

ASPECTS OF MONASTIC FORMATION, PROBATION, AND EDUCATION IN ST. GREGORY PALAMAS

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ABSTRACT. The theology of Saint Gregory Palamas is of crucial importance for monastic spirituality. In his writings as well as in his *Vita*, composed by Philotheos Kokkinos, there are several instances which deal with aspects of a novitiate, that is, the process of becoming a monk. These elements will be examined in the context of Byzantine monastic rules (*typika*) and the earlier monastic tradition, both in East and West. In the sixth century, St. Benedict of Nursia adopted these early Eastern traditions for Western monasticism. Therefore, they constitute a strong common ground until today. This article attempts to show some traits of St. Gregory Palamas' own monastic "career," what he himself considered important, and what could be considered important for today.

Keywords: St. Gregory Palamas, St. Benedict of Nursia, monasticism, monastic spirituality, novitiate

Introduction

As a Benedictine monk, I much depend on the Byzantine theological, liturgical, and monastic tradition. And ever since I first came across St. Gregory Palamas as a student, I freely admit that, without his theology, I cannot reflect on my own faith, as a monk, theologian, and musician. Beyond my personal interest, however, I consider the common basis and heritage of monasticism, East and West—their shared ideas and ambitions—to be a great opportunity to enrich both traditions, and perhaps to bridge some gaps.

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In 1924, Pope Pius XI assigned the Benedictines with the task of translating, explaining, and promoting Byzantine theology to the West, in order to contribute to an aspired reunion of the Churches.¹ As one direct result, the Benedictine Abbey of Chevetogne in Belgium was founded by Fr. Lambert Beaudouin (1873–1960), where two branches of the monastic community follow either the Byzantine or the Latin rite. According to the Pope’s request, their common work is published in various forms to this day, not least in their journal, *Irénikon*.² More Benedictine monasteries have responded to this call, including my own, in Gerleve. Perhaps this article can be a small contribution towards the same call.

The Eastern sources of Western monasticism are well known. The *Rule* of St. Benedict of Nursia, dating back to the sixth century, quotes quite a number of Greek Fathers³ and further recommends, explicitly, reading the rules of St. Basil of Caesarea and the writings of St. John Cassian.⁴ In the other direction, St. Benedict has also shown some influence in the Byzantine East.⁵ In the tenth century, merchants from Amalfi founded the monastery *Santa Maria degli Amalfitani*

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- ¹ Pope Pius XI, Letter *Equidem Verba* (March 21, 1924) to the Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Confederation, in *Annales Ordinis S. Benedicti* 28–34/1920–1926 (Subiaco: Typis Proto-Coenobii, 1934), 76–78. The full title of the letter reads: “Epistola ad Reverendissimum D. Fidelem de Stotzingen, Abbatem Primate O.S.B. de praeparandis monachis pro futuro opere unionis Russiae cum Ecclesia Catholica.” The Benedictines nevertheless focused on the whole of the Byzantine tradition. However, with the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), most of the work was abandoned.
- ² The Bavarian Abbey of Niederaltaich is following a comparable way with two branches in one community. Not far from Rome, the monks of the Abbey of Grottaferrata, a Byzantine foundation from 1004, follow the Byzantine rite and a *typikon* in the Stoudite tradition, with close connections with the Benedictines. Another example are the Benedictine sisters of the *Monastère de l’Emmanuel* in Bethlehem, following the Byzantine rite under the jurisdiction of the Greek Catholic Patriarch of Jerusalem.
- ³ The extent of quotations from Greek and Latin Fathers as well as their names easily become clear from the critical apparatus and the indexes of the various editions, e.g., Rudolf Hanslik (ed.), *Benedicti Regula* (CSEL 75), 2nd edn (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1977), 186–191; Timothy Fry (ed.), *RB 1980. The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 594–600; Michaela Puzicha (ed.), *Quellen und Texte zur Benediktusregel* (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 2007).
- ⁴ *Rule of St. Benedict* 73.5, ed. Hanslik, 180; *RB 1980*, 296–197.
- ⁵ Olivier Delouis, “Saint Benoît de Nursie à Byzance,” in *Interactions, emprunts, confrontations chez les religieux (Antiquité tardive – fin du XIX^e siècle)*, eds. Sylvain Excoffon, Daniel-Odon Hurel, and Annick Peters-Custot (Saint Étienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint Étienne, 2015), 73–92; Julien Leroy, “Saint Benoît dans le monde byzantin,” in *San Benedetto e l’Oriente cristiano. Atti del Simposio tenuto nell’abbazia della Novalesa (19–23 Maggio 1980)*, ed. Francesco Pio Tamburrino (Novalesa: Abbazia di Novalesa, 1981), 169–182, repr. in Leroy, *Études sur le monachisme byzantin. Textes rassemblés et présentés par Olivier Delouis* (Bégrolles en Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 2007), 435–451; Photios Ioannidis, “Η παρουσία του Οσίου Βενεδίκτου στο χώρο της Ανατολής,” *Ἐπιστημονικὴ Ἐπετηρίδα Φιλοσοφικῆς Σχολῆς τοῦ Ἀριστοτελείου Πανεπιστημίου Θεσσαλονίκης* 2 (1991–1992): 227–268.

on Mount Athos, which existed until the beginning of the thirteenth century.⁶ There are even a few obvious quotations from the *Rule of St. Benedict* in the *hypotyposis* of St. Athanasius the Athonite,⁷ which suggests that he probably had a Greek translation of the *Rule* as one of his sources at hand.

While such a contemporaneous Greek translation of the *Regula Benedicti* seems not to have survived, this is not the case with the *Vita* of St. Benedict, written by Pope Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) in the second book of his hagiographical *Dialogues*.⁸ The Greek translation, by one of Gregory's later successors, Pope Zachary (679–752),⁹ enjoyed a wide dissemination in the East. In his *Triads*, St. Gregory Palamas refers to a vision of St. Benedict who, it is said in this text, saw "the whole world as gathered into one beam of the sun," in order to defend the hesychastic vision of the Tabor light.¹⁰

As the novice master of our community, one of the topics I teach the postulants and novices is the history of monasticism and monastic spirituality. Within a Benedictine horizon, this monastic history cannot be told from a "Western" perspective alone, nor can it be limited to those Greek and Eastern Fathers who served as sources for St. Benedict. The later patristic and Byzantine monastic sources are indispensable for a proper understanding of history (and real history is never past but present) as well as for an existential development of one's own spiritual life. The spirituality of Hesychasm is of a considerable interest for Western monasticism, too, and so are the life and writings of St. Gregory Palamas. Although the *Rule of St. Benedict* is written for cenobites, it considers anchoritism as an original and legitimate, even advanced, form of

⁶ Delouis, "Saint Benoît," 79; Vera von Falkenhausen, "Il monastero degli Amalfitani sul Monte Athos," in *Atanasio e il monachesimo al Monte Athos. Atti del XII Convegno ecumenico internazionale di spiritualità ortodossa sezione bizantina*, eds. Sabino Chiala and Lisa Cremaschi (Bose: Ed. Qiqajon, 2005), 101–118; Agostino Pertusi, "Monasteri e monaci italiani all'Athos nell'alto Medioevo," in *Le millénaire du mont Athos 963–1963. Études et mélanges*, vol. 1 (Chevetogne: Éditions de Chevetogne, 1963), 217–251; Philibert Schmitz, *Geschichte des Benediktinerordens*, vol. 1 (Einsiedeln; Zürich: Benziger, 1947), 237.

⁷ Delouis, "Saint Benoît," 77–81; Hans-Georg Beck, "Die Benediktinerregel auf dem Athos," *BZ* 44 (1951): 21–24; Giuseppe Mercati, "Escerto greco della Regola di S. Benedetto in un codice del Monte Athos," *Benedictina. Fascicoli trimestrali di studi Benedettini* 1 (1947): 191–196.

⁸ *Grégoire le Grand, Dialogues*, vol. 2: (*Livres I–III*), ed. and trans. Adalbert de Vogüé and Paul Antin (SC 260) (Paris: Cerf, 1979). Gregory earned the name Ἅγιος Γρηγόριος ὁ Διάλογος in the East because of these *Dialogues*. He is also venerated as the traditional author of the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts.

⁹ Gianpaolo Rigotti (ed.), *Gregorio Magno. Vita di San Benedetto. Versione greca di papa Zaccaria* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2001).

¹⁰ Gregory the Great, *Vita Benedicti* 35.2–3, ed. de Vogüé, Antin, 236–239; idem, *Vita di San Benedetto*, ed. Rigotti, 102–105. See Gregory Palamas, *The Triads* 1,3,22, ed. Jean Meyendorff, *Défense des saints hésychastes* (Leuven: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, 1959), 157.

monastic life.¹¹ With St. John Cassian in the background, the eremitical tradition remains, even if it is not put into practice very often, a part of the Benedictine spiritual heritage.

The significance of Gregory Palamas for Byzantine monastic spirituality in general is obvious. Another question is whether he has anything to say about becoming a monk, how candidates should be examined, who takes the responsibility for postulants and novices,¹² what they should learn, how they should be tested in everyday life, in order to find out for themselves and for the community if they are on the right path to follow their vocation. Of course, Palamas has not left us a cohesive *ratio formationis* in the modern sense, but in a number of his writings one finds information on what he considers important in this regard. If such elements are placed and analyzed in their proper historical context, they may not only contribute to our historical understanding, but could also be of some help for today.

Fr. Daniel Oltean has recently published a comprehensive study on becoming a monk in Byzantium between the seventh and the fifteenth century,¹³ providing and analyzing a vast number of sources. An older work of reference has been written by the Benedictine Placide de Meester who collected, systematized, and commented on canonical sources "*De monachico statu*,"¹⁴ including a section *de ingressu in monachicum statum* with chapters *de statu probationis* and *de professione vitae monachalis*.¹⁵ For the Latin tradition, one can refer to the various commentaries on the *Rule of St. Benedict*¹⁶ and look for its chapter 58 on "The procedure for receiving brothers." Numerous monographs and articles deal with certain aspects or take a look at different periods of monastic history.¹⁷ However,

¹¹ *Rule of St. Benedict* 1.3-5; *RB 1980*, 168–169.

¹² The terms "novice" and "novitiate" we probably owe to St. Benedict (*Rule* 58.20-21; cf. 58.5); cf. Alvaro Huerga, "Noviciat," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 11 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1982): 483–495, here at 484.

¹³ Daniel Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance. Coutumes sociales, règles monastiques et rituels liturgiques* (OLA 291) (Leuven: Peeters, 2020); for the temporal and geographical framework of his study, see *ibid.*, 3–4.

¹⁴ Placide de Meester, *De monachico statu iuxta disciplinam byzantinam. Statuta selectis fontibus et commentariis instructa* (Rome: Typis polyglottis Vaticanis, 1942). See further Michael Wawryk, *Initiatio Monastica in Liturgia Byzantina. Officiorum schematis monastici magni et parvi necnon rasphoratus exordia et evolutio* (OCA 180) (Rome: Typis Pontificiae Universitatis Gregoriana, 1968).

¹⁵ de Meester, *De monachico statu*, 349–366, 366–393.

¹⁶ E.g., *RB 1980*, 437–466, on "monastic formation and profession;" Puzicha, *Kommentar zur Benediktusregel*, 2nd edn (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 2015), 609–638.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Mirko Breitenstein, *Das Noviziat im hohen Mittelalter. Zur Organisation des Eintritts bei den Cluniazensern, Cisterziensern und Franziskanern* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008); Hubertus Lutterbach, *Monachus factus est. Die Mönchwerdung im frühen Mittelalter. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frömmigkeits- und Liturgiegeschichte* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1995).

a comprehensive and comparative study on the novitiate in East and West remains to be written. Given its limits, this article will neither examine the whole oeuvre of Palamas in chronological order, nor will it search for evidence by following a pre-established list of topics. Instead, it will take a closer look at some specific questions as they take a characteristic shape in Palamas' works. This cannot be more than a first attempt which could perhaps encourage further studies.

