through a parallel between the respectful fear of the woman from man and the general respectful humans’ fear from God, following the model given by virtuous women of the *Old Testament* (*1 Peter* 3,1-6: “Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear. Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands: Even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement”).

Another aspect with consequences throughout the Middle Ages, was limiting women participation in the priesthood. In the early Christian centuries, a role similar to the deacon⁷ was maintained for women (*Romans* 16,1: “I commend

⁶ Or one of his disciples, the real author of the *Epistles*, who signed them using Paul’s name, in order to make them pass easier among the first Christian communities. For more details see Claudio Moreschini, Enrico Norelli, *Istoria literaturii creștine vechi grecești și latine (Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature: A Literary History)*, vol. I, *De la Apostolul Pavel până la epoca lui Constantin cel Mare (From Paul to the age of Constantine)*, <Iași>, Ed. Polirom, 2001, p. 35-41.

⁷ This institution is largely explained by Ionuț Mavrîchi, in his article, *Instituția diaconitelor în Noul Testament (Deaconesses’ Institution in New Testament)*,

unto you Phebe our sister, which is a deaconess [διδάκτορος] of the church which is at Cenchrea”), but it was allowed rather because of the desire not to violate the unwritten rules of decency⁸.

But this role did not compensate the fact that women were forbidden to speak in church meetings (1 *Corinthians* 14,34: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.”, 1 *Timothy* 2,11-12: “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence”).

In the following centuries, apocryphal writings reassumed the idea of non-differentiation between women and men in the afterlife. The *Gospel of Thomas* assigned Jesus a replica based on the understanding of Paul’s principles. When asked by the Apostles when they entered the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus responded: “When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter the Kingdom.”⁹. But the following centuries’ trend was not to nullify in the social plan the differences between men and women¹⁰.

Church Fathers have inherited from the Greco-Roman and the Jewish traditions the tendency of placing woman on an inferior position comparing to man, in the context of carnal disregarding. But they found new justifications. First of all, woman was associated with the original sin that brought death into the world. One of Tertullian’s writings against women was assumed by medieval clerics, although the author was condemned as a heretic: “The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil’s gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of your desert — that is, death — even the Son of God had to die. And do you think about adorning yourself over and above your tunics of skins?”¹¹.

Some of the Church Fathers interpreted the original sin as a sexual one. Thus, the woman was defined only by her bodily senses that she could not master,

http://www.nistea.com/eseuri/ionut_mavrichi/institutia-diaconitelor-in-noul-testament.htm, 12th October 2010.

⁸ Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women’s Religious among Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Greco-Roman World*, Oxford, Ed. Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 181-182.

⁹ *The Gospel of Thomas*, trans. Stephen Patterson, Marvin Meyer, <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gosthom.html>, 13th October 2010.

¹⁰ Raoul Mortley, *Womanhood: The feminine in Ancient Hellenism, Gnosticism Christianity, and Islam*, Sydney, Ed. Delacroix, 1981, p. 69-71.

¹¹ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, 1, 1, in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, A. Cleveland Coxe (eds.), *The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325. Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV, trans. S. Thelwall, Buffalo, Ed. Christian Literature Publishing Co. 1885, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0402.htm>, 14th October 2010.

unlike man, seen through the light of rationality. Sexuality damnation and thus, woman damnation, was made on behalf of the ascetic ideal promoted by Christianity in the first centuries. Although sermons offered good models, for women they were difficult to follow. The great delicacy and moral beauty were embodied by Virgin Mary, and the courage was exemplified by female martyrs Perpetua, Felicitas, Blandina, Mercuria, Dionisia and many others. Writings on these accomplished women, in addition to the revival of the *Old Testament* traditions, through women like Deborah (*Judges* 4-5) and Judith (*Judith* 1-16), showed that even women could gain the salvation, even if they were required much higher effort than men¹².

Another point of view was that of the natural inferiority of women. Influenced by women exclusion from priestly duties in Judaism and by the secondary position which was attributed to them in Christian priesthood¹³, Augustine argued that the natural order made the woman her husband's servant.

