

# OBEDIENCE AND THE SPIRITUAL FATHER

BY

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Before your feet are able to stand in front of your Spiritual Father, they must first be washed in the blood of your heart.

Before your tongue is unable to hurt any person, you cannot converse with your Spiritual Father.

(Traditional sayings of Asia Minor Greeks during the *Tourkokratia*).

## I. *Introduction.*

The subject-matter under this heading may seem to lie outside a discussion of the nature of man, whether in a general Christian anthropological context or even in the context of Climacus' view of man. Yet it has a bearing on the idea of free will and self-will and, therefore, on the nature of the human person. What is at stake, however, is not an abstract metaphysical position, a philosophy of determinism or indeterminism, but an experience of the human situation which leads man to be free in personal communion with God, by contrast to being free in separate autonomous existence, at the expense of others. The monk is a solitary, but his solitariness is one of ascending inward fulfilment, not a descent into inward emptiness and isolation. This is the necessary preliminary to a consideration of the meaning of obedience and the spiritual father.

For Climacus obedience is so important that he devotes to it the second longest chapter in his book — the fourth step. He does not advocate any idea of compliance with rules and refutations — in fact, although the Pachomian monks did have a written rule, Climacus never mentions the word «rule» in this connection but speaks of obedience as a unique relationship with a chosen person, namely the spiritual father, in which one is no longer engulfed by one's self. In this as in other respects, John Climacus does no more than follow the monastic tradition, especially as it is expressed in fourth century Egypt and by Barsanu-

phius and John of Gaza in the early sixth century. Thus, the first thing Pachomius is told to do is to find a *geron* or spiritual father<sup>1</sup>. And in Diadochus' *Century* obedience is regarded as «the first introductory virtue»<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, for Climacus obedience constitutes the *alpha* of the first among the two mystical alphabets, for the beginners, since without it one cannot advance spiritually<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the teaching that obedience is directed to a specific person is present in monastic tradition from the start.<sup>4</sup>

The present chapter will examine the notion of self-will as a source of isolation and of its eradication as a path to harmony; the part of obedience as a means towards that end; and the roles played by the spiritual father in achieving it.

## II. *Idion Theléma*.

Ἰδιον θέλημα or self-will is the technical term used in ascetic literature to denote the will as pertaining to man's fallen nature (cf. Eph. 2:3) which, in fact, inhibits the possibilities of his true and unfallen nature.<sup>5</sup> Climacus sees nothing wrong about free will as such, but believes that it has broken away from God's will, with which it was originally at one, choosing to become separate<sup>6</sup>. What must be given up by the monk, and indeed by every Christian, is the «way of wilfulness» (ἰδιογνώμων ῥυθμός; Migne has ἰδιογνωμόρρυθμος), the «idiorrythmic nature (ἰδιοῤῥυθμία) or one's «self-trust» (οἰκειόπιστον) — a word used by Climacus to describe man's self-sufficient or self-regarding will — which any humble person (ταπεινόνους) will recognise as deviant, «gone astray» (πλάνον).<sup>7</sup> Obedience means, first and foremost, the cutting off of the self-will, the elimination of *idiorrythmia*: here Climacus

1. *Vita Prima Graeca* 6. Cf. also *Apophth.* Isaiah 2 (PG 65:181A) and Greg. of Sinai, *Chapt.* 18. Völker makes several references to the *Apophthegmata* and to Barsanuphius: cf. *Scala Paradisi*, p. 27-51.

2. *Cent.* 41 and 42.

3. 26-14 and 45 (1017A and 1028CD).

4. The best and fullest study on this subject is Hausherr, *Direction*. Later monastic tradition treats Anthony of Egypt as a prototype: cf. Athanasius, *Vita Ant.* 3-4 (PG 26:844A-845C) and *Apophth.* Anthony 37-38 (PG 65:88B).

5. 15:80 (901B) : here it refers to the fallen *sarx*.

6. 26:ii,41 (1068CD). Cf. also Mark the Monk, *De his* 54 (PG 65:937C).

7. For *idiognómon rythmos*, cf. 24:17 (981C). *Idiorrythmia* is found in 4:6 (680C) and 26:45 (1028D) and *oikeiopiston* in 25:50 (1000C).

is closely following Mark the Monk.<sup>8</sup> All are rebelling against God by satisfying their needs apart from Him and from their fellow creatures. Through giving up our own will we proclaim, in effect, that we have no part in the rebellion: we tear up the parchment of our will<sup>9</sup> as a claim to our «rights», as an exaction.

The surrender is no easy task, and the ascetic needs at times to go to extremes in cutting off his own will altogether and acquiescing in the will of God<sup>10</sup>. He goes to extremes because of the extremity of his fallen, self-enclosed condition: a limitative situation requiring limitative measures.

It may be commendable to give up certain personal pleasures, but man becomes holy, shares in Christ's divine-humanity, his fallen nature assuming its former glory, only by giving up entirely his separate will. Such a person, says Climacus, will not merely be rewarded but «will inherit eternal life». This accords with other ascetic writers who equate the denial of one's will with salvation, while abba Dorotheus goes further still: «He who wishes to be, must have no will in any matter»<sup>11</sup>. It is «the narrow and hard way» (Matt. 7:14), the way of total renunciation (*apotagê*)<sup>12</sup>, for the will is like «leaven» which raises the dough; it is, as Mark the Monk says, deeply rooted, almost hidden, within us<sup>13</sup>. Renunciation begins by being a slow and painful process, like bearing a cross

8. Cf. *Ad. Nic.* 5 and 11 (PG 65:1036D-1037A and 1048B). Later Fathers also adopt this term: cf. Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 20; Greg. of Sinai, *Chapt.* 8 and Kallistos/Ignatios, *Cent.* 14.

9. 4:92 (716B) and 4:11 (681AB). *Mac. Hom.* 31,3 also speaks of a «forcing and constraining» of the will.

10. *Shep.* 31 (1181C), 94 (1200) and those in Prison: 5:5 (764Df.).

11. *Doctrina* 21,6 (PG 88:1817C). For reference to Climacus, cf. 16:17 (928D-929A). For reference in other Fathers, cf. abba Isaias, *Logos* 21,9 and Barsanuphius 192 and 583.

12. For references to the «narrow way», cf. *Apophth.* Ammonas 11 (PG 65:124A) and Nau 249 (1909, p. 365). The link with *apotagê* is found in Mark the Monk, *De paen.* 4 (PG 65:969D) and Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Euthymios*, IX and is later taken up by Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 6, 9 and by his disciple Nicetas Stehathos, *Cent.* 1:2 and 1-75.