The *Vita* of St. Gregory Palamas by Philotheos Kokkinos

Before turning to Gregory Palamas' writings, let us look at what Philotheos Kokkinos wrote about him and his monastic career.¹⁸ Of course, Philotheos is more a hagiographer than a biographer in the modern sense. As a personal friend of Palamas and himself a hesychast monk, he had detailed knowledge as well as empathy for his subject. He wrote Palamas' *Vita* in the early 1360s, in preparation for his canonization in 1368. Yet however hagiographical it may be, one does not need to mistrust the biographical information presented in the *Vita*, since Philotheos provides some valuable insights both in what he says and what he does not say.¹⁹

When Palamas finally followed his vocation to monastic life and set off from his home in Constantinople to Mount Athos, accompanied by his two brothers, he was around twenty years of age.²⁰ Robert Sinkewicz dated this moment two years earlier, *ca.* 1314, when Gregory was eighteen,²¹ while most recently Norman Russell argues for as much as five years later, in 1319.²² In any

¹⁸ Philotheos Kokkinos, *Λόγος εις τὸν ἐν ἀγίοις πατέρα ἡμῶν Γρηγόριον ἀρχιεπίσκοπον Θεσσαλονίκης* (hereafter *v.G.Pal.*), ed. Demetrios Tsamis, *Φιλοθέου Κωνσταντινουπόλεως τοῦ Κοκκίνου ἀγιολογικὰ ἔργα. Α΄. Θεσσαλονικεῖς ἄγιοι* (Thessaloniki: Κέντρον Βυζαντινῶν Ἐρευνῶν, 1985), 427–591; English trans. Norman Russell, *Gregory Palamas. The Hesychast Controversy and the Debate with Islam. Documents Relating to Gregory Palamas* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 52–210.

¹⁹ On Kokkinos as a monastic hagiographer and his various personal relationships to his “heroes,” including Palamas, see Mihail Mitrea, “A Late-Byzantine Hagiographer: Philotheos Kokkinos and His *Vitae* of Contemporary Saints” (PhD diss., The University of Edinburgh, 2018). The importance of hagiographic literature as a source of information, especially in the field of monastic studies, is also apparent from Oltean’s monograph, *Devenir moine à Byzance*, which evaluates no less than 193 *vitae* of saints; cf. *ibid.*, 364–374.

²⁰ Meyendorff, *Introduction à l'étude de Grégoire Palamas* (Patristica Sorbonensia 3) (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1959), 50.

²¹ Robert Sinkewicz, “Gregory Palamas,” in *La théologie byzantine et sa tradition*, vol. 2: (XIII^e–XIX^e s.), eds. Carmelo Giuseppe Conticello and Vassa Conticello (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 131–188, here at 131.

²² Russell, *Gregory Palamas*, 40.

case, Palamas entered monastic life as an adult, after having lived in the “world.” I will come back to Palamas’ spiritual and educational dimensions of childhood and youth below.

Starting the journey of *ca.* 600 km in autumn, the Palamas brothers decided after a bit more than half the distance to spend the winter in one of the monasteries on Mount Papikion, close to present-day Mosynopolis.²³ None of its monasteries has survived, and no documents associated with the place have been preserved either.²⁴ However, the Monastery of St. George on Papikion is mentioned as a dependency, in the *Typikon* of Gregory Pakourianos, of the Monastery of the Mother of God *Petrizonitissa* in Bačkovo (Bulgaria), dating from 1083.²⁵ It is not clear if Palamas and his brothers found shelter in exactly this monastery.

Philotheos writes that the Palamas brothers took part in the “philosophical life” of the monks on Mount Papikion, that is, in a monastic sense, in their life of asceticism and prayer as the true Christian philosophy. There is no mention, however, of him, as a guest and newcomer being introduced into monastic life by some monk of the community. Rather, it was the other way round, that is, Palamas himself impressed them such that he seemed “to be a truly great and wonderful man in speech and manner, in the way he looked and walked, in his sense of recollected attentiveness, in a word in everything by which a man of God is naturally portrayed and described.”²⁶ This is hagiographical language, but the possibly true content points back to what Palamas had already learned before; moreover, the hagiographer does not say that Palamas would have prompted a spiritual father to tell him that he could not teach him anything anymore.

If the monastery in question could indeed have been St. George, as a dependency of Bačkovo, the question remains whether the aforementioned *Typikon* of Pakourianos was also valid for the monastery on Papikion, some 150 km south, on the other side of the Rhodope mountains—and what would the monks there have done with Pakourianos’ regulation, according to which no Greeks should be accepted as monks or priests?²⁷ The same *Typikon* orders the education of the “lads” (μειράκια) to take place in the monastery of St. Nicholas,

²³ Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 14, ed. Tsamis, 41, trans. Russell, 65.

²⁴ Michel Kaplan, “Monasteries. Institutionalisation and Organisation of Space in the Byzantine World until the End of the Twelfth Century,” in *Diverging Paths? The Shapes of Power and Institution in Medieval Christendom and Islam*, eds. John Hudson and Ana Rodríguez (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 321–350, here at 348.

²⁵ *Typikon of Pakourianos 2 and 33E*, ed. Paul Gautier, “Le Typikon du sébaste Grégoire Pakourianos,” *REB* 42 (1984): 5–145, here at 37 and 129; English trans. Robert Jordan in *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents: A Complete Translation of the Surviving Founders’ Typika and Testaments* (hereafter *BMFD*), eds. John Thomas and Angela Constantinides Hero (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2000), 524 and 556.

²⁶ Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 14, trans. Russell, 65.

²⁷ *Typikon of Pakourianos 24*, ed. Gautier, 105, trans. Jordan, 547.

close to St. George.²⁸ As they are also called “παιδιά” in the same chapter, these “striplings” are minors, not adults. The *Typikon* instructs that an old priest of the community shall take responsibility for them and instruct them in the Holy Scriptures.²⁹ This, too, did not apply to Palamas, and so his novitiate proper only starts with his arrival on Mount Athos in the following Spring.

According to Philotheos, upon his arrival at Vatopedi, Palamas took the hesychast monk named Nikodemos as a spiritual father.³⁰ When Palamas “went where he was dwelling in *hesychia*,” this implies that Nikodemos was not living in the monastery, but in a hermitage.³¹ Palamas was tonsured by Nikodemos, and he placed himself under his direction in obedience, immediately (εὐθύς), connected with an agreement (συνθήκη).³² The twofold use of the word “obedience” (ὑποταγή) in this context could at the very least allude to the “ἔνδυμα τῆς ὑποταγῆς” as the novice’s habit, which is given together with the tonsure, and a profession (which—notably the “συνθήκη” mentioned above—must not be confused with those vows which later constitute a lifetime commitment).³³ If, however, one considers Palamas’ *Letter* to Paul Asen on the issue of the “Great Schema” (see below), there is also the possibility that at this point he was simply vested with the regular habit. Neither option can be ruled out completely.

The subsequent visionary experience of Palamas is introduced by Philotheos as follows: “He had already completed his second year, eagerly practicing fasting (νηστεία), keeping vigil (ἀγρυπνία), watchfulness (νήψις) and unceasing prayer (ἀδιάλειπτος προσευχή) to God, day and night.”³⁴ The ascetical exercises show the content of formation under the focus of the “eager practice” (ἐπείγω) of the beginner. The “second year” points to the customary three years of novitiate, as decreed by Emperor Justinian in his *Novellae*.³⁵ However, Oltean has shown that while a number of monasteries followed this *triennium*, in reality many did not.³⁶

²⁸ The localization of St. Nicholas “πλησίον τοῦ κάστρου” obviously means “close to the fort [of Mosynopolis].”

²⁹ *Typikon of Pakourianos* 31, ed. Gautier, 115–117, trans. Jordan, 550–551. On schools for children inside monasteries, with the focus both on receiving the children as prospective novices or, independently from this, with the freedom of future choice (or even to receive them already as novices), see Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*, 91–138.

³⁰ Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 17, ed. Tsamis, 46, trans. Russell, 70–71.

³¹ Russell, *Gregory Palamas*, 71: “In the vicinity.” Meyendorff, *Introduction*, 51: “habitent les environs de Vatopédi.”

³² Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 17–18, ed. Tsamis, 46–47, trans. Russell, 71.

³³ Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*, esp. 241–245, shows in detail the various and often differing customs, at which moment tonsure, vesting, and vows are taking place.

³⁴ Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 18, ed. Tsamis, 47, trans. Russell, 71.

³⁵ Justinian, *Novellae* 5.2 and 123.35; Rudolf Schöll and Wilhelm Kroll (eds.), *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, 4th edn, vol. 3 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1912), 29, 618.

³⁶ Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*, 51–52, 254–256.

It is worthwhile to compare Philotheos' account of Palamas with older monastic sources and with the rules and *typika* of the Athonite monasteries, which, during the time of Palamas and Philotheos, were already in effect for about 350 years. As monks at the Great Lavra, both will have known them for sure, and whether, and how, they were or were not followed. For instance, the initial *Rule* of Athanasios for the Lavra mentions only two or three weeks that the candidate has to stay in the hospice for probation.³⁷ Monastic legislation on this initial aspect of probation begins as early as with Pachomius:

If anyone who comes to the door of the monastery with the purpose of quitting the world and to be considered among the brothers, he will not have the freedom to enter. They will start by informing the father of the monastery. The candidate will stay some days in the exterior, at the door. They will teach him the Lord's Prayer and the Psalms that he is able to learn. He will send carefully the proofs to show that his will motivates him [to join]. This is to make sure that they have not committed a crime, and, troubled by fear, fled without delay to the monastery; or that he is a slave of someone. This will allow us to discern if he will be able to quit his relatives and to despise material wealth.³⁸

Much harsher sounding is what John Cassian brings from the Egyptian desert to the West:

Whoever seeks to be received into the discipline of the coenobium is never admitted until, by lying outside for ten days or more, he has given an indication of his perseverance and desire, as well as of his humility and patience. And when he has embraced the knees of all the brothers passing by and has been purposely rebuked and disdained by everyone, as if he wished to enter the monastery not out of devotion but out of necessity, and has been visited with numerous insults and reproaches and has given proof of his constancy, and by putting up with taunts has shown what he will be in time of trial, and when the ardor of his intention has been proven and he has thus been received, he is asked with the utmost earnestness if, from his former possessions, the contamination of even a single copper coin clings to him.³⁹

³⁷ English trans. George Dennis in *BMTD*, 225; cf. Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*, 52–53, 241.

³⁸ Pachomius, *Praecepta* 49; Amand Boon (ed.), *Pachomiana Latina* (Leuven: Bibliothèque de la Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique, 1932), 25–26.

³⁹ John Cassian, *Institutions* IV, 3.1, ed. Jean-Claude Guy, *Jean Cassien, Institutions cénobitiques* (SC 109) (Paris: Cerf, 2001), 124–125; *The Institutes*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: The Newman Press, 2000), 79–80; cf. Puzicha, *Quellen*, 484.