At the end of the 4th century, Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory of Nazianz and Saint Gregory of Nyssa believed that the world had become overcrowded, and so it did not need too many new births. However, they did not condemn marriage, that Jesus had blessed by committing His first miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee (*John* 2,1-11), but they considered it inferior to virginity. Thus, from the 4th century, woman's condition has been defined only in terms of sexual condition. She could only be seen as consecrated virgin, married woman or widow. Of those three states, the status of married woman was considered inferior to the other two. On the one hand, in Mediterranean societies, man's (or men's) honor and appreciation were determined by the purity of woman that he (they) was (were) responsible for. Therefore virginity was valued¹⁴. On the other hand, Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions required women's virginity before marriage. The novelty brought by Christianity consisted in proposing a perpetual virginity.

II. First Steps to Monastic Path: Social Withdrawal

In the period taken into consideration, clerics sustained that a nun should be "dead to the world". Anxiety that women had to be enclosed away from the society, in order to keep their purity untouched, was strongly present. Behind the walls of the monastery, enclosed woman was imagined as being contained in a cell which was both the tomb of her life in this world, and the womb for her spirituality.

But not only seculars associated the veil with the death. John Chrysostom, in his apology *Against the Opponents of Those Attracted to the Monastic Life*, related that a father compared his son's entrance into monasticism with the death

¹² Marius Țepelea, *Aspecte ale vieții sociale în Biserica Primară (Aspect of Social Life in the Early Church)*, <Deva>, Ed. Emia, <2004>, p. 144-146.

¹³ Jean Verdon, *La femme au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Ed. Editions Jean-Paul Gisserot, <1999>, p. 5.

¹⁴ Philip Lyndon Reynolds, *Marriage in the Western Church: the Christianization of Marriage During the Patristic and Early Medieval Periods*, Leiden, Ed. Brill, 1994, p. 126-131, http://books.google.ro/books?id=QSAFvHZ3OZIC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_slider_thumb#v=onepage&q&f=false, 17th October 2010.

of a traveler caused by a storm or a lightning (“The storm has caused not only the lost of the wealth, but also the death of such a prosper man¹⁵”). Moreover, his pain was greater than the pain he would have had if his son would have indeed died.

Both in the eastern and in the western Christendom, there are many examples of monks and nuns who considered that renunciation the society meant the death of an existence dominated by sin. Although the most part of the sources refer to monks, they are also relevant for nuns, because in that time (men) clerics related, in general, to men, and only sometimes to women.

In Oriental Christendom, the contradiction between women’s desire for fulfillment and the opportunity that this society offered them was expressed in the motif of the “holy travestied”, frequently encountered in hagiographic literature of this period. The model was provided by the *Acts of the Holy Apostle Paul and of Saint Thecla*¹⁶ and by *The Book of Saint Thecla*¹⁷, two apocryphal books written in the 2nd century. These presented Thecla, a virgin, who, even the night before her wedding, ran away disguised in a man, from her family and her fiancé, chosen by her relatives, and, attracted by Saint Paul’s preaching against marriage, accompanied him in his missionary work. In other hagiography, women disguised as men entered the monastery for men, pretending to be eunuchs, and the truth was discovered only after their death. Although all these narratives’ veracity is questionable¹⁸, they are important in several respects. First of all, they show that the society of that period did not permit women to lead an ascetic life beyond their own house¹⁹. In addition, it is clear that women interiorized society’s conception of them, and thus they believed that the only way to get closer to God was the renunciation of was characteristic to them: the femininity, assimilated with adultery. And provided that normal and normative humanity was assimilated with masculinity, the woman could not be perfect unless she transformed herself into a man²⁰. But the importance of these writings is represented by the model that they had constituted in that age. During the early

¹⁵ S. Joannes Chrysostomus, *Adversus oppugnatores eorum qui vitam monasticam inducunt. Ad infidelem patrem*, 2, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Patrologiae Graecae*, vol. XLVII, Paris, Ed. Petit Montrouge, 1863, col. 331-332,

http://books.google.com/books?id=-G8Z2qXXjIEC&printsec=frontcover&hl=ro&source=gbs_atb#v=onepage&q&f=false, 21st October

2010.

¹⁶ *Faptele Sfintei Tecla, (Acts of Saint Thecla)*, in Aurelian Scrima (ed.), *Martire pentru Hristos (Female Martyrs for Christ)*, trans. Monica Medeleanu, București, Ed. Herald, <2008>, p. 27-68.

¹⁷ *Cartea Sfintei Tecla (The Book of Saint Thecla)*, in Aurelian Scrima (ed.), *Martire pentru Hristos (Female Martyrs for Christ)*, trans. Monica Medeleanu, București, Ed. Herald, <2008>, p. 69-90.