13. Climacus speaks of the will as «leaven» in *Shep.* 99 (1201B). Abba Isaias, *Logos* 12,1 says that the spiritual father moderates the rise of the leaven. Mark the Monk, *De his* 191 (PG 65:960C), speaks of «hidden wills». Nevertheless, in a striking passage on baptism, Mark also says that baptismal grace is «hidden» within us and awaits our obedience to it: cf. *De bapt.* (PG 65:993C).

(cf. Luke 22:42)<sup>14</sup>; but as we stand beside Him who was crucified<sup>15</sup> we know that we will be resurrected.<sup>16</sup>

From the Old Testament, disobedience is seen as death (cf. Num. 16 and Ex. 14); the Fathers knew this and often spoke of «the death of one's own will» as the remedy of the death through disobedience.<sup>17</sup> Yet, by placing our will before the feet (ἀπόθεσις) of our spiritual father, we do not kill but bury it (μνημεια), as Christ was buried, knowing that it will be resurrected as He was. Its burial is «a willing punishment»<sup>18</sup>. For Climacus «the tomb of the will» and «resurrection» are closely linked.<sup>19</sup> Thus the cutting off of the self-will, while seemingly negative, proves to be a positive event.

The aim is to seek God's will and yield to it in all that we do and are: «every enterprise, utterance, thought, step and movement (should be) according to the Lord.»<sup>20</sup>

This accord cannot come about unless we have previously surrendered our fallen self-will, shed it like a garment and approached God in our nakedness<sup>21</sup>, or, as Barsanuphius says, acquired the «cold» nudity of a person who has nothing but God: «he dismisses his self-will and hangs everything on the will of God.»<sup>22</sup>

The cutting-off of self-will is a continual process. At times Climacus speaks of it as an activity for the less advanced<sup>23</sup>; but, in fact, it is taken for granted throughout. Each detail of our life should aim to conquer our rebellious nature and surpass it in order to return to the

14. 27:26 (1100D-1101A) and 4:5 (680AB).

15. 4:37 (704D).

16. Cf. 4:5 (680AB).

17. For disobedience as death, cf. Basil. *Sermo de renuntiatione saeculi et de perfectione spirituale* 4 (PG 31:633B). For the death of one's own will», cf. Cassian, *Inst.* IV, 43; *Apophth.* Sisoës 3 (PG 65: 405AB) and Zacharias 3 (180AB).

18. Cf. 4:4 (680A) and 5:5 (772AB).

19. 4:4 (680A). Cf. also 4:128 and 130 (728AB); 25:29 (996AB); 22:7 (965D); 26:45 (1028CD); 22:14 and 28 (968BD) and 24:11 (984C).

20. 27:ii,31 (1113A); *Shep.* 50 (1188A) and 26:ii,1 (1056D). Cf. also *Apophth.* Anthony 37-38 (PG 65:88B) where Deut. 32:7 is quoted: «Ask your father and he will tell you»; Nau 176 (1908, p. 268); abba Isaias, *Logos* 1,2; 25,18 and esp. 27,8. Obedience must be continual: cf. 4:54 (708CD) and 26:iii,10 (1085BC).

21. 28:27 (1133BC); 26:ii,2 (1057B) and esp. 4:31 (700BC). Cf. also *Apophth.* Nau (1908, 211 p. 208-2) and 244 (1909, p. 364).

22. Barsanuphius 40.

23. 27:ii,27 (1112C). Cf. also Ps. Athanasius, *Vita Sanctae Syncreticae* 100 (PG 28:1549A) and *Apophth.* Syncretica 16-17 (PG 65:425D-428A).

condition of pristine harmony; each move we make should render us more humble or else we are liable to cut ourselves off from God's will.<sup>24</sup> Some people must be patient in their self-abrogation in order to come to a perception of God's will, whereas the perfect come to know His will directly, in personal experience, in prayer.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the *idion thelêma* is not uprooted by one's own effort alone but, above all, by God's grace; God does the undoing with «the sword of the Spirit»,<sup>26</sup> in response to the humble in heart and body,<sup>27</sup> who no longer isolate themselves in impotent rebellion.

### III. *Obedience.*

It is inimical «to act in isolation» (ἀντεξουσίως πορεύεσθαι), as Climacus says;<sup>28</sup> it is «less damaging» to do things wearing the garb of obedience and service, allowing Christ to govern one's life «without danger».<sup>29</sup> Obedience means carrying one's cross with joy, knowing that one is actually taking part in Christ's crucifixion — itself an act of obedience. Climacus adheres to the notion of obedience as expressed by abba Hyperechios:

Obedience is the best ornament of the monk. He who has acquired it will be heard by God, and he will stand beside the crucified with confidence, for the crucified Lord became obedient unto death (Phil. 2:8).<sup>31</sup>

Disobedience, on the contrary, forms a barrier between man and God (Eph. 2:14).<sup>32</sup> Climacus characterises obedience as a form of inward «martyrdom» — Barsanuphius speaks of «the shedding of blood» (ἀίμα-

24. 26:63 (1033A).

25. 26:ii,4 (1060A). Regarding the perfect, cf. 26:64 (1033AB); 27:ii,32 (1113 AB) and 29:15 (1149CD).

26. 4:2 (677D); *Shep.* 50 (1188A) and 100 (1204C).

27. 26:1 (1013A). For Cassian, too, obedience is a gift (cf. *Inst.* IV, 29) and is linked with «simplicity of heart»; cf. *Inst.* IV, 24,1.

28. 8:20 (832B).

29. 28:27 (1133BC) and 56 (1140A).

30. 27:26 (1100D-1101A).

31. *Apophth.* Hyperechios 8 (PG 65:432A). For the linking of obedience with the Cross, cf. also Cassian, *Conf.* XIX,6. This parallel is also found in later Patristics: cf. Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 27 and Nicetas Stethatos, *Cent.* 2:54.

32. 29:18 (1152A).

τοχυσία) — a «witness» or «confession» (*omologia*) which allows one actually to see God,<sup>33</sup> while the demons try to separate us from Him and render obedience useless.<sup>34</sup>

It may be «useless», but so are all «absolute» commitments. Obedience is an absolute response: one «gives away everything» and receives only in proportion to such giving, as a reciprocal gift, yet without merit and without effort.<sup>35</sup> More, obedience is blind: even if the prescription given by the physician is wrong, taken in obedience it will heal.<sup>36</sup> At times, obedience seems to be taken to the point of the absurd and irrational<sup>37</sup> but it is «not illogical» (*ouk alogos*).<sup>38</sup> The Fathers stress blind obedience, even to behests that are ostensibly absurd — John the Dwarf is ordered to water a piece of dry wood<sup>39</sup> — or even apparently immoral — abba Saio is ordered to steal.<sup>40</sup> By the same token, they stress fidelity and promptness in obedience: abba Mark was copying the letter *omega* when his *geron* called him and he left the letter unfinished.<sup>41</sup> The pain experienced as a result of such obedience is likened by Climacus to an «anaesthetic» given by the physician while the patient undergoes the cure, and the burden of obedience ultimately becomes a way of reconciliation and comfort to the monk.<sup>42</sup> Obedience can only be broken «when it comes to questions of faith»<sup>43</sup>.