This is a bit more lenient in the *Rule of St. Benedict*:

Do not grant newcomers (*noviter veniens*) to the monastic life an easy entry, but, as the Apostle says, “Test the spirits to see if they are from God” (1 Jn 4:1). Therefore, if someone comes and keeps knocking at the door, and if at the end of four or five days he has shown himself patient and bearing his harsh treatment and difficulty of entry, and has persisted in his request, then he should be allowed to enter and stay in the guest quarters for a few days. After that, he should live in the novitiate (*cella noviciorum*), where the novices study, eat and sleep.⁴⁰

Later Byzantine documents connect this first probation with an interrogation of the candidate. For instance, in the eleventh-century *Rule of Christodoulos* for the Monastery of St. John the Theologian on Patmos we read:

Whenever a layman arrives asking to be admitted [...], first he must be carefully interrogated by the superior, and closely examined concerning his circumstances, lest he be come to the monastery not simply out of the love of God and desire to save his soul, but constrained by earthly contingencies, creditors, perhaps, or extreme poverty and disinclination to work, or numerous children, so that he is come to the monastery as to a refuge that will furnish escape and dispense from effort.⁴¹

If this admission to the novitiate is connected with a liturgical rite, there have been different customs concerning whether and in which garments the postulant should be vested, or if he is to be tonsured now or later.⁴² The *Life* of Palamas does not rule out that this took place with him, but neither does not mention it. There is also no trace of a *scrutinium*, a formal interrogation. Perhaps the way that the *Typikon* of Evergetis prescribes for candidates to be treated differently according to their origin was applied to Palamas:

If they are distinguished people (περιφανείς) or come from people known to you for a long time and have a close knowledge of our way of life (δίαιτα), they should be tonsured within the customary period of time, if perhaps they themselves ask for this and are accepted. But if they are common and unknown (τῶν τυχόντων καὶ ἄγνωστοι), after an interval of seven days after their arrival here they should assume the [novice’s] rags (τὰ ῥάκη) and put on the monastic headdress (περικεφαλαία).⁴³

⁴⁰ *Rule of St. Benedict* 58.1-5, ed. Hanslik, 146–147, trans. *RB* 1980, 266–267.

⁴¹ English trans. Patricia Karlin-Hayter in *BMFD*, 592.

⁴² Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*, 241–245.

⁴³ *Typikon of Evergetis* 37, ed. Paul Gautier, “Le Typikon de la Théotokos Évergétis,” *REB* 40 (1982): 5–101, here at 78–81; English trans. Robert Jordan in *BMFD*, 494–495.

According to Robert Jordan, “this was an enormously influential chapter.” He also lists a number of later *typika* that copied it in whole or in part.⁴⁴ Palamas in fact was from a distinguished family and, without doubt, familiar with the monastic way of life. This could perhaps explain his immediate admission to the novitiate.

For the novitiate proper, the *Typikon* of Emperor John Tzimiskes (an intervention into an internal conflict at the Great Lavra around 970/1) prescribes one year of novitiate, which has to be spent within the monastic enclosure, not in a hermitage:

All who come to you and promise to receive the monastic tonsure ought to be received by each one of the superiors. By no means should they be permitted outside the spiritual enclosure. They should not be tonsured right away, but should observe the ecclesiastical canon by devoting one year to being trained in monastic life. They should give evidence that their resolve is firm and unshakable. When they show that such is the case, then, the superior may judge that they be clothed in the monastic habit.⁴⁵

Here are tonsure and vesting signs not for the *beginning* of the novitiate, but for its *completion*.

Philotheos calls the elder Nikodemos a “teacher and father” (καθηγητῆς καὶ πατήρ) of Palamas.⁴⁶ These spiritual fathers seem to have been appointed sometimes by the abbots, but in most cases chosen by the novices themselves, respectively with the consent of the abbot.⁴⁷ John Cassian reports for Egypt in the fourth century that the novices were confided in groups of ten to a responsible monk assigned by the abbot.⁴⁸ St. Benedict in the West apparently took it from Cassian when he determined that in his monasteries one novice master was to be appointed per community.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Jordan in *BMFD*, 505, n. 37.

⁴⁵ *Typikon of Emperor John Tzimiskes* 3, ed. Philipp Meyer, *Die Haupturkunden für die Geschichte der Athosklöster* (Leipzig: J. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1894), 143; trans. Dennis in *BMFD*, 236.

⁴⁶ Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 20, ed. Tsamis, 48, trans. Russell, 73.

⁴⁷ Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*, 235, 253, 256. In some instances, the word “ἡγούμενος” denotes not only the superior of the monastery, but apparently in some cases also the spiritual father, in the literal sense of a guide, as a “ἡγούμενος πνευματικός.” The discontent novices mentioned in the *Typikon* of Tzimiskes will therefore not always have moved to another monastery, but changed their spiritual director; see the *Typikon of Emperor John Tzimiskes*, ed. Meyer, *Die Haupturkunden*, 144 (ll. 20-21), trans. Dennis in *BMFD*, 236.

⁴⁸ John Cassian, *Institutions* IV, 7, ed. Guy, 130–131, trans. Ramsey, *The Institutes*, 81–82; Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*, 260, with more examples from the early Egyptian tradition.

⁴⁹ *Rule of St. Benedict* 58.6, ed. Hanslik, 147, trans. *RB 1980*, 267.

While Palamas' training and practice in the ascetical and spiritual life are presented by Philotheos in customary terms, the place of his novitiate obviously was not a monastic enclosure, but, from the start, a hermitage. Anchorites were at the very origins of monastic life itself. The cenobitic foundations and rules of St. Pachomius, however, are a reaction to the difficulties and incapacities of many early hermits. Knowing the Pachomian coenobitism at first hand, St. Basil remains altogether skeptical of the anchoritic life as a whole.⁵⁰ John Cassian then reports how the Egyptian anchorites of his time,

dwelling first for a long time in cenobia, having been carefully and thoroughly instructed in the rule of patience and discretion, having mastered the virtues of both humility and poverty and having totally destroyed every vice, penetrate the deep recesses of the desert in order to engage in the terrible combat with demons.⁵¹

Again, Benedict of Nursia adopts this for his own *Rule* in the Latin West. The true anchorites

have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time, and have passed beyond the first fervor of monastic life. Thanks to the help and guidance of many, they are now trained to fight against the devil. They have built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers to the single combat of the desert. Self-reliant now, without the support of another, they are ready with God's help to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind.⁵²

Such a preparation of future anchorites in the cenobitic life is documented for the older Palestinian monasteries.⁵³ The *Typikon* of St. Athanasios for the Great Lavra, written some ten years after the earlier *Rule*, lists a number of preconditions which a prospective hermit has to learn beforehand and which are to be checked carefully by the superior:

If anyone with the support and cooperation of God should ever desire to exchange the bother of obedience for the solitude and individual residence in a *kellion*, let him inform the superior of his wish. Let him, in turn, carefully examine the man's condition. If indeed he does possess the strength and diligence required of those who reside in the *kellia*, if he

⁵⁰ Basil of Caesarea, *Regulae fusius tractatae* 7, PG 31, 927-934.

⁵¹ John Cassian, *Institutions* V, 36.1, ed. Guy, 246-247, trans. Ramsey, *The Institutes*, 137-138; cf. Puzicha, *Quellen*, 35.

⁵² *Rule of St. Benedict* 1.3-5, ed. Hanslik, 18-19, trans. *RB 1980*, 168-169.

⁵³ Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*, 255-256.

has been previously exercised (ἤδη προϋμνασθεὶς) in obedience, if he has learned (μαθὼν) to stay in a cell with concentration and strict guard over his mind, if he has learned to pray and keep vigil, to control himself, to exercise abstinence, to meditate, to devote himself (μελετᾶν) to the study of the Scriptures with humility, and attach some importance to working with his hands, then let him be permitted to do this.⁵⁴

The relation of later hesychast monks to a basic cenobitic formation, as well as the attitude of the responsible superiors, would be worth a study of its own.⁵⁵ When Philotheos, himself a hesychast monk, recounts that Palamas is apparently bypassing such a cenobitic novitiate, this is obviously understood neither as a mistake nor as problematic. When Palamas' spiritual father Nikodemos died in the third year of his "novitiate," he left their common hermitage not for Vatopedi, but for the Great Lavra. There he was "deemed worthy of hospitality and reception" (καὶ ξενίας ἐκεῖ καὶ ὑποδοχῆς [...] ἀξίωθεις) by the monks.⁵⁶ In the beginning, this may have implied also terminologically the status of a guest,⁵⁷ but the Great Lavra was to become the home monastery of Palamas. In fact, Philotheos reports that the superior made Gregory participate in the regular service in the refectory (ἐπιμελεῖσθαι τῆς κοινῆς τῶν ἀδελφῶν τραπέζης) and in the liturgical service of the cantors (τοῖς ψάλλουσιν ἐν τῷ ναῷ συνίστασθαι καὶ συνάδειν). The examples of the common liturgy and serving in practical duties, read together with the information that Palamas stayed for another three years in the Great Lavra, sharing the common life of the brethren (μένει παρ' αὐτοῖς καὶ συνδιατρίβει τρεῖς ὄλους ἐνιαυτούς),⁵⁸ altogether sound like a kind of belated novitiate and probation in such aspects of monastic life as Palamas probably had not yet experience in his hermitage.

⁵⁴ *Typikon of Athanasios the Athonite for the Lavra Monastery*, ed. Meyer, *Die Haupturkunden*, 116; English trans. Dennis in *BMDF*, 261.

⁵⁵ Nikodemos, the first spiritual father of Palamas, was originally a monk from Mount Auxentios, where the young Gregory could have passed a visit himself. The *Typikon of Michael VIII Palaiologos for the Monastery of the Archangel Michael on Mount Auxentios* near Chalcedon, dating to 1261–1280/1, exhorts: "Without trial let no one be tonsured [...] Those who come from the lay state to the monastic manner of life [...] ought not to be received straightaway and without strict probation [...] Care must therefore be had in putting the [novice's] rags on anyone before getting to know what he is like by time and experience. Have him brought in with the brothers and let him remain, wearing his customary garments for a period of at least six months." English trans. Dennis in *BMDF*, 1228. However, we have no information what of his own earlier experiences Nikodemos might have implemented on Mount Athos.

⁵⁶ Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 20, ed. Tsamis, 48, trans. Russell, 73.

⁵⁷ Russell, *Gregory Palamas*, 73, translates "There he was welcomed as a guest by the fathers."

⁵⁸ Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 20, ed. Tsamis, 48, trans. Russell, 73.

The probation of a novice in manual labor and in the daily duties of the monastic community is an integral part of many Byzantine *typika*. In general, “all the brothers must work,”⁵⁹ and the *Typikon* of the Black Mountain orders a rotation of work assignments, with references to Pachomius, Basil, and Cassian.⁶⁰ Here, there is no mention of novices, while the *Typikon* for the Monastery of the Archangel Michael on Mount Auxentios prescribes that “the one who has been chosen [that is: admitted to the novitiate] must be exercised in every service in the community, no matter what sort of secular dignity or position he held.”⁶¹ The *Typikon* of Evergetis (and other *typika* adopting this passage) decides that the novices “should be appointed to tasks according to their abilities (ταῖς κατὰ δύναμιν διακονίαις) and observed to see if they carry out these with perseverance and humility (μεθ’ ὑπομονῆς [...] καὶ ταπεινώσεως).”⁶² From what Philotheos writes, we may assume that during his first three years in the cenobium of the Great Lavra Palamas joined such a cycle of duties, no matter what his “canonical status” might have been at that time. However, Philotheos does not tell us anything about a formal or even liturgical act of integration into the community, or, after the interrupted “novitiate” with Nikodemos, about some kind of profession or further vesting. Also, when after completing the three years of common life Palamas again sets out for a solitary life at the *skete* of Glossia, there is no mention of the superior examining his aptitude. Rather, his extraordinary capacities are described by the hagiographer as openly visible to everyone.

In summary, Palamas’ *Vita* by Philotheos Kokkinos does not explain to us how a regular novitiate on Mount Athos in his time would have looked like. Analyzing nearly 200 Byzantine saints’ lives, Oltean states that “le noviciat est parfois attesté dans l’hagiographie,” that is, not in every instance. For some authors, as Oltean notes, omitting the novitiate would have been a means of underlining the ascetic qualities of the future saint (this corresponds to Philotheos’ endeavor to write the *Life* of his friend as a part of the canonization process), while on the other hand the novitiate would have been better presented for those coming from a humble social background,⁶³ which was obviously not the case with Palamas. Therefore, Philotheos’ information has to be set carefully against the background of earlier and contemporaneous documents.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, if

⁵⁹ *Typikon of the Black Mountain* 82, trans. Robert Allison in *BMFD*, 408–409.