¹⁸ Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women’s Piety in Late Antiquity*, <Oxford>, Ed. Oxford University Press, p. 27-28.

¹⁹ Ecaterina Lung, *Începuturile vieții monastice în Occidentul European: contestare socială și politică (The Beginnings of Monastic Life in Western Europe: Social and Political Disprooves)*, in „Analele Universității Spiru Haret, Seria Istorie” (“Annals of Spiru Haret University, History Series”), nr. 4-5, 2001-2002, p. 93.

²⁰ Eadem, *Mentalități și cultură în Evul Mediu (Mentalities and Culture During the Middle Ages)*, București, Ed. Fundației România de Măine, 2007, p. 118.

Church, they proposed women an alternative model of life, a preferable existence, for many reasons, compared to the one of a wife or a mother.

For Saint Basil the Great, a virgin was the earthly spouse of Jesus Christ, with Whom she will be united only in Heaven, in a mystical wedding. As a consequence, a consecrated virgin must never even think to a man. She must not ever touch a man and she must not solicit man's attention. In chapter 36 of *De virginitate*, Saint Basil the Great said: "A virgin, who in her mind, appearance and dress, alone or with others, soberly contemplates what pleases the Lord, may speak chastely, with the friends of the bridegroom. We do not lock her away so that we may induce her to hatred of man, but that we may lead her prudently to the house-mates of the faith; the body covered from head to toe in clothing, like an image of God, so that [...] she may profit from their conversation. She must, therefore, I say, talk with the servants of the bridegroom like a true bride, [...], simply like a dove and prudent like a serpent"²¹. The idea of this advice is that a servant must be very careful with the love for God's servant, in order not to turn it into carnal lust. Despite the dangers, a virgin must not hate God's servants: "This is the greatest and most significant aspect of virginity that it constitutes a manifestation already here on earth of the pure seed of the resurrection and the incorruptible life. If at the resurrection no one marries and is married but all are like angels and become children of God (*Matthew* 22,30), then all those who lead the virginal life are already angels during their human life, while still ensconced in their corruptible flesh [...] surrounded by constant temptations. [...] Here the virgins must be most highly admired. They have a female body, but they repress this appearance of their body through *askesis*, and become, through their virtue, like men, to whom they are already created equal in their soul. And while men through *askesis* become angels instead of men, so do women, through exercise of the same virtues, gain the same value as men. So, while in this present life there are equal to men in their soul only, but are hampered in achieving equality because of their female body, they will gain through virtue, fully equality with these men, who have already been made into the angels of the future life. Because if they become angel-like, then those who practice asceticism in this life have already succeeded in being just like angels; they have castrated the female and male desires to cohabit through virtue and live amongst men on earth with naked souls"²². If for a virgin, the soul is free from temptations, then passion and desire no longer exists. Male and female are all "one in Christ" (*Galatians* 3,28), because all those aspects of the body are dead, and only the pure, incorrupt soul is alive²³.

²¹ S. Basilii Magni, *Liber de vera virginitatis integritate, ad Letoium Meltinense episcopum*, 36, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Patrologiae Graecae*, vol. XXX, Paris, Ed. Garnier Fratres, 1888, p. 372-373, col. 740-741, <http://www.archive.org/stream/patrologicursus45migngoog#page/n372/mode/1up>, 21st October 2010.

²² *Ibidem*, 51, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Patrologiae Graecae*, vol. XXX, Paris, Ed. Garnier Fratres, 1888, p. 388-389, col. 771-774, <http://www.archive.org/stream/patrologicursus45migngoog#page/n388/mode/1up>, 21st October 2010.

²³ Susana Elm, *Virgins of God: the making of asceticism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford, Ed. Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 118-120,

In the 4th century, hagiographies related stories about women who chose to live in tombs, in order to escape from temptations. Alexandra, who locked herself in a tomb, was visited by Melania the Elder²⁴. The sisters Nymphodora, Menodora and Metrodona sheltered in a tumulus at Pythiis²⁵. Photina seated on a rock in the middle of the sea for six years²⁶. In the 6th century, Marana and Cyra lived in chains in a small half-roofed enclosure for forty-two years. In that period they were visited by Theodoret, Bishop of Cyprus²⁷. Other recluse was visited by a monk and asked why she was remaining solitary. She answered that she was not remaining solitary, as she was traveling to God. Despite her sanctity, however, she was reprimanded for her pride by that monk. Thus, the ascetic perceived her not entirely dead to the world²⁸. Another nun mentioned by sources was Romana, who lived in a cave on Mount Soracte until her death²⁹.