There are some conditions for obedience, such as fasting,<sup>44</sup> but

33. 4:10 (681A). Cf. also 15:6 (881B) and 33 (888B). The reference to Barsanuphius is: 254. The same notion is also found in *Apophth.* Pambo (PG 65:369AB) and Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 12.

34. 4:50 (708B).

35. 4:131 (728B). Cf. similar words in Greg. of Sinai, *Chapt.* 83.

36. 26:21 (1020C). Cf. also 25:49 (1000BC); 24:14 (984CD) and 8:20 (832B). Symeon the New Theologian has a similar understanding in *T.G.P.* 1:56.

37. 4:108 (717D) and 21 (689AC); 24:14 (984CD).

38. 4:111 (720B).

39. *Apophth.* John the Dwarf 1 (PG 65:204C). Cf. also Cassian, *Inst.* IV, 27:28. Cassian also speaks of *indiscussa oboedientia* in *Inst.* I, 2,4; cf. also *Conf.* XVIII,3; *Apophth.* Sisoës 10 (393C-396A); Joseph of Panepho 5 (229BC); John disciple of Paul 1 (240BC); Mark 1 (293D-296A); Pistos 1 (372C-373B) and Nau 295 (1909, p. 378).

40. *Apophth.* Saio 1 (PG 65:420AB).

41. *Apophth.* Mark 1 (PG 65:293D-296A). Cf. also *Apophth.* Arsenios 24 (93C-96A); Mark 3 (296BC); Basil the Great 1 (137BC); Palladius, *Hist. Laus.*, Didymus the Blind 4. Similar examples can be found in the *Ladder* cf. 4:32 (701BD); 70 (712B) and 13 (681B).

42. *Shep.* 12 (1169B).

43. 25:9 (992B).

44. 14:31-32 (869B-872A).

these are marginal to the benefits of obedience itself, which is shown to have a liberating effect, allowing the monk to «breathe» God.<sup>45</sup> It also mitigates the effort in struggling.<sup>46</sup> Those in obedience are attacked by only three of the eight vices, whereas the hesychasts must face the challenge of the other five<sup>47</sup>. It would seem that, for Climacus, obedience is a protective and preparatory stage, whereas *hesychia* marks the ideal condition. Still, it has a bearing on the destructive wilfulness of fallen human nature, leading to *penthos*,<sup>48</sup> repentance and purification<sup>49</sup>.

To repent is to redirect one's intellect, will and actions towards God: it is an act of obedience to Him, mediated as we shall see by the spiritual father. It entails a new condition. Obedience is obedience unto death and beyond death: the monk Akakios, in obedience to John the Sabbaite, obeys even from his grave.<sup>50</sup> He overcomes the fear of death or breaks, as it were, the barriers of death itself in obedience, which thus becomes a promise of resurrection. To be thus resurrected is to be transfigured: «I have seen those who shone in obedience».<sup>51</sup> The end of obedience is clearly positive; it does not aim at inertia but at positive harmony.

#### IV. *The Spiritual Father.*

##### (i) *The Relationship. Preliminary Comments.*

Obedience is nowhere spoken of by Climacus in terms of normative ethical demands: it transcends the submission man is normally subjected to, for its focus is in the monk's loving trust in his spiritual director. Without this special personal relationship, one gains nothing but a feeling to guilt from obedience; and such guilt feeling defeats the purpose of obedience which is to liberate.<sup>52</sup> The spiritual father does

45. 4:19 (688C) and 27:ii,7 (1108BC).

46. 24:11 (984C). Cf. also 13:2 and 10 (860A and D-861A); 27:ii,7-8 (1108BD) and 4:19 (688BC). Cf. also Cassian, *Inst.* IV, 43 and Greg. of Sinai, *Chapt.* 107.

47. 27:ii,9 (1109A). Cf. also Greg. of Sinai, *Chapt.* 121.

48. 5:1 (728B) and 7:61 (813D-816A).

49. 15:33-34 (888BC) and 83 (904B).

50. 4:111 (720A-721A). Cf. also 6:3 (793B); 4:3 (680A) and 43 (705B); *Shep.* 67 (1192D). Obedience unto death is also stressed in Pachomius' *Vita Prima Graeca* 36 and 69. Cf. also Holl, *Enthusiasmus*, p. 164-5.

51. 28:36 (1136B), Cf. also 7:61 (813D-816A) and 18:4 (937C). The notion of obedience leading to resurrection is explicit in *Apophth.* Nau 294 (1909, p. 377-8).

52. Regarding such guilt, cf. 4:42 (705B). On faith in one's spiritual father,

not aim at imposing rules and punishments, but offers a personal relationship to his spiritual child even in his admonitory role. As in the case of one's bodily father, the monk loves and respects his spiritual father. But their relationship is not a matter of biological necessity.<sup>53</sup> Barsanuphius says that the spiritual father and child are «of one soul» (ἑμὸψυχοι) in eternal love.<sup>54</sup> The spiritual life of a monk becomes his only life and the monastery his home. The diverse virtues constitute his family, and his father is the one who toils with him,<sup>55</sup> his friend and «accomplice» (βοηθός): «without help not only does one stumble but one may even die».<sup>56</sup> Barsanuphius goes further than Climacus and claims that the spiritual father does more than we do.<sup>57</sup> He is the person to whom one must not be ashamed to confide everything. To confide is to confess; to confess is to throw off all disguise — a way reverting to truth and of reversing the order of sin, leading to cleansing and purification.

Although he use the words *omologia* — *exomologesis*, which imply thanksgiving, Climacus nowhere explicitly develops the sacramental aspect of confession. But such an omission does not imply preclusion. The practice of confession must be taken for granted in the context of a monastery; moreover even today confession proper is often for monks in a monastery less formal than for lay people. Monks continually impart to their spiritual father their thoughts and transgressions while the spiritual father will read the prayer of absolution in church before

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cf. Hausherr, *Direction*, p. 186-201. Fr. Hausherr's book is the best modern study on spiritual direction. There are some passages in the *Ladder*, such as 26:ii,2 (1057B) and 25:49 (1000B), which can be compared with John Cassian's notion of obedience to a *group* of elders: cf. *Conf.* 11, 10-11; Cassian, however, is not ignorant of a tradition with *one* superior: cf. *Inst.* IV, 9 A similar notion to Cassian's former idea is found though only implicitly, in *Shep.* 31 (1181C) where the shepherd, too, is asked to obey his monks. For this notion, cf. also Athanasius, *Vita Ant.* 3-4 (PG 26:844A-845C). Abba Isaias tells one to obey one's fathers: cf. *Logos* 9,1-2 and Barsanuphius implies the same: cf. Barsanuphius 554, 694 and 703. Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of St. Abraamios*, refers to two spiritual fathers that the saint consulted. The notion of obedience to more than one person is also implied in Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 5.