⁶⁰ *Typikon of the Black Mountain* 78, trans. Allison, 407 (cf. *ibid.*, 423, n. 78).

⁶¹ *Typikon of Michael VIII Palaiologos for the Monastery of the Archangel Michael on Mount Auxentios* 12, trans. Dennis in *BMFD*, 1228.

⁶² *Typikon of Evergetis* 37, ed. Gautier, 78–81, trans. Jordan in *BMFD*, 494; word-for-word also in *Kosmosoteira* 51, *Mamas* 22, and in other *typika*.

⁶³ Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*, 259.

⁶⁴ A comparison with the other *vitae* composed by Philotheos for contemporaneous figures shows similar elements. For instance, Sabas the Younger and Isidore Boucheir both stem from a noble background, but Sabas especially receives a harsh treatment from his spiritual father;

Palamas is commencing his monastic life proper not in a coenobium, but with a spiritual father in his hermitage, this may shed some light on the actual practice during the monastic, and specifically hesychastic, renewal of the fourteenth century.

Finally, a look at the monastic formation of Gregory Palamas has to take into account the education and experiences of his childhood and adolescence. The atmosphere at home was one of intellectual learning combined with a profound piety. His father was the διδάσκαλος of the emperor's grandson, the future Emperor Andronikos III, while the whole family kept a frequent, even daily (according to Philotheos), contact with monks and spiritual fathers. From the very beginning of their lives their souls "should be directly moulded and broadened by holy discourses and teachings" (τῆς εἰς τὸν βίον εἰσόδου τοῖς ἱεροῖς λόγοις καὶ ταῖς διδασκαλίαις εὐθὺς τυπῶνται καὶ πλάττωνται τὰς ψυχάς).⁶⁵

Preparing for service at the emperor's court, the young Gregory studied literature, grammar, and rhetoric, the so-called "outer learning" (θύραθεν παιδεία),⁶⁶ physics and logic, "in a word, all Aristotelian studies" (ἀπλῶς πᾶσι τοῖς Ἀριστοτελικοῖς). His learning earned him the admiration of the Grand Logothete at that time, Theodore Metochites.⁶⁷ Of course, the hagiographer wants to emphasize his intellectual prowess in view of the future theological and philosophical debates, but we do not have to doubt that this education in fact took place. However, as secular studies did not satisfy him, the young Palamas sought the company of monks, especially those coming from Athos, and "placed himself under them" (καὶ μονασταῖς μᾶλλον καὶ πατρᾶσι σπουδαίοις καὶ διδασκάλοις τῆς ἀρετῆς ἑαυτὸν ὑπετίθει).⁶⁸ Finally, Philotheos calls Theoleptos of Philadelphia a "πατὴρ καὶ μυσταγωγός" for Palamas. Theoleptos was a monk on Mount Auxentios (similar to Nikodemos, Palamas' spiritual father) before his appointment as metropolitan. Palamas himself mentions Theoleptos among his teachers,⁶⁹ and if Russell's calculation is correct that Palamas set out for Athos only in the autumn of 1319, this would be chronologically possible (against Sinkewicz).⁷⁰

cf. Mitrea, "A Late-Byzantine Hagiographer," 184–199. However, here too, Philotheos does not provide a distinctive structure of the novitiate or a relation to one of *typika*. On the other hand, a prolonged novitiate as requested by the candidate himself is a hagiographic commonplace to emphasize one's humility and obedience; cf. Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*, 259.

⁶⁵ Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 7, ed. Tsamis, 33–34, trans. Russell, 58.

⁶⁶ Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 10, ed. Tsamis, 36, trans. Russell, 60.

⁶⁷ Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 11, ed. Tsamis, 37–38, trans. Russell, 61–62.

⁶⁸ Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 11, ed. Tsamis, 38, trans. Russell, 62.

⁶⁹ Palamas, *Triads* 1,2,12, ed. Meyendorff, *Défense*, 98–99.

⁷⁰ Russell, *Gregory Palamas*, 63, n. 119; cf. Sinkewicz, *Gregory Palamas*, 132.

In short, when Palamas arrived on Athos, he disposed of a profound secular, theological, and spiritual learning and was in no need of any kind of basic education in this regard. A modern novice master, too, has to consider carefully what his candidates might already bring with them and what they still need. However, no academic diploma and no personal references can dispense one from an existential probation if a novice is on the right way and in the right place to follow his vocation, and if he fits into the life of the community. According to the *Vita* by Philotheos, with the arrival of Palamas on Athos these aspects seem not to have been in question any longer. On the other hand, monastic formation and probation are a life-long process. For Palamas, as for most novices then and now, the real challenges still lay ahead. Thus the novitiate is not the time to overcome all problems, but to learn how to deal with them when they do arise.

The *Vita* of St. Peter the Athonite

The first literary opus from Palamas' pen is a hagiographical work, a *Vita* of St. Peter the Athonite, who was, according to tradition, the first hermit on Athos, probably in the ninth century.⁷¹ Explaining the intention of this work, Meyendorff writes that "à Byzance, l'éloge public d'un saint était un exercice souvent proposé au rhéteur débutant, à l'issue de ses études. [...] Pour acquérir le droit d'enseigner, on prononçait un discours d'essai devant le chapitre des moines."⁷² Therefore, such an inaugural lecture has to prove both one's rhetorical capabilities as well as a mastery of the content.

If, with the hesychastic revival, St. Peter became a model, a prototype for the Athonite hermits,⁷³ and "la spiritualité que le docteur hésychaste décrit chez St. Pierre est donc celle qu'il désire voir adoptée à l'Athos,"⁷⁴ then we should take a look to see if Palamas has anything to tell us about St. Peter's monastic formation. Concerning the saint's biography, information is sparse. Conversely, however, we have to be careful not to conclude from the absence of certain topics that Palamas considered them irrelevant.

The beginnings of the monastic career of St. Peter are rather quickly told.⁷⁵ Born in Constantinople, he took part as a young soldier in a military campaign

⁷¹ See, e.g., Mitrea, "Old Wine in New Bottles"? Gregory Palamas' *Logos* on Saint Peter of Athos (BHG 1506)," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 40.2 (2016): 243–263, here at 246.

⁷² Meyendorff, *Introduction*, 383.

⁷³ Mitrea, "Palamas' *Logos*," 249–250.

⁷⁴ Meyendorff, *Introduction*, 383.

⁷⁵ Cf. Mitrea, "Palamas' *Logos*," 247–248, who compares Palamas' account with the earlier source, i.e., the *Vita* of Peter by Nicholas, another Athonite monk.

against the Arabs and was captured. In captivity, he made a vow to make a pilgrimage to Rome, to the tomb of his patron, and to assume the monastic habit there. After his liberation, miraculously procured by St. Nicholas of Myra, he fulfilled his promise and went immediately to Rome. There, again with the help of St. Nicholas, he was called by the Pope (most probably Gregory IV, who died in 844), who initiated him into the monastic way of life and vested him with the garments suitable for this way of life (ὁ δὲ πάπας εὐθὺς αὐτὸν μεταπέμπεται καὶ μυεῖ τούτῳ τὴν μονήρη δίαιταν καὶ μεταμφιέννυσι τὴν τῆ διαίτη⁷⁶ προσήκουσαν στολήν).⁷⁷

The “novitiate” is reduced here to merely five words, “μυεῖ τούτῳ τὴν μονήρη δίαιταν,” followed by vesting the “novice,” which is itself a reduction of Palamas’ model, the *Vita* of St. Peter by the Athonite monk Nicholas.⁷⁸ It remains unclear how long St. Peter remained in Rome (he is considered by some to be a legendary figure anyhow⁷⁹), and if there was any further instruction. On his way back from Rome, he had a vision of the Theotokos, calling him to settle on Mount Athos, destined to become a permanent monastic heritage under her protection. Arriving there, Peter embarks on fifty-three years of solitude, thus becoming a model of Athonite hesychasm.

The greater part of his ascetic life, as narrated in the *Vita*, consists of four assaults by the Devil, whose temptations Peter resists (§§ 21–32). According to a number of rules and *typika*, in order to fight the Devil, the hermit has to be prepared thoroughly in cenobitic life and has to be examined by his superior to see whether he has obtained this capacity. Here, this aspect is completely missing. However, this does not necessarily mean that Palamas recommends for his Athonite brethren to bypass such a preparation, but rather signals how great the dangers lurking in solitude can be.

In the last year of his life, St. Peter is discovered by a hunter, to whom the holy man subsequently narrates his life (and thus makes it known to the world). When the hunter wishes to stay and join St. Peter in his hesychastic life, the latter sends him back to his secular life for a year, to take care of his family, to serve Christ tending the hungry and the needy, but also to do some basic spiritual (hesychastic) exercises:

⁷⁶ “διάτη” is obviously a misspelling in the critical text.

⁷⁷ Palamas, *Λόγος εἰς τὸν θαυμαστὸν καὶ ἰσάγγελον βίον τοῦ ὁσίου καὶ θεοφόρου πατρὸς ἡμῶν Πέτρου τοῦ ἐν τῷ ἁγίῳ ὄρει τῷ Ἄθῳ ἀσκήσαντος* (hereafter *Λόγος*) 10, ed. Panagiotis Christou in *PS*, vol. 5, 166–167.

⁷⁸ Mitrea, “Palamas’ *Logos*,” 254; cf. the synoptic table of both *vitae* at 261.

⁷⁹ Mitrea, “Palamas’ *Logos*,” 246.

Pay attention to yourself, detach yourself from the earthly pleasures and worries as far as you can, take constant care of the remembrance of God in your heart, implanting the meditation of his name as engraved in the hidden inner chambers of your soul; converse with books and sayings [of the Lord and the Fathers] as much as you have days and hours.

προσέχειν δὲ σαυτῶ, καὶ ταῖς γηΐναις ὀπόση δύναμις ἡδοναῖς τε καὶ μερίμναις ἀποταξάμενος παράμονον τηρεῖν ἐν τῇ σῆ καρδίᾳ τὴν τοῦ Θεοῦ μνήμην, τὴν ἐπ' ὀνόματι τούτου μελέτην τοῖς ἐν κρυπτῶ τῆς ψυχῆς ταμείοις ἀνάγραπτον ὡσπερ ἐνθήμενος· θείοις τε βίβλοις καὶ λογίοις ἐντυγχάνειν ὅσαι ἡμέραι τε καὶ ὥραι.⁸⁰

These are not only characteristic topics of a hesychastic spirituality, but respectively also aspects of a novitiate, and St. Peter shows himself as a spiritual father to the hunter. A “normal” novitiate would have started with a separation from the world and attaching oneself to one’s spiritual father. By sending the hunter back home first, he may have intended—feeling that his time would come soon—to complete his earthly life in solitude, without a companion (or even novice). On the other hand, St. Peter—and Gregory Palamas—here attest that it is possible to live the essentials of a hesychastic spirituality also under the conditions of a secular life in the world.⁸¹ Such a kind of “urban hesychasm” was rather frequent in the time of Palamas.⁸² Philotheos Kokkinos writes that the young Palamas encountered Athonite monks in Constantinople who supported his vocation, and surely there were such monks whom Barlaam the Calabrian met in Constantinople and asked about hesychastic practices.

This episode can also imply the basic importance of proving one’s vocation to the monastic life and preparing for the next steps. Almost 1200 years after Pope Gregory IV, whose application of the novitiate was summed up in the words “μυεῖ τούτῳ τὴν μονήρην δίαιταν” and in the vesting of the candidate, his current successor, Pope Francis, has issued the Apostolic Constitution *Vultum Dei quaerere* regarding women’s contemplative life, which decrees, amongst other things, that the formation of nuns has to last altogether at least nine years.⁸³ As a follow-up, the Roman Dicastery for the Religious has issued an “implementing instruction” with the title *Cor orans*, wherein these nine long years are unfolded. The first of

⁸⁰ Palamas, *Λόγος* 39, ed. Christou, 184–185.