Although in Western Europe the best part of nuns had arisen from aristocracy, all of women consecrated to asceticism followed the same rule of renouncing the society.

In the 4th century, the only recluses in Western Europe were found in Rome and Gaul. Jerome was taking care of Melania the Younger who, for a time, was a recluse on the Mount of Olives³⁰, Marcella³¹ and Asella. The last one, although she was only twelve years old, lived “shut up in a narrow cell and so roamed through Paradise”, seeking “all her delight in solitude and thereby found for herself a monastic hermitage in the centre of busy Rome”³².

http://books.google.ro/books?id=idB88q-p6a8C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_slider_thumb#v=one_page&q&f=false, 18th October 2010.

²⁴ Palladius, *The Lausiac History*, V, trans. W. K. Lowther Clarke, London, Ed. The Macmillan Company, 1918,

http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/palladius_lausiac_02_text.htm#C5, 18th October 2010.

²⁵ *Acta Sanctorum*, III, 10 Sept., 489-493, apud Margot H. King, *The Desert Mothers: A Survey of the Feminine Anchoretic Tradition in Western Europe*, <w. p.>, Ed. Peregrina Publishing Co, 2006, <http://www.hermitary.com/articles/mothers.html>, 18th October 2010.

²⁶ Agnes B. C. Dunbar, *A Dictionary of Saintly Women*, vol. 2, London, Ed. George Bell, 1905, p. 151-152, <http://www.archive.org/stream/saintlywomen02dunbuoft#page/n7/mode/2up>, 18th October 2010.

²⁷ *Acta sanctorum* III, 1 Aug, 226-228, apud Margot H. King, *The Desert Mothers: A Survey of the Feminine Anchoretic Tradition in Western Europe*, <w. p.>, Ed. Peregrina Publishing Co, 2006, <http://www.hermitary.com/articles/mothers.html>, 18th October 2010.

²⁸ Palladius, *op. cit.*, XXXVII, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/palladius_lausiac_02_text.htm#C37, 18th October 2010.

²⁹ *Acta sanctorum* III, 23 Febr., 231-233, apud Margot H. King, *The Desert Mothers: A Survey of the Feminine Anchoretic Tradition in Western Europe*, <w. p.>, Ed. Peregrina Publishing Co, 2006, <http://www.hermitary.com/articles/mothers.html>, 18th October 2010.

³⁰ Gerontius, *Life of St. Melania*, 57-67, trans. E. Leahy, ed. Herbert Thurston, 1826, http://www.archive.org/stream/MN5140ucmf_10/MN5140ucmf_10_djvu.txt, 19th October 2010.

³¹ Jerome, *Letter CXXVII. To Principia*, 6-9, in Philip Schaff, Henry Wace (ed.), *A Selected Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, series II, vol. VI, New York, Ed. Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892, p. 255-256, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.CXXVII.html>, 19th October 2010.

³² Idem, *Letter XXIV. To Marcella*, 3, in Philip Schaff, Henry Wace (ed.), *A Selected Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, series II, vol. VI, New York, Ed.

III. The Beginning of a New Life: Ingress into Monasticism

Female monasticism of the first Christian centuries developed mainly due to virgins and widows. Written sources that have survived from 2nd and 3rd centuries covered the rules that governed the lives of consecrated virgins and widows who lived in groups or in their homes, in the first monastic communities. They were repeatedly asked to be unpretentious, quiet, modest in behavior, not to allow foreigners to look at them, wherever possible, and to refrain from ostentatious religious gestures during public worship. They began to have charitable activities, they took care for the sick and they taught women entered the catechumenate³³.

The decision to isolate from society for a life dominated by deprivation and prayers, which was taken by women and men, was influenced by the idea of dichotomy between body and soul. Capturing the Roman tradition, which considered the body being inferior, early Christianity emphasized the care for soul, at the expense of concern for the body³⁴. But for a woman the only concern for soul was not sufficient. Interiorizing the guilt for the original sin, accentuated in preaching, women were aware of their need for a sustained and more intense ascetic effort than the one men needed for their salvation.