53. 4:78 (713AB). Cf. also 1:46 (641D) and 4:39 (705A). To the spiritual father one gives one's heart: cf. *Hist. Monachorum*, VIII, Apollo 8 and abba Isaias, *Logos* 9,2.

54. Barsanuphius 5.

55. 3:20 (665D). Cf. also 15:56 (892B); 4:68-69 (712AB). Cf. also Dorotheus, *Instr.* V, 61 and similar words in Barsanuphius 162.

56. 4:61 (709C) and 58 (709B).



communion over the whole monastic community. When in Step seven Climacus refers to «noetic confession» (*noera exagoreusis*)<sup>58</sup> he is not questioning the sacrament of confession but stressing the purification of the intellect as well as underlining the completeness of obedience as a weapon against noetic enemies.

The relationship, then, with one's spiritual father may include confession in the narrower, sacramental sense, but it is not restricted to it. In fact, nowhere does Climacus indicate that the spiritual father should be in priestly orders, and there is no evidence that the author himself was actually ordained, though he clearly was a spiritual father. Similar cases are to be found in fourth century Egypt where abba Anthony and many other Fathers were not priests. The same applies to Symeon the Pious, the spiritual father of Symeon the New Theologian, and in this century Staretz Silouan, who were not priests.<sup>59</sup> In the West, too, there is no evidence that, for example, Benedict was in orders.

The relationship between spiritual father and child exists both in *cenobium* and in the hesychast way of life. Even if, for Climacus, obedience to a spiritual father signifies life in a monastic community, it is yet a virtue assumed in the life of a solitary. A hesychast may, in fact, have never lived in a *cenobium* but he certainly will have lived initially in obedience under a spiritual father,<sup>60</sup> as indeed Climacus himself did. Abba Rufus, however, who composed an entire eulogy to obedience, believes that «he who remains sitting at the feet of his spiritual father receives a greater reward than he who lives alone in the desert».<sup>61</sup> Later Fathers, especially fourteenth century Hesychasts, deal with the matter more comprehensively, reminiscent of Climacus, and they see obedience as the foundation of and door to *hesychia*.<sup>62</sup>

Writers such as Theodoret of Cyrrihus like to refer to the spiritual father as a «gymnast» (γυμναστής) or «trainer» (παιδοτρίβης).<sup>63</sup>

57. Barsanuphius 227.

58. 7:3 (801D).

59. Cf. Holl, *Enthusiasmus*, p. 127, and Archimandrite Sophrony, *The Monk of Mount Athos* (London and Oxford 1973).

60. Cf. Cassian, *Conf.* XXIV, 26.

61. *Apophth.* Rufus 2 (PG 65:389C-392A) and Nau 296 (1909, p. 379). A similar emphasis on obedience is found in abba Isaias, *Logos* 3,3 and Isaac Syrian, *Mystic Treatises* (p. 128).

62. Cf., for example, Greg. of Sinai, *Chapt.* 107 and Kallistos/Ignatios, *Cent.* 14.

63. *Phil. Hist.*, Julian Sabas, II,3, (1308C); Eusebius IV,2 and 13 (1341A and

Other texts show a preference for such words as «abbot» (ἡγούμενος), «guide» (ὁδηγός), «shepherd» (ποιμὴν) or other terms.<sup>64</sup> In the following sections, I shall deal with the spiritual father as guide, physician, teacher, sponsor and judge. I will then briefly consider his relationship with God and his role as priest in the world. It will be seen how Climacus, while personal and distinct in his view of this, reflects an existing tradition.

It bears reiteration that, for Climacus, the relationship with the spiritual father is not an institutional but a personal one. Although he is called «a (good) manager» (ἀγωνοθέτης),<sup>65</sup> he is, for his disciple above all, «an archetypal image», «rule» and «law»: he does not prescribe rules but himself becomes a living model, not so much through his words as through his personal example.<sup>66</sup> Abba Poemen states: «Be their example, not their legislator»,<sup>67</sup> and Barsanuphius writes to a disciple: «I have not bound you, brother, nor have I given you a commandment but an advice; so do as you wish». <sup>68</sup> This freedom characterises the *geron* who need not necessarily be old in age if his attitude shows that «everything he says and does is as a law and a rule for the brotherhood». <sup>69</sup>

### (ii) *The Spiritual Father as Guide.*

The spiritual father is seen as one's precursor in the way of salvation by first entering into heaven, seeing Christ, and thereupon calling us to see and taste Christ for ourselves<sup>70</sup> (cf. Ps. 34:8). If he himself has not encountered Christ, then, in Basil the Great's words, «he is a

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1352A); Publius, V,10, p. 342 (1357A) and Symeon the Elder, VI, 13, (1364C). Compare these terms with similar ones in the *Ladder*: 4,2 (677D), 23-24 (692A), 29 (697BD) and 124 (725D).

64. Cf. Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Sabas*, XVI. «Shepherd» is also found in Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 18. and Kallistos/Ignatios, *Cent.* 15.

65. 4:7 (680D) and 31 (700D). Cf. also Theodore Studite, *Ep.* 1,2 (PG 99:909B).

66. *Shep.* 23 (1177B). Cf. Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 18 and Kallistos/Ignatios, *Cent.* 14, who use the word «archetype». Cf. also Basil, *Reg. Fus. Tract.* 43,1 (PG 31:1028BC) and *Apophth.* Psenthaision 1 (PG 65:436D-437A).

67. *Apophth.* Poemen 174 (PG 65:364C).

68. Barsanuphius 56.

69. Basil, *Sermo Asceticus* 3 (PG 31:876BC). Cf. also *Apophth.* Poemen 61 (PG 65:336D) and the use of the word *paidariogeron* (young old man) with reference to Macarius of Egypt in Palladius, *Hist. Laus.* 19 and 20.