⁸¹ Mitrea, “Palamas’ *Logos*,” 257.

⁸² E.g., the case of Isidore Boucheir as told in his *Life* by Kokkinos; cf. Mitrea, “A Late-Byzantine Hagiographer,” 127, 192–193, 230.

⁸³ Pope Francis, Apostolic Constitution *Vultum Dei quaerere on women’s contemplative life* (July 22, 2016), § 15, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20160629_vultum-dei-quaerere.html. The question remains why this applies only to women, while men can continue to be allowed to take solemn vows after about four years and a half.

these is now called the “aspirantate”⁸⁴ and has to precede the actual entry into a monastery. It involves continuing one’s previous secular life, praying and reflecting on one’s vocation, and working on possible “weak points,” accompanied by regular visits to the envisaged monastery. Only then may follow the postulate, novitiate, and temporary vows (which in turn have to be prolonged twice). As these demands are the same for the whole Latin Church worldwide, the following question arises (together with Palamas’ *Vita* by Philotheos as well as his *Vita* of St. Peter and the person of the hunter): How should one deal with the individual spiritual, intellectual, and other needs of a respective candidate? How should this responsibility be assumed?

With his “journeyman’s piece” (the *Vita* of St. Peter) Gregory Palamas qualified for his subsequent work as a monastic teacher, spiritual father, and not least a capable defender of Orthodoxy. One could (cautiously) call it a special part of the “novitiate,” namely, to acquire the ability to write such a piece, that is, knowledge of Holy Scripture, the Church Fathers and (at least some) philosophers, and the texts of councils and synods; and also, to acquire and exercise the necessary verbal skills and, most importantly, to integrate all this into a personal, existential theological and spiritual identity. Although the prospect of becoming a teacher does not apply to all novices, it is altogether indispensable for a living and sustainable monastic tradition (tradition understood in the way that there is not only something to be passed on, but also someone to pass it on, keep it alive, enhance it, and hand it over).

According to Philotheos, Palamas wrote the *Vita* of St. Peter after two years in the hermitage of St. Sabas,⁸⁵ when he was at least 36, or even 38. After no less than thirteen to fifteen years of monastic experience, he was definitely not a novice any more. However, monastic formation is not something resolved and completed once and for all, but a life-long process, in ascetism, in prayer, in studying the Scriptures and theology, and in caring for one’s fellow human beings. Palamas describes the fifty-three years Peter spent in *hesychia* on Mount Athos not as something static, but as a continuous inner growth.⁸⁶ Palamas himself would experience something similar, although in completely different circumstances, in the following decades of his eventful life.

⁸⁴ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Cor orans. Implementing instruction of the Apostolic constitution Vultum Dei quaerere on women’s contemplative life* (April 1, 2018), §§ 251.262-268, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_20180401_cor-orans_en.html.

⁸⁵ Cf. the timeline of Palamas’ biography as reconstructed by Russell, *Gregory Palamas*, 45; Sinkewicz, “Gregory Palamas,” 151, dates it to 1332, while Meyendorff, *Introduction*, 383, to 1334–1335. Sinkewicz, “Gregory Palamas,” 131, calculates it earlier, considering that Palamas left Constantinople to join monastic life already in 1314.

⁸⁶ Mitrea, “Palamas’ *Logos*,” 254.

Gregory Akindynos as a Novice of Gregory Palamas

It is reasonable that Gregory Palamas himself took on the duty of a spiritual father initiating novices into monastic life and hesychastic spirituality; he surely assumed this responsibility when he was superior of the monastery in Esphigmenou (1335/6).⁸⁷ Another hagiographical work by Philotheos Kokkinos, namely the *Life* of Isidore Boucheir, bears witness that the latter was tonsured (and consecrated deacon) by Palamas.⁸⁸ He remained his friend and comrade in theological and political disputes. As newly elected patriarch in 1347, Isidore appointed his former teacher as archbishop of Thessaloniki.

Another novice of Palamas was Gregory Akindynos,⁸⁹ who calls him in one occasion “καὶ ἀδελφὸς ἡμῶν καὶ φίλος καὶ πατήρ.”⁹⁰ Palamas himself mentions that Akindynos was his disciple, “although not studying until completion” (παρ’ ἡμᾶς εἰ καὶ μὴ διὰ τέλους φοιτήσας).⁹¹ In *Contra Akindynum* VII, 16, 59, Palamas reports that Akindynos came to him as a teacher (οὗτος ὡς διδασκάλω μοι ἐρχήτο). After some days, Akindynos told him of a vision of light (φῶς τι θεωρεῖν), which seemingly appeared to him from within as a human face (διαφαίνειν ἔνδοθεν ἀνθρώπειόν τι πρόσωπον). Palamas then told him about the deceptions of the Devil and offered to keep him in order to free him from his delusion. However, some of the older and experienced monks at the Lavra heard about this; they gave “not a good testimony” on Akindynos to the superior (οὐκ ἀγαθὰ τινα μαρτυρήσαντες αὐτῷ πρὸς τὸν τότε προεστῶτα) and did not allow him into their common life (πρὸς συνοίκησιν οὐκ εἴασαν). “So he went away from us together with that illumination [that appeared to him] endued with a form” (Ἀπῆρε τοῖσιν τόθ’ ἡμῶν μετὰ τῆς ἐσχηματισμένης ἐκείνης αὐτῷ φωτοφανείας).⁹² Hence, Akindynos’ opposition to hesychastic spirituality seems not to have existed in the beginning, but on the contrary he would have overdone it as a novice, refusing the correction of his “novice master.”⁹³ Polemical texts have to be read cautiously concerning such personal details, but, in any case, this example shows the pitfalls of an early and un-reflected *fervor monasticus* as well as the necessity of a proper supervision.

⁸⁷ Meyendorff, *Introduction*, 63–64.

⁸⁸ Mitrea, “A Late-Byzantine Hagiographer,” 127, 193.

⁸⁹ Meyendorff, *Introduction*, 61–63; Juan Nadal Cañellas, “Gregorio Akíndinos,” in *La théologie byzantine*, vol. 2, 189–314, here at 194–195.

⁹⁰ Meyendorff, *Introduction*, 62, n. 94.

⁹¹ Palamas, *Contra Acindynum* III, 2, 1, ed. Christou in *PS*, vol. 3, 161; Meyendorff, *Introduction*, 62, n. 94.

⁹² Palamas, *Contra Acindynum* VII, 16, 59, ed. Christou in *PS*, vol. 3, 505–506.

⁹³ See Andreas P. Zachariou’s article in this issue.

John Meyendorff and Juan Nadal Cañellas report that Akindynos delivered a paean to the Great Lavra in front of the assembled community and its abbot, encouraged by Palamas, but his performance failed.⁹⁴ As this seems to have taken place as early as in Akindynos' formative period, it was probably not yet intended as an "inaugural lecture" to receive the *venia legendi*, as was presumably the case with Palamas' *Vita* of St. Peter. However, it shows that Palamas as a teacher also attached some importance to this dimension of learning.

Akindynos does not seem to have had the opportunity for further learning from this failure; to the contrary, as Patriarch Kallistos I informs us, the monks of Lavra voted openly against him: "μὲν φωνῆ καὶ ἐνὶ στόματι 'διωχθῆτω' ἔφεσαν ἅπαντες ὁ Ἀκίνδυνος ἀπὸ τῆς μονῆς."⁹⁵ Today, in Benedictine monasteries, there is a secret vote of the convent to determine whether a novice should be admitted to profession. This vote is prescribed and without doubt important, but if it fails, it raises the question for the novice master and the superiors if the novice was properly accompanied in his personal and spiritual development, including telling him in good time to leave if he is inept for the common life.

The Beginning of the Hesychast Controversy and the *Triads*

The year 1335 saw the beginning of the dispute between Gregory Palamas and Barlaam of Calabria, initially on various issues of theological argumentation and the use of Aristotelian logic and then on hesychast spirituality (the "Hesychast Controversy" proper).⁹⁶ With his *Triads*, Gregory Palamas responded to Barlaam, defending the monks from the latter's accusation of heresy. Barlaam himself was a Byzantine monk from southern Italy, not an outsider to the monastic tradition, but apparently not completely versed in the characteristics of its spirituality. The question regarding his monastic formation in his original monastery of St. Elias at Galatro in Calabria⁹⁷ and what he had learned as a novice in monastic and spiritual life will not be addressed here.

⁹⁴ Meyendorff, *Introduction*, 61, n. 88; Nadal Cañellas, "Gregorio Akíndinos," 194–195.

⁹⁵ Quoted after Meyendorff, *Introduction*, 61, n. 88.

⁹⁶ Concerning the history of the Hesychast Controversy, its protagonists, contexts, and contents, see Russell, "The Hesychast Controversy," in *The Cambridge Intellectual History of Byzantium*, eds. Anthony Kaldellis and Niketas Siniossoglou (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 494–508; idem, *Gregory Palamas*, 10–17; Sinkewicz, "Gregory Palamas," 132–134; Meyendorff, *Introduction*, 65–94; idem, *Défense*, viii–xxiv; with a special focus on the role of Barlaam, see Giuseppe Schirò (ed.), *Barlaam Calabro. Epistole greche. I primordi episodici e dottrinari delle lotte esicaste* (Palermo: Istituto Siciliano di studi bizantini e neogreci, 1954).

⁹⁷ Russell, *Gregory Palamas*, 11.

“Poussé par son universelle curiosité ou par un vrai désir de vie monastique, le Calabrais s’était mis à l’école d’un moine de Thessalonique.”⁹⁸ In any case, he clearly intended to obtain a better understanding of the theological and spiritual background of his opponent or even to look for a weak point. However, it seems not to have been a “novitiate,” to have confided himself to a spiritual father, or even a kind of continuous education, but rather an investigation. The first of these presumably “urban hesychasts” whom Barlaam engages was a certain Ignatius, whom we find as an addressee of two letters by Barlaam, together with other monks called David Disypatos, Joseph Kalothetos, and “the good Luke.”⁹⁹ They seem to have been monks of good reputation.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Barlaam mentions in this context a certain youth (μειρακίσκος) who told him about his experiences in hesychastic prayer and whom he in turn tried to convince to abandon this. While Giuseppe Schirò quotes John VI Kantakouzenos that this “lad” would have been a fool and thus a bad informant,¹⁰¹ Russell assumes he might “simply have been a polite fiction on Barlaam’s part in order to avoid attributing heretical doctrines to his correspondent and his correspondent’s friends.”¹⁰² It seems at least arguable that this “lad” could have been a novice, conversing in public before completing his basic monastic formation.¹⁰³

The three treatises of Palamas’ first *Triad* each begin with a question posed by a young monk or even a novice to his spiritual father. Even if this is only a literary device, there is no doubt that Palamas would indeed have answered in this way to a real novice, and possibly even did so. The first *Triad* thus presents us with a kind of extensive “novitiate class.” In the first treatise, the “novice” tells his father he had heard certain people say that for a monk it would be necessary to study “profane wisdom” (ἔξω σοφία) and “Hellenic education” (καθ’ Ἑλληνας παιδεία) in order to avoid ignorance, while his own experience had taught him the opposite. So he asks his father to teach him how to defend the truth (διδαχθῆναι τοὺς ὑπὲρ τῆς ἀληθείας λόγους).¹⁰⁴ The answer that secular learning

⁹⁸ Meyendorff, *Défense*, xiv.

⁹⁹ Meyendorff, *Défense*, xiv; Russell, *Gregory Palamas*, 12–13; Schirò, *Barlaam Calabro*, 187–194; cf. the text of Barlaam’s respective *Letters* 4–8 in Schirò, *Barlaam Calabro*, 315–330.

¹⁰⁰ Russell, *Gregory Palamas*, 12–13; Meyendorff, *Défense*, xvii; Meyendorff, *Introduction*, 70: “Les moines qu’il rencontra étaient peu instruits et incapables de satisfaire dans le domaine de la spiritualité ses aspirations d’intellectuel sceptique.”