Entrance into monasticism implied, especially for women, the radical transformation of their past life. They had abandoned society, their family and their possessions and had consecrated themselves to God, following Christ's advice: "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me." (Matthew 19,21; Mark 10,21; Luke 18,22). However, this ideal could not have been achieved without an accomplished morality, which presupposed many labors. Under the direction of monks, through all the aspects that governed their life in monasteries, nuns were indeed spiritually reborn.

In Western Europe, from the earliest years of monastic history, women have dedicated themselves to Christ, consecrating their lives to prayer, humility and services to others. Devotion to God was marked by perpetual virginity and mystical marriage with Christ. To show their status as spouses of Christ, since the 3rd century, consecrated virgins (*virgines sacratae*), doomed to God (*Deo dicatae*), submit a vote of chastity before the Bishop, receiving on this occasion, as a distinctive sign, a headgear veil. In time, for them and for widows who chose the ascetic living, there have been formulated rules intended to provide some guidelines and norms of living together.

Principal coordinates of feminine monastic life demonstrate that after their entrance in monasteries, nuns were determined to change their old lives in order to follow Scriptural advices.

Unlike men, women's attire was not an index of authority, but a permanent

Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892, p. 43, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.XXIV.html>, 19th October 2010.

³³ Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West*, Oxford, Ed. Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 9-13.

³⁴ Peter Brown, *The body and society: men, women, and sexual renunciation in early Christianity*, <w. p.>, Ed. Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 48.

state of sin, because of which they were implicitly subordinated to men. However, their clothing was a sign of ascetic discipline. Men authors of female hagiography appreciated this discipline and therefore recommended dull, cheap, or even ragged clothes. Jerome appreciated Marcella, Paula the Elder and Paula the Young, Eustochium and Demetrias for having understood the asceticism, materialized by their modest clothing. He considered that “a simple dress proves a pure soul”³⁵ and “a cheap cloth proves contempt for this world”³⁶. There was known the history of Mary, an Egyptian nun, who had fallen into sin and had worn prostitute dressing (*habitu meretricum*), before being rescued by her uncle. Her return to the saving life was marked by the renunciation of demonic clothes. For a woman, renunciation of luxurious clothes marked her conversion, whether she was a respectable matron or a prostitute³⁷. *Life* of Melania the Younger is marked by an increasingly appreciated monastic dress, including animal hair clothing and even hair belt, appreciated by Saint John Cassian, for which these details contribute to the arguments on which he recognized her holiness. Melania, risen in luxury, began in secret to follow the ascetic path. Only her aunt, Melania the Elder, knew that, under the clothes required by her matron status, she was wearing a tunic of animal hair (*fm£tion condrÕn*). When she finally persuaded her husband and family to permit her to follow asceticism, she totally renounced the wealthy clothes, in order to become accustomed to harder ascetic practices³⁸. Her hagiographer considered that she progressed only when he became able to wear a head cover (*mofÕrion*), a simple dress (*fm£tion*) and a hood (*koukoÕllion*) made of animal hair (*trícina*), especially since she previously had had an extremely sensitive skin³⁹. In his *Rul *, Augustin recommended women to wear mourning clothes, due to the considerations about women’s deprivation and about the necessity of physical repentance⁴⁰. All Church Fathers stated that a woman had to cover her head with a veil. Clerics sustained that the hair was one of the feminine temptations, and thus it was one of the reasons men fell into sin.

For a pious woman, who aimed to keep her chastity, fasting was considered ideal. In the letter sent to Eustochium, at her mother’s, Paula, death, Jerome

³⁵ Jerome, *Letter CXXV. To Rusticus*, in Philip Schaff, Henry Wace (ed.), *A Selected Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, series II, vol. VI, New York, Ed. Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892, p. 245-246,

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.CXXV.html>, 21st October 2010.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ Rebecca Krawiec, “*Garments of Salvation*”: *Representations of Monastic Clothing in Late Antiquity*, in “*Journal of Early Christian Studies*”, 17:1, 125–150, 2009, p. 133-135.

³⁸ Regarding clothing, Melania’s attitude is an example of “gender reversal”, dominant in hagiography, which made her seem more devoted than her husband. In *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity*, Lynda L. Coon shows that Melania’s renunciation of luxurious clothes was “a punishment for living the past life in luxury”, and the veil and hood she began to wear constituted “a sort of repentance for her genre”. See Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997, p. 144-145,

http://books.google.ro/books?id=bAZO6v-q9xIC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_slider_thumb#v=onepage&q&f=false, 21st October 2010.