70. *Shep.* 100 (1208A) and 93 (1197D-1200A).

blind guide, leading to the destruction both of himself and of others who follow him».<sup>71</sup>

In the *Ladder*, the spiritual father is compared to Moses who led the Jews out of Egypt; we, too, have need of «some Moses» to take us by the hand and guide us to the Promised Land, to freedom.<sup>72</sup> It is a self-deception to presume that one can rely on oneself in this, even if one were to possess all the wisdom and strength of the world (cf. John 5:30): «for angelic strength is needed for the solitary life».<sup>73</sup> Even in solitary life mere separation can be a way of servitude to oneself, whereas the seed and fruit of obedience is perfect freedom in response and in concord. For Climacus' contemporary, Isaac the Syrian, only in obedience is one truly free.<sup>74</sup> And Dorotheus of Gaza asks: «Have you seen someone fallen? You can be sure that he counted on himself».<sup>75</sup>

A number of recurring metaphors are used to express the idea of guidance; a guide (*hodégos*)<sup>76</sup> for the blind (cf. Job. 29:15), a shepherd for the flock, a leader for the lost, a father, and even a mother (cf. 1 Thess. 2:7) for the child, a healer for the sick, a navigator for the ship,<sup>77</sup> even if the vessel is in a bad condition.<sup>78</sup> «But I shall be surprised if anyone will be able by himself to save his ship from the sea»,<sup>79</sup> «becoming all things for all in order that he might by all means save some» (1 Cor. 9:22).

71. *Reg. Fus. Tract.* 25,2 (PG 31-985B).

72. 1:14 (633D-636A); *Shep.* 93 and 100 (1197D-1200A) and 1201Bf.); 1:15 (636A) and 4:126 (725D-728A).

73. 27:12 (1097D). Cf. also 1:14 (633D-636A) and 26,iii,45 (1089B).

74. *Mystic Treatises* (pp. 24 and 142).

75. Dorotheus, *Instr.* V, 66. Cf. also similar statements in Mark the Monk, *De his.* 148 (PG 65:953B) and 146 (953A); Barsanuphius 162; Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 20 (p. 348); Nicetas Stethatos, *Cent.* 2:10 and Greg. of Sinai, *Chapt.* 15.

76. 27:12 (1097D). Cf. 27:ii,1 (1105A) and 26:iii,45 (1089B). Cf. also Symeon the New Theologian, *Thanks.* 2.

77. Cf. 4:69 (712A). The term «shepherd» is also found in John Moshus, *Pratum*, ch. 110 (PG 87:2973C). The notion of the spiritual father as «mother» is not Climacus' but originates in Greg. Nyssa, *De virginitate* 3 (PG 46:332B).

78. 26:iii,44 (1089B); *Shep.* 3 (1165B). For God's will as the «harbour», cf. Greg. Nyssa, *De virg.* 24 (PG 46:412D) and *De proposito secundum deum* (PG 46:297BC) and Diadochus, *Cent.* 22.

79. 15:56 (892C).

(iii) *The Spiritual Father as Physician.*

In speaking of spiritual direction, Climacus prefers therapeutic to juridical imagery: «For we need a director who is indeed an equal to angels...a skilled person and a physician».<sup>80</sup> The spiritual father is an experienced physician who knows, for instance, how to remove splinters without enlarging the wound;<sup>81</sup> For Anastasius the Sinaite the spiritual father must be experienced enough to heal.<sup>82</sup> Sin is equivalent to disease or illness, and so we must enter the hospital of confession where the spiritual father makes us inwardly whole by prescribing medicines, by bandaging, cauterising, amputating. Trust in the spiritual father's judgement should be equal to confidence in the diagnosis of a physician: we ourselves are often incapable of detecting our disease, as Basil the Great observes.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, a physician can only heal us if we expose our wounds to him: the monks in the *cenobium* at Alexandria noted down every sin or sinful thought in a notebook which they showed to their *geron*.<sup>84</sup> «He who confesses his pain is near to health», says Isaac the Syrian.<sup>85</sup> The physician should be consulted immediately, everything revealed to him unashamedly, lest the object of confession be defeated: «and, if possible, sprinkle the feet of your judge and physician with your tears, like the feet of Christ».<sup>86</sup> The physician wants to inspect the open wound: the Ladder states that we must show him our repentance free from all preconception or bias.<sup>87</sup>

80. 1:15 (636AB). Symeon the New Theologian refers to his spiritual father as «equal to the angels»: cf. *Cat.* 22.

81. 8:23 (832C); 23:1 (976B) and 4:28 (697B). Medical imagery is also found in Athanasius, *Vita Ant.* 87 (PG 26:965A); Greg. Naz., *Or.* II, 16 and 18 (PG 35:425A) and 473A); Chrysostom, *De Sacerdotio* I, 9 (PG 48:630) and *Non esse ad gratiam concionandum* 1 (PG 50:653); Basil, *Reg. Fus. Tract.* 30 (PG 31:993A) and 51 (1040CD); *Vita Prima* 132 (p. 83-4, p. 232); *Apophth.* Nau 217, (1909, p. 357-8); Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Euthymios*, IX; Isaac Syrian, *Mystic Treatises* (p. 51); Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 18 and Nicetas Stethatos. *Cent.* 2:11). There are many such references in the *Ladder*: cf. *Shep.* 72 (1193B); 28:7 (1132A); 5:5 (776C) and *Shep.* 2 (1168D-1169C).

82. *Quaestiones* 6 (PG 89:369D-372A). The emphasis on experience is especially evident in later Fathers: cf. Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 14; Nicetas Stethatos *Cent.* 1:73 and Greg. of Sinai, *Chapters*.

83. *Reg. Brev. Tract.* 301 (PG 31:1296AB).

84. 4:32 (701CD). Cf. also 4:70 (712B) and 13 (681B).

85. *Mystic Treatises* (p. 7). Cf. also Basil, *Reg. Fus. Tract.* 46 (PG 31:1036A).

86. 4:56 (709A). Cf. also 4:27 (697A), 32 (701CD) and 39 (705A).

87. 4:117 (724D-725A).

On the other hand, the spiritual father, impelled by «good humour» (τῇ ἀστειότητι), must aim to retain his patients throughout the entire operation until they are completely healed. Barsanuphius wants the spiritual father to be «free from anger».<sup>88</sup> Cases can occur, however, when the physician will cause despair.<sup>89</sup> His powers are limited and some sickness cannot be healed except by angels or by God Himself.<sup>90</sup> Not everyone is equal to a confessor's task: «Not all of us are required to save others», Climacus says.<sup>91</sup> It is a vocation which presupposes vision—a gift of discernment or insight,<sup>92</sup> and of dispassion, without which the correct medicines cannot be administered.<sup>93</sup> A spiritual father may also give away so much of himself that he will be left spiritually dry, «empty handed» (κεναῖς χερσίν), unless he is continually refreshed and replenished by God's grace. The fact, therefore, that one is spiritually gifted is not by itself sufficient for assuming the responsibility of a *geron*.<sup>94</sup> The *Vita Antonii* illustrates well the notion that the spiritual father is called by God directly, or, very often, indirectly through others: Anthony's door is broken down by those who have chosen him as *geron*.<sup>95</sup> The Fathers tried to avoid such a responsibility. Barsanuphius said: «I want to be neither an abba for anyone, nor a teacher; for the Apostle indicts me when he says: 'you, then, who teach will you not teach yourself?'» (Rom. 2:21).<sup>96</sup> The physician must himself be «without illness» (*anosos*), in need of no medical treatment<sup>97</sup> and

88. Barsanuphius 23. The reference to the *Ladder* is 1:33 (637D-640A).

89. 26:21 (1020BC). Much care is needed to discern which patients are inclined towards despair: cf. *Shep.* 32 (1181CD).