¹⁰¹ Schirò, *Barlaam Calabro*, 191.

¹⁰² Russell, *Gregory Palamas*, 12.

¹⁰³ Cf. the case of Isidore Boucheir who only after some time under the direction of Gregory of Sinai was sent by the latter to assume an “urban hesychast apostolate,” which he carried out in Thessaloniki for ten years; cf. Mitrea, “A Late-Byzantine Hagiographer,” 126–127, 192–193, 230; cf. *supra* n. 82.

¹⁰⁴ Palamas, *Triads* I,1, first question; ed. Meyendorff, *Défense*, 4–7.

is neither from God nor necessary for a Christian, and respectively monastic life, does not have to be expounded here in detail. Palamas is speaking here about monastic life in general, not on a methodological level about teaching novices, while the literary situation implicates exactly this. It is worth mentioning the metaphor that the potentials of secular education should be used like snake venom as an antidote against attacks from this very direction.¹⁰⁵ This entails that these aspects of the ἔξω παιδεία not only have to be learned but also discerned and clarified.

In the first treatise of the second *Triad*, dealing with the same subject, Palamas states that he does not want to deprive the monks of secular education: “Therefore the time before entering the monastic way of life is appropriate for all those who do not take things easy to acquire of all kinds of literary [education] (ἐγὼ δ’ οὐκ ἀποστερεῖν μοναχούς, Ἰκανὸς γὰρ ὁ πρὸ τοῦ τὴν πολιτείαν ταύτην ὑπελθεῖν χρόνος πρὸς λόγου κτήσιν παντοίαν τοῖς οὐ ραθύμοις).¹⁰⁶ This is what Palamas himself (and many others) did, as is attested by Philotheos in his *Life of Palamas*¹⁰⁷ and by the quality of his own writings.

Byzantine *typika* do not have much to say about this topic and there is nothing in the *Rule of St. Benedict*. According to the *Vita* of Benedict by Gregory the Great,

he was born in Nursia of distinguished parents, who sent him to Rome for a liberal education (*liberalis litterarum studii*; ἐλευθερικῶν γραμμάτων διδασχῆ). When he found many of the students there abandoning themselves to vice, he decided to withdraw from the world he had been preparing to enter; for he was afraid that if he acquired any of its learning he would be drawn down with them to his eternal ruin. In his desire to please God alone, he turned his back on further studies, gave up home and inheritance and resolved to embrace the religious life. He took this step, fully aware of his ignorance; yet he was truly wise, uneducated though he may have been.¹⁰⁸

While the motivation to choose the monastic life sounds basically connatural in St. Benedict and St. Gregory Palamas, the latter completed his studies before leaving the imperial capital for solitude. However, monasteries in East and West have become places of education and research, of schools and libraries. In the

¹⁰⁵ Palamas, *Triads* I,1,21, ed. Meyendorff, *Défense*, 58–61.

¹⁰⁶ Palamas, *Triads* II,1,35, ed. Meyendorff, *Défense*, 296–297.

¹⁰⁷ Kokkinos, *Λόγος* 10–11, ed. Tsamis, 36–38, trans. Russell, 60–62.

¹⁰⁸ Gregory the Great, *Vita Benedicti*, ed. de Vogüé, Antin, 126–127; idem, *Vita di San Benedetto*, ed. Rigotti, 102–105; English trans. Odo J. Zimmermann and Benedict R. Avery, *Life and Miracles of St. Benedict* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1984), 1.

present Benedictine *ratio formationis*, at least in my own Beuronese congregation, a graduation certificate, graduation from vocational training, or an academic degree are the regular prerequisites to be accepted as a postulant. The decisive bit, then and now, seems to be the “home address” of the various subjects of education and their common goal to seek God alone.¹⁰⁹

In the second treatise in the first *Triad*, Palamas’ interlocutor asks his “spiritual father” about the criticism he has heard about the hesychastic way of prayer, especially, when the novices were exhorted to look at themselves and by their respiration send their mind within themselves (τοῖς ἀρχαρίοις παραινοῦντας ἐφ’ ἑαυτοὺς βλέπειν καὶ διὰ τῆς ἀναπνοῆς εἴσω πέμπειν τὸν οἰκεῖον νοῦν).¹¹⁰ As in the introductory question, Palamas mentions the novices explicitly. In § 7 of this second treatise, he refers to St. John Climacus to explain this method of prayer as indispensable for those who truly want to become monks (τοὺς [...] ὡς ἀληθῶς γενέσθαι [...] μοναχοῦς), especially for beginners, who are to be introduced into the monastic life (μάλιστα τοὺς εἰσαγομένους). This time, learning is not about acquiring a certain knowledge, but about exercising an existential practice. For none of these beginners does any of this happen without labor, and their teacher is not a word, but toil, and the experience resulting from toil (οὐ λόγος, ἀλλὰ πόνος καὶ ἡ διὰ πόνων πεῖρα διδάσκαλος).

Learning a handicraft or an art is impossible if one remains in the distance of “theory.” It needs practical involvement. If one wants to learn to play the piano, it does not suffice to understand the keyboard and the notes, but one has to practice, exercise, with patience and perseverance, to be critically attentive, to see the goal, and to avoid bad habits. First of all, one has to understand the music, otherwise all technical studies are meaningless. And for all this one has an indispensable need for the direction of a good teacher, whom one trust and whom one allows to work on oneself. The same applies to learning a spiritual practice. For such a process of learning, a relationship of mutual confidence and transparency is absolutely necessary to evade the danger of manipulation or even spiritual abuse. What may sound like a rather modern problem we find in fact considered already in some middle Byzantine *typika*, for example in the *Typikon* of Emperor John Tzimiskes for the monasteries of Athos:

A layman who has come to one of the superiors [ἡγουμένων, here in the sense of “spiritual director,” see below] and stays with him for six months or an entire year, but who becomes dissatisfied with the superior’s direction for certain causes and has good reason to claim that he has not been helped by him, may give himself to another spiritual director (εἰς ἕτερον ἡγούμενον

¹⁰⁹ See *Rule of St. Benedict* 58.7, ed. Hanslik, 147, trans. RB 1980, 266–267.

¹¹⁰ Palamas, *Triads* 1,2, second question, ed. Meyendorff, *Défense*, 72–73.

πνευματικὸν παραδίδοσθαι), whomsoever he might select, provided that other persons testify that this new director is irreproachable and capable of helping souls.¹¹¹

“Lord, teach us to pray,” the disciples ask Christ (Lk 11:1). Teaching novices to pray means to share in Christ’s ministry, with all its responsibility. The issue of teaching and learning how to pray is a highly sensitive matter. Therefore, it seems important that a Benedictine novice today can rely on a separation of the *forum internum* from the *forum externum*, and always has the right to approach his abbot directly. All the more it is important to find and live a solid balance between confidence and transparency, to avoid dangerous dependencies as well as the risk of playing one spiritual director off against another.

A problematic relationship of its own kind between a novice and his spiritual father arises in the question preceding the third treatise of the first *Triad*. The young monk reports that the adversaries of the hesychasts would falsely pretend they wished to become disciples [of hesychast fathers], but were not willing to learn earnestly (λέγουσι δ’ ὁμως ὑποκριθῆναι μὲν μαθητιῶντας, ἀλλ’ οὐκ εὐμαθεῖς): “Therefore they put into writing the things they heard the teachers telling them that they should cling to and believe in” (διὸ γραφῆ διδόναι τὰ παρὰ τῶν διδασκάλων πρὸς αὐτοὺς λεγόμενα λιπαρῆσαι τε καὶ πείσαι). Such a sham novitiate and deceptive novices should hopefully not appear in our monasteries today, or should be quickly identified. In the case mentioned in the *Triads*, they write that their teachers would assert that they should give up all the Holy Scriptures as something bad, but rather devote themselves only to prayer, by which the evil spirits would be driven away (γράφουσι τοίνυν φάναι τοὺς διδάσκοντας αὐτοὺς πάσης μὲν Γραφῆς ἱερᾶς ὡς πονηρᾶς ἀφεῖσθαι, προσανέχειν δὲ μόνη τῇ εὐχῇ, δι’ ἧς ἀπελαύνεσθαι μὲν τὰ πονηρὰ πνεύματα).¹¹² Something similar is expressed in the first treatise of the second *Triad*: “Ἐλεγε [sc. Barlaam] γὰρ ὡς ἐδιδάχθη παρ’ ἐκείνων ὧν κατηγορεῖ, τὴν μὲν θείαν πᾶσαν Γραφήν ἀνωφελῆ πᾶσι παντάπασιν εἶναι.”¹¹³

Palamas in turn admits that beginners in hesychasm should indeed abstain from long readings and devote themselves to the “prayer of a single thought” [i.e., the Jesus Prayer] until this has become an uninterrupted habitus of their mind (Ἀφεῖσθαι μὲν γὰρ τοὺς ἀρχομένους ἡσυχάζειν μακρᾶς ἀναγνώσεως καὶ προσανέχειν τῇ μονολογίστῳ προσευχῇ, μέχρις ἂν ἕξιν τινὰ σχοῖεν τοῦ ταύτης ἀδιαλείπτως ἔχεσθαι κατὰ διάνοιαν).¹¹⁴ Therefore, he is speaking only of a

¹¹¹ Meyer, *Die Haupturkunden*, 144, trans. Dennis in *BMFD*, 236–237.

¹¹² Palamas, *Triads* I,3, third question, ed. Meyendorff, *Défense*, 102–105.

¹¹³ Palamas, *Triads* II,1,2, ed. Meyendorff, *Défense*, 229.

¹¹⁴ Palamas, *Triads* I,3,2, ed. Meyendorff, *Défense*, 108–109.

temporary reduction. Even more, he suggests that novices will find better conditions later, when they will be able to read the Scriptures on a foundation of continuous prayer. Palamas returns to a similar accusation in the first treatise of the third *Triad*, that some of the monks would consider reading the Scriptures as [a source of] confusion (τῶν λογίων ἀνάγνωσιν σύγχυσιν οἴονται): “However, we do not know among us any hesychast who would not devote himself to the Scriptures (if he has learned to read); and those who do not know to read you can regard as ‘living books,’ for they recite the greater part of the Scriptures by heart.”¹¹⁵ With the word of Jesus, “if you would believe Moses, you would believe me, too” (Jn 5:46), Palamas understands Christ himself commanding us to explore the Scriptures (τὰς ἱερὰς Γραφὰς ἐρευνᾶν ἐντεῖλατο) and to find eternal life in them.¹¹⁶ The benchmark is to be in accord with the Prophets, with the Apostles, and with all the Fathers (τὸ φρονεῖν προφήταις, ἀποστόλοις, πατράσι πᾶσιν ἀπλῶς), since through all of them the Holy Spirit is speaking.¹¹⁷

Even more important than reading and understanding the Scriptures, Palamas considers, is putting the Word of God into practice, quoting Rom 2:13: “μὴ τοὺς ἀκροατὰς τοῦ νόμου, τοὺς δὲ ποιητὰς σωθήσεσθαι”¹¹⁸ and “τὴν πρᾶξιν δὲ εἰδότες, ἀλλ’ οὐ τὴν γνῶσιν, σώζουσιν.”¹¹⁹ Whoever listens to the Word of God and acts accordingly (cf. Mt 7:24) will possess God within himself (ὁ τὸν τοῦ Κυρίου λόγον ἀκούων καὶ ποιῶν, αὐτὸν ἐν ἑαυτῷ κτᾶται). In other words, “He who has acquired God within himself by keeping his commandments no longer needs to study the Scriptures, but knows them all exactly without studying” (οὐδὲ τῆς μαθήσεως τῶν Γραφῶν δεῖσεται, ἀλλὰ καὶ χωρὶς αὐτῆς πάσας οἶδεν ἀκριβῶς).¹²⁰ First, this means studying the Scriptures thoroughly and keeping the commandments. If secondly, though, at a certain point a “possession” of God should be taken for granted, this would be rather problematic. The objective criterion of the Scriptures would be somehow internalized and thus be missing for a discernment of spirits. Throughout his writings, however, Palamas does not only show a comprehensive knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, but takes them as his essential point of reference in a way that he does not lose their objectivity.