³⁹ Rebecca Krawiec, *op. cit.*, p. 137-138.

⁴⁰ *La R gle de notre p re Saint Augustin: Texte latin et traduction fran aise*, Paris, Ed. Typographie Augustinienne, 1923, p. 27-29.

remembered her ascetic practices⁴¹. Also, in *Letter 22*, addressed to Eustochium, he advised her to seek only the company of women who had “thin because of fasting, with a pale face”, and reminded her that maintaining virginity was only possible if she abstained from wine and abundant food. In the *Rule* written for his sister, Caesarius of Arles recommended daily fasting, except the Sundays and the feasts. Excessive eating and drinking were forbidden, not only because of spiritual or physiological consequences that would be triggered, but also because this type of behavior was associated with pagans⁴². Silence was important, because one of the nuns had to read from the holy books during meal⁴³. The *Rule* of Saint Benedict established the quantity of food that could have been consumed in monasteries. Nuns were permitted two meals each day, except the fasting days, when they could take only one meal⁴⁴.

Nuns’ daily life was centered around prayer, according to Saint Paul’s exhortation “Pray without ceasing” (*1 Thessalonians* 5,17). In a letter addressed to Laeta, John Chrysostom gave her some advice concerning daily prayer and study of the Holy Books: “And let it be her task daily to bring to you the flowers which she has culled from scripture. Let her learn by heart so many verses in the Greek, but let her be instructed in the Latin also. [...] She ought to rise at night to recite prayers and psalms; to sing hymns in the morning; at the third, sixth, and ninth hours to take her place in the line to do battle for Christ; and, lastly, to kindle her lamp and to offer her evening sacrifice. In these occupations let her pass the day, and when night comes let it find her still engaged in them. Let reading follow prayer with her, and prayer again succeed to reading. [...] Let her begin by learning the *Psalter*, and then let her gather rules of life out of the *Proverbs of Solomon*. From the *Preacher* let her gain the habit of despising the world and its vanities. Let her follow the example set in *Job* of virtue and of patience. Then let her pass on to the *Gospels* never to be laid aside when once they have been taken in hand. Let her also drink in with a willing heart the *Acts of the Apostles* and the *Epistles*. As soon as she has enriched the storehouse of her mind with these treasures, let her commit to memory the *Prophets*, the *Heptateuch*⁴⁵, the books of *Kings* and of *Chronicles*, the rolls also of *Ezra* and *Esther*. When she has done all

⁴¹ Jerome, *Letter XXII. To Eustochium*, 15-28, in Philip Schaff, Henry Wace (ed.), *A Selected Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, series II, vol. VI, New York, Ed. Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892, p. 28-31,

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.XXII.html>, 21st October 2010.

⁴² C. M. Woolgar, *Ospăț și post. Mâncarea și gustul în Europa medievală (Fasting and Feasting: Food and Taste in the Middle Ages)*, in Paul Freedman (coord.), *Istoria gustului (The History of Taste)*, <București>, Ed. Vellant, <2008>, p. 164-165.

⁴³ Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *The Gateway to the Middle Ages: Monasticism*, Michigan, Ed. University of Michigan Press, 1989, p. 57, http://books.google.ro/books?id=Y-SYpFbidiAC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_slider_thumb#v=onepage&q&f=false, 23rd October 2010.

⁴⁴ Benedict, *Sancti Benedicti Regula*, XXXIX-XL, <http://www.intratext.com/X/LAT0011.HTM>, 23rd October 2010.

⁴⁵ The first seven *Books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges*.

these she may safely read the *Song of Songs*⁴⁶. John Cassian, Caesarius of Arles and Benedict also insisted on the importance of prayer.

Conclusions

Regarding women who had chosen to consecrate their lives in ascetic communities, social death was seen as one of the most certain ways of reaching God. This difficult transformation implied a sustained ascetic effort, which could be followed only through bodily renunciation. Thus, the moment when all the aspects of the body died represented the moment of social death. But the accomplished spiritual rebirth was thought to be achieved through an entire process, which had to progress continuously in monasteries.

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⁴⁶ Jerome, *Letter CVII. To Laeta*, 9-12, in Philip Schaff, Henry Wace (ed.), *A Selected Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, series II, vol. VI, New York, Ed. Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892, p. 193-194.

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