90. 26:ii,62 (1073B).

91. 3:5 (664CD). Cf. also 15:74 (897D) and esp. 26:12 (1016BC). Cf. also Pachomius, *Vita Prima* 126.

92. 4:4 (680A) and 5:5 (772C). On insight, cf. 4:113 (724AB). Cf. also Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Euthymios*, XIX; John Moschus, *Pratum*, John 78 (PG 87: 2932A-2933B), and Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 18.

93. *Shep.* 13 (1169BC), 57 (1189B), 96 (1201A) and 100 (1204B).

94. *Shep.* 56 (1189A). Cf. also 26:12 (1016B).

95. Athanasius, *Vita Ant.* 14 (PG 26:864BC). Cf. similar examples in Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Sabas*, XIX; Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 20 and Nicetas Stethatos, *Cent.* 2:58.

96. Barsanuphius 162.

97. *Step.* 4 (1165A). This is common ground in the Fathers: cf. Basil, *Sermo de renuntiatione saeculi, et de perfectione spirituale* 2 (PG 31:631-2); *Vita Prima* 15; *Apophth.* Poemen 127 (PG 65:353D) and Cassian 5 (245A); Cassian, *Inst.* IV, 30,1; Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Sabas*, XXXIX, Cf. also Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 18.

even then should not undertake to heal patients who are not his (cf. 1 Cor. 5:12-13). Abba Macarius of Alexandria says: «Correct and judge justly those who are subject to you, but judge no one else»<sup>98</sup>.

(iv). *The Spiritual Father as Teacher.*

As a person who has received wisdom from above, the spiritual father is preeminently a «teacher» (*didaskalos*) who needs no other books since he has received through personal experience the book written «by the hand of God» (δακτύλῳ Θεοῦ),<sup>99</sup>: the parallel here is with the tablets given to Moses on Sinai. One might observe that, in the East, the Church never condemned extra-ecclesiastical charismatic leadership: while accepting institutional authority, monks for example could challenge even Patriarchs in the name of the truth. In fact, a charismatic atmosphere seems to have prevailed in the desert, in which personal obedience to an elder or teacher preceded all institutionalised ecclesiastical power relations.

The teacher should not only be adorned with the virtues of «guilelessness» (*akakia*) and «zeal» (οὐκεία σπουδῆ)<sup>100</sup> but, above all, he should be rigorous and exacting, «for this also is the sign of a good shepherd», so that the Last Judgement may not prove severe.<sup>101</sup> Gregory of Nyssa says of the pedagogue that he applies «to one wounds, to another advice, to one praise, and to another something else»,<sup>102</sup> while Isaac of Nineveh, the Syrian contemporary of Climacus, states: «He that combines chastisement with healing, chastises with love».<sup>103</sup>

98. *Apophth.* Macarius 2 (PG 65:304D-305A). This is implied also in the *Ladder*: cf. 14:7 (865A).

99. *Shep.* 5-6 (1165BC) and 94 (1200AD). Cf. also 25:49 (1000C); *Shep.* 20 (1177A) and 4:72 (712C). Symeon the New Theologian speaks similarly in *Cat.* 18. In the Fathers, the teacher is usually God Himself: cf. Greg. Nyssa, *Adversus eos qui castigationes aegre ferunt* (PG 46:309C-312A) and Chrysostom, *Non esse ad gratiam concionandum* 2 (PG 50:655).

100. *Shep.* 2 (1165B).

101. *Shep.* 30 (1180B). The quotation is from *Shep.* 7 (1168A). Cf. also *Shep.* 27 (1180A), 94 (1200CD), 96 (1201A) and 99 (1201A).

102. Greg. Nyssa, *De proposito secundum deum* (PG 46:300A). Macarius adopts similar language to that of Greg. Nyssa: cf. *Epistola* (PG 34:424D-425A). Cf. also Pachomius, *Vita Prima* 103. There is also a passage in Chrysostom where he speaks very much like Climacus regarding the Last Judgement: cf. *Non esse ad gratiam concionandum* 3 and 1 (PG 50: 657 and 653).

103. *Mystic Treatises* (p. 216).

(v) *The Spiritual Father as Sponsor.*

Climacus also describes the spiritual father as *anadochos*, the term used for the sponsor or godfather at baptism, and signifying the one who assumes responsibility for another.<sup>104</sup> The source of this doctrine is Pauline: «We who are strong ought to bear the failings of the weak» (Rom. 15:1). Barsanuphius writes to a disciple: «I assume and bear you but on this condition: that you bear the keeping of my words and commandments».<sup>105</sup> The spiritual father does nothing less than take on full responsibility for our souls:

Thus, there is an assuming of spiritual responsibility (*ἀναδοχή*) in the proper sense, which is a laying down of one's soul on behalf of the soul of one's neighbour *in every way* (*κατὰ πάντα*).

As suggested here by Climacus, the *anadoché* can be complete (*kata panta*) but — and here Climacus is clearly adhering to Barsanuphius — it can also be partial: the spiritual father may only undertake responsibility for the sins of the past or only of the present.<sup>106</sup> In the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, abba Lot says: «I will carry half of your fault with you».<sup>107</sup> Barsanuphius goes further and says that as a spiritual father he would bear more than half, even all the sins: «I care, then, for you more than you do; or, rather, it is God who cares». «But if you want to cast everything on me on account of obedience, I accept this too».<sup>108</sup>

104. 4:104 (771B). Cf. *Shep.* 56 (1189A), 45 (1185B) and 59 (1189C); 4:7 and 11 (680CD and 681B). Cf. Hausherr, *Direction*, p. 141-7 and p. 178-211. Also see unpublished D. Phil. thesis by R. Barringer, *Ecclesiastical Penance in the Church of Constantinople: A Study of the Hagiographical Evidence to 923 A.D.* (Oxford 1979), esp. ch. 2 n. 138, which refers to Pachomian evidence for the use of *anadochos*; ch. 3 n. 89, where he refers to J. Gouillard, «Christianisme byzantin et slave», in *École Pratique des Hautes Études (Ve Section) Sciences Religieuses. Annuaire* 82 (1974) p. 213-19 (esp. p. 215-17); ch. 3 n. 316 and n. 335; cf. also ch. 4, p. 138-40 and ch. 5, p. 161-3, for the action of the laying upon of the hand. This is why the spiritual father is filled with joy when his child progresses: cf. Barsanuphius 119, 121 and 206. Symeon the New Theologian, Cat. 18, refers to Rom. 15:1. The *anadochos* theme is frequently found in the Fathers: cf. *Apophth.* Nau 179 (1908, p. 269-70), 180 (1908, p. 270), 346 (1912, p. 297-8) and 354 (1912, p. 300); Barsanuphius 189, 191, 199, 203, 239 and 483; Isaac Syrian, *Mystic Treatises* (p. 350 and p. 418) and Maximus, *Cap. de car.* IV, 93 (PG 90:1072A).