¹¹⁵ Palamas, *Triads* II,1,11, ed. Meyendorff, *Défense*, 246–247: Ἀλλὰ τῶν μὲν ἐφ’ ἡμῶν ἠσυχάζοντων οὐδένα ἐγνωμεν ὃς τοῖς λογίοις οὐ προσανέχει, γράμματα μεμαθηκῶς, καὶ τοὺς μὴ γράμματα εἰδόμενος ἴδοι τις ἂν βίβλους ἄλλας ἐμψύχους ἀπὸ στήθους τὰ πλείονα τῶν λογίων εὐφύως ἀπαγγέλοντας.

¹¹⁶ Palamas, *Triads* II,1,43, ed. Meyendorff, *Défense*, 312–313.

¹¹⁷ Palamas, *Triads* II,1,42, ed. Meyendorff, *Défense*, 312–313.

¹¹⁸ Rom 2:13 reads “δικαιωθήσονται,” the variants “σωθήσονται” or “σωθήσεσθαι” are not attested. If Palamas is quoting by heart, does this imply that he knows the Scriptures well, shows shortcomings, or is even another step further as he knows how to use them sensibly in various contexts?

¹¹⁹ Palamas, *Triads* II,1,11, ed. Meyendorff, *Défense*, 246–247.

¹²⁰ Palamas, *Triads* II,1,43, ed. Meyendorff, *Défense*, 314–315.

As already mentioned, a prerequisite for studying the Bible and then putting it into practice is the ability to read or to memorize biblical texts. In no. 95 of St. Basil's *Shorter Rules* we have the question whether the newly accepted (i.e., the postulants, respectively the novices) should immediately learn parts of the Scriptures by heart (Εἰ συμφέρει τοῖς ἄρτι προσερχομένοις εὐθύς τὸ ἀπὸ τῶν Γραφῶν ἐκμανθάνειν). St. Basil answers that each one should learn by heart what he needs (τὸ γὰρ πρὸς τὴν χρεῖαν ἕκαστον ἐκμανθάνειν ἐκ τῆς θεοπνεύστου Γραφῆς ἀκόλουθον καὶ ἀναγκαῖον). The answer to the following question, no. 96, whether everyone should be allowed to learn reading and writing according to his own wish (Εἰ παντὶ τῷ βουλομένῳ ἐπιτρέπειν δεῖ γράμματα μανθάνειν, ἢ ἀναγνώσασσι προσέχειν), St. Basil leaves for the superior (προεστῶς) to decide.¹²¹

Learning the Scriptures by heart (especially if one is not able to read) requires listening to someone else reading aloud. The question arises whether there was a special reader reciting the sacred texts repeatedly to the novices to help them memorize them. Subsequently one may ask if it would not be easier to teach all of them to read for themselves. That is what St. Pachomius prescribes:

If someone is not able to read (*litteras ignorabit*), then he shall go in the first, third and sixth hour to someone who can teach him and is assigned for this, and he shall stand in front of him and shall study with the greatest intentness (*studiosissime*) [...] and even if he does not want to read, he shall be compelled to do so (*compelletur*). There shall be no one in the whole monastery who does not learn reading (*discat litteras*) and comprehends something from the Scriptures, at least from the New Testament and the Psalms.¹²²

This is also the demand of St. Benedict who assigns in chapter 48 of his *Rule* several hours each day for each brother to read, without exception; they shall be free for reading (*lectioni vacent*) as well as occupied with it (*occupari debent in lectione*), especially on Sundays.¹²³ At the beginning of Great Lent all brothers receive a single volume of the Bible which they shall read completely until Easter (*in quibus diebus quadragesimae accipiant omnes singulos codices de bibliotheca, quos per ordinem ex integro legant*). In this case, *bibliotheca* does not denote a library, but the whole of the Bible, so that everyone receives a different one of the various biblical books.¹²⁴ Neither here nor in chapter 58 on

¹²¹ Basil of Caesarea, *Regulae brevius tractatae* 95–96, PG 31, 1148–1150.

¹²² Pachomius, *Praecepta* 139–140, ed. Boon, *Pachomiana Latina*, 47–48; cf. Puzicha, *Kommentar*, 516.

¹²³ *Rule of St. Benedict* 48.1, 4, 5, 10, 13, 14, 17, 20, 22, ed. Hanslik, 125–130, trans. *RB 1980*, 248–253.

¹²⁴ Puzicha, *Kommentar*, 525–526. Here, however, we may indeed see the beginnings of a monastic library as the necessary place where the codices were kept.

the reception of novices does Benedict speak about *teaching* them, but it seems reasonable to assume that many, if not most of them, were still in need of acquiring literacy after entering monastic life.

It is a bit astonishing that in the Byzantine *typika* “relatively little is said about literacy or reading.”¹²⁵ In the twelfth-century *Typikon* for the Monastery of St. John the Forerunner in Phoberos, the chapter on tonsuring novices has the addition (compared to its model in the *Typikon* of Evergetis) that the newcomers first have to read the procedures in the rule and to promise to observe everything drawn up in it.¹²⁶ Strictly, this would presuppose literacy as a precondition for entering monastic life, but probably this was not the case. “The most interesting reference to literacy is in [the *Typikon* of] *Neilos Damilas* of Crete, where reading aloud was said to be more important than psalmody.”¹²⁷ Palamas, as already seen, knows both literate and illiterate monks, but all of them have to engage in the Holy Scriptures. Learning to read them or learning them by heart with the help of another one’s recitation are both part of the education of a “novice.” To put the Word of God into practice after hearing it takes even more work and will not come to fruition without the accompaniment of a spiritual director.

The Question of the “Great Schema”

The matter of the monastic habit in connection with the way of becoming a monk (which garment is given when, what are the accompanying liturgical rites, what do they signify for the canonical status of the novice or monk, etc.) are discussed comprehensively by Oltean.¹²⁸ Different regional traditions mingle in various developments, leading again to different results and open questions. How do the “small habit” (μικρὸν σχῆμα) and the “great habit” (μέγα σχῆμα) relate to each other? Do they correspond to succeeding stages of the monastic “career”? If the μικρὸν σχῆμα is not the habit of the novices (that should be the ῥάσον), is it a kind of intermediate form for a limited period (as the temporary vows of the Benedictines, which precede solemn vows)? Or do the two habits relate to

¹²⁵ Giles Constable, “Preface” to *BMFD*, xxviii.

¹²⁶ *Rule of John for the Monastery of St. John the Forerunner in Phoberos*, trans. Jordan in *BMFD*, 872–953, here at 929; cf. the *Typikon of Evergetis* 37; ed. Gautier, 78–81, trans. Jordan in *BMFD*, 494–495.

¹²⁷ Constable, “Preface,” xxviii; *Testament and Typikon of Neilos Damilas for the Convent of the Mother of God Pantanassa at Baionaia in Crete* 13, trans. Alice-Mary Talbot in *BMFD*, 1462–1482, here at 1475: “for prayer and reading are like two eyes.”

¹²⁸ Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*; while the first part of the book is entirely devoted to this issue (9–86), it frequently recurs especially in the third part on postulate, novitiate, and profession (217–316).

permanently different “levels” of monastic life, the simpler monks sticking with the small habit for a lifetime, while the great habit would show a higher degree of spiritual perfection? Or perhaps the small habit was for the cenobites, while the hermits took on the great one? There is evidence for quite a number of diverging customs,¹²⁹ while at the time of Gregory Palamas the division of small and great habit according to hierarchical degrees was common.¹³⁰

Against this background, Palamas receives a request from the hieromonk Paul Asen, who asked if he should take on the great habit. In his response,¹³¹ Palamas approves of his taking on the μέγα σχῆμα, but has to offer some basic considerations as well as some personal advice for his correspondent. Beginning with the common vocation of all baptized Christians, to show in deeds, words, and thoughts that they have mastery over the passions and are developing in virtue, have love for God and one’s neighbor (§ 2), he continues with the special features of a monastic vocation, which are withdrawal from the world, renunciation of pleasures, and the inclination of oneself totally to the love of God (ὡς ἂν ὄλωσ νεύσας πρὸς τὴν θεῖαν ἀγάπην, § 3). The subsequent sentence, “τοῦτο ἐστὶ τὸ μέγα καὶ μοναχικὸν σχῆμα” (§ 4), hints at the twofold meaning of the word “σχῆμα.”¹³² First, the shape, appearance, bearing of a (monastic) figure. Secondly, derived from there, the monastic vestment. The Latin word “habitus” is in this case a faithful translation of the Greek “σχῆμα.” Then, Palamas points out, with direct reference to St. Theodore the Stoudite, that the monastic σχῆμα/*habitus* is essentially one and the same. The brief original sentence in the Testament of Theodore the Stoudite reads: “You shall not grant what they call the little habit, and after that the great one, for the habit like baptism is one according to the usages of the fathers.”¹³³ Palamas adds:

So it seems to me that those who later divided the form of the prescribed garments restricted and took away the *analavon* and the *koukoulion* from the young monks because [these garments] are the most venerable symbols for onlookers and constitute a way of formally showing off in front of those inducted into the monastic life yet still pursuing [i.e., or not yet firm in] holy humility.

¹²⁹ Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*, 11–12, 65–77.

¹³⁰ Peter J. Hatlie, “The Answer to Paul Asen of Gregory Palamas: A Fourteenth Century Apology for the One, Grand and Angelic Schema,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 33 (1989): 35–51, here at 35.

¹³¹ Meyendorff, *Introduction*, 384–385, gives no date of composition, Hatlie, “The Answer,” 35, and Sinkewicz, “Gregory Palamas,” 151, date this letter around 1334.

¹³² Palamas, *Letter to Paul Asen, PS*, vol. 5, 247–250, here at 247–248; Hatlie, “The Answer,” 46–49.

¹³³ *Testament of Theodore the Stoudite for the Monastery of St. John Stoudios in Constantinople*, in *BMFD*, 67–83, here at 78, no. 12.

δοκεῖ δέ μοι τοὺς ὕστερον ἐν τοῖς νενομισμένοις περιβολαίοις τὸ σχῆμα μερίσαντας παρακατασχεῖν καὶ ἀφελέσθαι τῶν ἀρχαρίων τὸν ἀνάλαβόν τε καὶ τὸ κουκούλιον, ὡς τοῖς ὀρῶσι σεμνότατα καὶ τοῖς εἰσαγομένοις ὡς ἔτι πρὸς τὴν ἱερὰν ταπεινώσιν ἀπαγέσι ραδίως πρὸς ἐσχηματισμένην ἐπίδειξιν μεθελκόμενα.¹³⁴

If we have to read this together with the *Athonite Rule* (§ 18)¹³⁵ and the latter indeed means that the προερχόμενος after two or three weeks in the hospice is already vested in the ordinary habit,¹³⁶ then the term “ἀρχάριος” in this letter does not denote a novice in the strict sense,¹³⁷ but a young monk, who is still at the beginning and “εἰσαγόμενος,” but already vested, tonsured, and professed. If we link this with the information from Philotheos’ *Vita* that Palamas was tonsured by his spiritual father Nikodemos rather quickly, made his vows, and then submitted himself in obedience to him,¹³⁸ then we should add that Palamas was probably also vested with the regular habit.