105. Barsanuphius 270.

106. *Shep.* 57 (1189AB).

107. *Apophth.* Lot. 2 (PG 65:256BC). Cf. also Nau 346 (1912, p. 297-8).

108. Barsanuphius 39 and 169. For carrying half the weight, see Barsanuphius 168; for forgiveness of all sins since birth, cf. 202 and 210.

The spiritual father lifts our burdens, bearing them as his own, and the disciple has nothing to fear: «He merely lays his burden entirely on his director».<sup>109</sup>

This attitude of vicarious transference indicates an extraordinary ascendancy over separate human existence. A remarkable passage in the *Ladder* reads:

The old man read it, smiled, lifted the brother and said to him: 'My son, put your hand on my neck'. The brother did so. Then the great man said: 'Very well, brother. Now let this sin be on my neck for as many years as *it has been or will be* active within you. But from now on, ignore it'.<sup>110</sup>

This gesture may point to a ritual practice of penance in the early Church, preserved in the present custom of the priest laying his hand on the penitent's neck in confession. Nevertheless, there is no suggestion of formal forgiveness; rather, it is an act of love implying solidarity with humankind. It is assuming the suffering of others, «bearing the cross» (Luke 14: 24) of Christ. The pain of obedience turns here into the divine love of a «suffering servant» (Isaiah 53) rising from the dead, in the same way as Christ's «obedience unto death» (Phil. 2:8) made Him the first-fruit of all creation (Col. 1:15-18), the creation of a new nature and not merely a reclamation of the old. The spiritual father should not, however, lift burdens which exceed his powers.<sup>111</sup> He will have to account for all his spiritual children at the Last Judgement (cf. Ezech. 3:20).<sup>112</sup> And in the words of the *Vita Prima Graeca* of Pachomius, if «it is a difficult struggle to account for oneself, how much more so is it to account for many?»<sup>113</sup>

Still, the spiritual father would prefer his own damnation to that

109. 24:14 (984CD). Cf. *Shep.* 75 (1177C) and 45 (1185B).

110. 23:14 (980AB). For this gesture, cf. also Symeon Metaphrastes, *Life of Ioannikios* 14 (PG 116:48D).

111. *Shep.* 59 (1189C).

112. 4:4 (680A) and 43 (705B). Cf. also Barsanuphius 48, 212, 217, 231, and 614; Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 12, 18.

113. *Vita Prima* 132; 95. The same notion is also found in other Fathers: cf. Basil, *De renuntiatione saeculi, et de perfectione spirituale* 10 (PG 31: 648B) and *Reg. Fus. Tract.* 25,1 (PG 31:948C); Barsanuphius 77 (p. 70) and Anastasius Sinaite, *Quaestiones* 6 (PG 89:372C). Cf. also Hausherr, *Direction* p. 124-30. This is why the spiritual Father cannot even sleep but must «not cease to play the pipe of exhortation when his sheep are grazing, and especially when they are settling down to sleep»: cf. *Shep.* 37 (1184B); cf. also Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 19.



of his disciples, or at least he seeks to suffer *with* his disciples, in true com-*passion*. Although Climacus does not develop this argument, it is certainly implicit in the *Ladder* and can be found explicitly in Patristic tradition both before and after Climacus. The Biblical source is Exodus 32:32. Barsanuphius prays to God: «Master, either take me into your Kingdom with my children, or else wipe me also off your book»<sup>114</sup>; while Symeon the New Theologian guarantees to his disciple that «I will die if God overlooks you [my child]. I will hand myself over to the eternal fire in your place if He deserts you».<sup>115</sup> These utterances echo God's reply to Moses: «Whoever has sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book» (Ex. 32:33) but they also highlight the power of the loving prayer of a righteous person (James 5:16), such as the spiritual father should be. Hence Climacus' description of the spiritual father as «intercessor» (μεσίτης)<sup>116</sup> and the first definition of him in the *Ad Pastorem* as «preeminently he that is able to seek out and set aright his lost, rational sheep by means of guilelessness, zeal and prayer».<sup>117</sup>

(vi) *The Spiritual Father as Judge.*

The shepherd cares for all the sheep all the time. He must not be judged but be remembered by his spiritual attainments. It is he who judges us, and not we who judge him.<sup>118</sup> Hence all his counsels should be accepted with joy,<sup>119</sup> even when they are not to our liking:<sup>120</sup> he tests

114. Barsanuphius 110. Cf. also 48, 231, 239, 147, 199, and passages regarding one another's burdens: cf. 198, 165, 203, 206, 218, 223, 489, 579, and 790 which can be paralleled with Ex. 32:32. Athanasius, *Vita Ant.* 55 (PG 26:924B); *Apophth.* Mios 1 (PG 65:301B) and abba Isaias, *Logos* 25,25 where he cites Ex. 32:32.

115. Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 30. Cf. also *Cat.* 3 19 and 8.

116. 1:14 (636A).

117. *Shep.* 2 (1165B). Cf. also 4:2 (677D) and 48 (708A) and 15:63 (893B). The notion of one's spiritual father praying for one is old: cf. *Apophth.* Nau 293 (p. 377); Barsanuphius 17, 80, 109, 129, 208, 216, 235, 255, 353, 645 and 790; Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 16. The importance of his prayer even after his death is emphasised in Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of Euthymios*, XXXIX and Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 20. Cf. esp. Hausherr, *Direction*, p. 130-41.

118. 4:9 (681A), 12-14 (681B-684B); 25:49 (1000B) and 4:56 (709A). The same idea is explicit in Barsanuphius 551. and esp. Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 18 and 26. We should remember his attainments: cf. 4:8 (680D) and 99 (716D); cf. also references above to Symeon the New Theologian. He is father of all: cf. *Shep.* 37 (1184B) and 15 (1172B), and he must take care not to reveal anything scandalous. *Shep.* 39 (1184C).

119. 4:16-17 (685AC), 26 (696C) and 11 (720BD).

120. *Apophth.* Nau 245 (1909, p. 364).

and «trains» (*gymnastes*) us continually.<sup>121</sup> Before his spiritual father the monk is silent, not just appropriating his teaching (cf. Matt. 3:9) but imitating the teacher.<sup>122</sup> If the monk does not know the physician he, too, can test him to find out if he is experienced in healing, if he is capable of curing the patient's wounds.<sup>123</sup> If he does know the spiritual father he should not take advantage of «the condescension and indulgence of the superior».<sup>124</sup> In the words of abba Isidore the priest, «disciples must love as their fathers those who are truly their masters and fear them as their guides; they should not lose their fear because of love, nor because of fear should love be obscured».<sup>125</sup>

(vii) *The Spiritual Father and God.*

The spiritual father stands vicariously not only in the place of his child, but also of God. His desire for our salvation (σωτηρις) is Christ's command (ἐσώθης).<sup>126</sup> Ascetic theology understands obedience to him as if it is unto God Himself.<sup>127</sup> Nevertheless, the spiritual father is seen as above all a servant of God, who is our real Father: «call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven» (Matt. 23:9).<sup>128</sup> The spiritual father does nothing more than to speak the word of God to a monk in obedience.<sup>129</sup> The desert fathers claim, ambiguously perhaps, that if someone has faith in another, and hands himself over to him in complete submission, he does not need to concern himself with God's commands but can entrust his whole will to his father. He will suffer no reproach from God, for God looks for nothing so much, at any rate from beginners, as renunciation through obedience.<sup>130</sup> The aim is not to reach mystical heights, nor to have command of prayer;

121. 4:23-24 (692A-693C), 29 (697BD) and 124 (725D); 4:2 (677D).

122. 4:72 (721C), 74 (712CD) and 77 (713A); 26:ii,21 (1064B). Cf. also other Fathers: cf. Athanasius, *Vita Ant.* 4 (PG 26:845A); Basil, *De renuntiatione saeculi, et de perfectione spirituale* 3 (PG 31:632D-633A); *Apophth.* Sisoës 45 (PG 65:405B) and *Hist. Monachorum*, XXIV, Paul 1.

123. 4:91 (716A), 122-3 (725CD).

124. 4:107 (717C).

125. *Apophth.* Isidore 5 (PG 65:236B).

126. 4:106 (717C).

127. Cf. Basil, *Const. monast.* 4 (PG 31:1408D-1409A); Cassian, *Inst.* IV, 10 and Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 3.

128. Cf. Pachomius, *Vita Prima* 35 and 108.

129. *Apophth.* Ares 1 (PG 65:132C-133A).

130. *Apophth.* Nau 290 (1909, p. 376).

it is not even to carry out the commandments of God. Rather, the purpose is to mortify our will, to die to this world through obedience to a spiritual father who can, by God's grace, further our resurrection from life. For Climacus, this remains valid even if the spiritual father is not a particularly «spiritual» person. God can speak through anyone he pleases:

...even if those consulted are not very spiritual. For God is not unjust, and will not lead astray souls who with faith and innocence humbly submit to the advice and judgement of their neighbour. Even if those who were asked were brute beasts, yet He who speaks is the immaterial and invisible One.<sup>131</sup>

This is the burden of the «blind» obedience advocated by the ascetic Fathers. But it is not blind in the sense of being pointless or misjudged. It is the risk of faith and the transparency of love which led Abraham, «not knowing whither he went» (Hebr. 11:8), to sacrifice his son because God wanted it; and it was that risk and transparency which led Isaac to his own sacrifice, carrying the wood to kindle the sacrificial fire, trusting in his father. In the same way, the relationship with one's spiritual father serves as the ground for the relationship with God which «allows» unconditional obedience.

As has been noted before, there is a «protective» element in this relationship: we are «covered» (σκέπη) from pitfalls<sup>132</sup>. The spiritual father protects even when he is not there: he is present even in his absence. We surrender to him in imagination, or rather in trust, as we trust in God<sup>133</sup>. Salvation itself depends on this<sup>134</sup>. True, in the New Testament obedience is offered directly to God; but at the time Christ was in person on earth. Now we must obey Christ through and in others, in a person who is his living image. In fact, since the *geron* intercedes for us to God, it is, in a sense and most paradoxically, preferable to sin against God than against him:

For when we anger God, our director can reconcile us; but when he is incensed against us, we no longer have anyone to

131. 26:ii,2 (1057BC).

132. 4:44 (705BC), 48 (705D-708A), 52 (708B) and 2 (677D); 15:63 (893B). Cf. also abba Isaias, *Logos* 9,1 and 25,18 and Barsanuphius 1.

133. 4:2 (677D), 7-8 (680C-681A) and esp. 47 (705D).

134. Shep. 92 (1197C).

make propitiation for us. But it seems to me that both cases amount to the same thing<sup>135</sup>.

There is, then, a continuity between God and the spiritual father. God is proverbially inscrutable, but he meets us face to face in another — in the spiritual father, and in the encounter, all the ambivalent areas of personal commitment: obedience, trust, self-abnegation, recovery of oneself and ultimate liberation, converge. The areas are ambivalent, for none of them provide a basis for complacency and self-assurance. The link with the spiritual father, too, and the love for him is no «guarantee» for unblemished spiritual life: it is a gratuitous gift offered by the Holy Spirit. But the gift commits us, and like all true commitment it cannot but be unconditional and enduring.

(viii) *The Spiritual Father as the Priest in the World.*

A brief comment must be made about the sacerdotal meaning of spiritual fatherhood. By presiding over our spiritual pathway, the spiritual father acquires a priestly function: he offers us to God in an act of sacrifice, preparing and leading us into the Holy of Holies. This is itself a form of consecration to a priesthood in the world around us and within us.<sup>136</sup> As intercessor (μεσότης), the spiritual father is expressing the ontological priesthood entrusted, in principle, to every human person by virtue of the divine image in him.<sup>137</sup>

Whether endowed with «royal priesthood» (1 Peter 2:5 and 9), as all Christians are, or as his disciple's supreme intercessor and guide, the spiritual father is considered by Climacus to be called to the highest and most arduous of orders:

We can offer no gift to God so acceptable as to bring Him rational souls through repentance. The whole world is not worth so much as a soul<sup>138</sup>.

The calling is shown as part of man's personal relation with God and his

135. 4:126 (728A) and 1:14 (633D-636A).

136. 4:67 (709D-712A); *Shep.* 91 (1197C), 93 (1197D) and 100 (1204B). For the notion of the spiritual father sacrificing us to God, cf. Symeon the New Theologian, *Cat.* 1. For the spiritual father as priest, cf. Greg. Nyssa, *Adversus eos qui castigationes aegre ferunt* (PG 46:316A).

137. Cf. 1:14 (636A).

138. *Shep.* 90 (1196D).

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fellow-men: whatever the connotations — priest, intercessor, healer, teacher, guide or proxy — the phenomenon of spiritual fatherhood, as of sonship, spells the supremacy of the personal over the impersonal. It is not by chance that John Climacus displays a characteristic interest in the spiritual father and his disciple as human beings with their peculiar qualities and involvement in peculiar relations, rather than a concern with compulsory rules and ordinances which may attend them.