Like Theodore the Stoudite, Palamas does not so much oppose the great or the small habit, but their division as such. On the other hand, he does not criticize the intention to keep the novices away from the fallacious impression that the monastic habit, in this case the Great Schema, would be a kind of honor in which to boast, instead of rather carrying it as a yoke. Palamas approves of his correspondent receiving the great habit. Wearing it in public, however, should be a constant exhortation to exercise himself in humility. When he shall bring the outward symbols (i.e., his dress) into agreement with the inward disposition of his soul (τοῖς ἔξω συμβόλοις συνάδουσιν ἔχειν σπεύδης τὴν ἐντὸς τῆς ψυχῆς σου διάθεσιν),¹³⁹ then this again shows the ambiguity of the word “σχῆμα.” The ἀρχάριος will have to work on himself to get his outer and inner shape into harmony (συνάδω), and as an εἰσαγόμενος, that is, a novice, he literally has to be introduced to this, for which he needs help from his spiritual father.

The Theotokos in the Temple as a Kind of Hesychastic Novitiate?

The second literary work of St. Gregory Palamas, written right after the *Vita* of St. Peter the Athonite, is his *Homily* 53 for the Feast of the Entry of the

¹³⁴ Palamas, *Letter to Paul Asen*, *PS*, vol. 5, 248–249; Hatlie, “The Answer,” 48–49.

¹³⁵ *Rule of Athanasios the Athonite for the Lavra Monastery* 18, ed. Meyer, *Die Haupturkunden*, 135–136; trans. Dennis in *BMFD*, 225.

¹³⁶ Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*, 52–53.

¹³⁷ The novice proper is normally designated with the term ῥασοφόρος. Palamas, however, does not use this term.

¹³⁸ Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 17–18, ed. Tsamis, 47, trans. Russell, 71.

¹³⁹ Palamas, *Letter to Paul Asen* 5, ed. Christou in *PS*, vol. 5, 249; Hatlie, “The Answer,” 48–49.

Theotokos into the Temple. Palamas' corpus of homilies largely date from his years as metropolitan of Thessaloniki. Only four or five of them were delivered to a monastic audience.¹⁴⁰ The extensive encomiastic *Λόγος* on the Presentation was written at the hermitage of St. Sabas, close to the Great Lavra.¹⁴¹ In several instances Palamas depicts the Theotokos dwelling in the Holy of Holies as a child, as a *πρωτότυπος* of hesychastic life.¹⁴² He follows closely the narration of the Protoevangelium of James. As Mary spends her childhood years from age three to twelve in the Temple, a time critical for education and formation, we may look for possible traces of a "novitiate" here.¹⁴³

First, there is the separation from the world. Palamas omits in his account that according to the Protoevangelium (6.1) the little child already had a kind of sanctuary in the bedroom at home to keep it ritually pure. He starts with her being brought to the Temple by her parents, which further unfolds in the quasi-liturgical procession with the "daughters of the Hebrews" carrying candles, and the High Priest receiving her and quoting Psalm 45(44):11-12: "Hear, o daughter [...], forget your people and your father's house, and the king will desire your beauty."¹⁴⁴

The outward separation is followed by the inner one: "She lived, as though in paradise, in a place removed from the earth, or rather, as though in the courts of heaven [...]. Thus she led an unencumbered life without cares or occupation, free from sorrow, with no share in base passions, above that pleasure which is inseparable from pain."¹⁴⁵ The negative separation from the things below is connected with the positive attachment to the things above: "Through the beauty of what she saw [in the Holy of Holies], she immediately cast her mind's eye to the unseen beauties,"¹⁴⁶ and these in the end are not "something" but God Himself: "She lived for God alone and was sustained and preserved only by Him [...]. Obviously she saw only God, making God her delight and continually waiting on Him."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁰ Ralph Greis, *Von der Menschenfreundlichkeit Gottes. Analyse und Kommentar der Homilien des Gregor Palamas in liturgiethnologischer Perspektive* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2021), 1040.

¹⁴¹ Greis, *Von der Menschenfreundlichkeit Gottes*, 580–581; Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 37, ed. Tsamis, 68, trans. Russell, 92; Meyendorff, *Introduction*, 60, 391.

¹⁴² Cf. Mitrea, "Monasticism and Kinship in Byzantine Hesychastic Hagiography," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 61 (2021): 396–422, here at 396–398.

¹⁴³ An interesting question in its own right, which we must omit here, is that of children given to monasteries by their parents; cf. Oltean, *Devenir moine à Byzance*, 91–138.

¹⁴⁴ Palamas, *Homily* 53, 25 (cf. also 53, 30 and 53, 50), ed. Basil Pseftonkas in *PS*, vol. 6, 563; English trans. Christopher Veniamin, *Saint Gregory Palamas. The Homilies* (Waymart, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2009), 425.

¹⁴⁵ Palamas, *Homily* 53, 47, ed. Pseftonkas, 575, trans. Veniamin, 435.

¹⁴⁶ Palamas, *Homily* 53, 46, ed. Pseftonkas, 574, trans. Veniamin, 435.

¹⁴⁷ Palamas, *Homily* 53, 47, ed. Pseftonkas, 575, trans. Veniamin, 435.

This may remind us of Palamas' *Vita* of St. Peter the Athonite who "went up the mountain and entered into the innermost sanctuary" (καὶ ἀνέβη τὸ ὄρος καὶ εἰσέδεν τὰ ἄδυτα), while "τὰ ἄδυτα" also appear as the dwelling place of the Theotokos in *Homily* 53, 20.¹⁴⁸ There St. Peter committed himself to God only (Θεῷ μόνω τὰ καθ' ἑαυτὸν ἐπιτρέψας).¹⁴⁹ It may remind us as well of the *Life of St. Benedict* who turned his back on his studies in Rome "in his desire to please God alone" (μόνω Θεῷ ἀρέσαι ἐπιθυμήσας).¹⁵⁰ The *Rule of St. Benedict* in turn expresses as a basic demand for every monk that, "The love of Christ must come before all else" (*nihil amori Christi praeponere*),¹⁵¹ while for a novice (and for those examining him) the first "concern must be whether the novice truly seeks God" (*et sollicitudo sit, si revera Deum quaerit*).¹⁵²

We find Mary's separation from the world connected with some classical hesychastic tropes: She "chose to live in solitude and out of sight of all, inside the sanctuary. There, having loosed every bond with material things, shaken off every tie and even risen above sympathy towards her own body, she united her mind with its turning towards itself and attention (συνῆψε τὸν νοῦν τῇ πρὸς ἑαυτὸν στροφῇ καὶ προσοχῇ), and with unceasing holy prayer" (καὶ προσοχῇ καὶ δι' ἀδιαλείπτω θείᾳ προσευχῇ). She saw the glory of God and divine grace (δόξαν ὀρᾷ θεοῦ καὶ θείαν ἐποπτεύει χάριν).¹⁵³

Obviously, for the little child there is no need to learn these things like a novice; everything is already there. Palamas emphasizes that little Mary "did not learn anything from lessons by studying with teachers. Instead, making her sovereign mind obedient to God in everything, she decisively abandoned human instruction and so received abundant instruction from above."¹⁵⁴ Thus God himself takes the place of the spiritual director. There is no need for any secular, philosophical education which is described in the usual skeptical patterns (§§ 51, 58). More important is *hesychia*, not so much a subject to be learned but a teacher itself: "The virgin found that holy stillness was her guide" (τὴν ἱερὰν ἡσυχίαν εὕρισκει χειραγωγόν), and under the guidance of *hesychia* we are set free from the things below and incline ourselves to God (τῆς ἀπὸ τῆς καθ' ἡσυχίαν ἀγωγῆς ὅτι δι' αὐτῆς ἀπολυόμεθα τῶν κάτω καὶ συννεύομεν πρὸς τὸν Θεόν).¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁸ Palamas, *Homily* 53, 20, ed. Pseftonkas, 561, trans. Veniamin, 423.

¹⁴⁹ Palamas, *Λόγος* 17, ed. Christou, 171.

¹⁵⁰ Gregory the Great, *Life of St. Benedict*, ed. de Vogüé, Antin, 126–127; idem, *Vita di San Benedetto*, ed. Rigotti, 102–105; trans. Zimmermann, Avery, 1.

¹⁵¹ *Rule of St. Benedict* 4.21, ed. Hanslik, 33, trans. *RB 1980*, 182–183; cf. *Rule of St. Benedict* 5.2, 72.11.

¹⁵² *Rule of St. Benedict* 58.7, ed. Hanslik, 147, trans. *RB 1980*, 266–267.

¹⁵³ Palamas, *Homily* 53, 59, ed. Pseftonkas, 582, trans. Veniamin, 441.

¹⁵⁴ Palamas, *Homily* 53, 18, ed. Pseftonkas, 560, trans. Veniamin, 422.

¹⁵⁵ Palamas, *Homily* 53, 52, ed. Pseftonkas, 578, trans. Veniamin, 437–438; Veniamin's translation seems to be missing a line.

Young Mary learns everything without a human teacher, and on her own initiative. Most of the “contents” of monastic life are not to be acquired once and for all during the novitiate but are subject to a life-long process of learning and practicing. The Theotokos, however, simply does what a hesychast novice has to exercise for a long time and she is gifted with a vision of the glory of God from the beginning. There is no need for her to fight any vices, and when she practices πᾶν ἀρέτης εἶδος, there is no word about any struggles (§ 50).

According to Evagrius Ponticus, after separation from the world and the πρακτική [τέχνη] of ascetism, there follows the θεωρία φυσική. This means that by contemplating the λόγοι of the created things one can reach an indirect knowledge of their transcendent Creator. In Palamas’ *Homily*, it is Abraham and Melchizedek who are meditating on the *kosmos* as the great proof of God (τὸ μέγα τοῦτο δεῖγμα τοῦ Θεοῦ, τὸν μέγαν τοῦτον κόσμον), and by what the natural laws proclaim they recognize God who is above them (τᾶλλ’ ὅσα πάντα λόγω φύσεως τελούμενα τὸν ὑπὲρ ταῦτα Θεὸν κηρύττει δι’ αἰῶνος). Mary, however, cannot use any of these intermediate cognitive steps, as she is too young (τὰ γὰρ τῆς ἡλικίας οὐπω συνεχώρει), but also does not need them; she simply recognizes God (Θεὸν ἐννοεῖ).¹⁵⁶

The way Palamas recounts the young Virgin’s encounter with the Holy Scriptures seems to be a bit closer to how novices might approach it: on every Sabbath, Mary listens to the liturgical readings in the Temple (ὡς δὲ καὶ τῶν Μωσῆ γεγραμμένων καὶ τῶν τοῖς ἄλλοις προφήταις ἐκπεφρασμένων κατηκροᾶτο μετὰ συνέσεως ἀκροτάτης, τοῦ λαοῦ παντὸς ἔξωθεν ἐκάστου σαββάτου ταῦτα διεξιόντος). Hence she hears about Adam and Eve, how they were created in the image and likeness of God, settled in paradise, she hears about their sin, being expelled from paradise, and about the subsequent continuous deterioration of man’s situation.¹⁵⁷ On the one hand, these belong to the basic tropes of a liturgical *anamnesis* of the history of salvation as we find it in the *postsanctus* of the Anaphora of St. Basil. In the Divine Liturgy, the account of creation, original sin, and corruption leads via God’s help through the Law, Angels, and Prophets to the Incarnation of Christ. This, and how Mary is in fact a very part of the Incarnation, Palamas shows here and in many other homilies.¹⁵⁸ On the other hand, in this *Homily* the situation of man provokes Mary’s compassion (οἶκτον λαβοῦσα) and her incessant intercession (πρέσβεια) to God, and she turns herself to him with all her mind (ὅλω νῶ).¹⁵⁹ We do not find here a monastic or hesychastic vocabulary of prayer, but the harmony of Sacred Scripture, prayer, and (at least implicitly) liturgy.

¹⁵⁶ Palamas, *Homily* 53, 28–29, ed. Pseftonkas, 565, trans. Veniamin, 426.

¹⁵⁷ Palamas, *Homily* 53, 48, ed. Pseftonkas, 575–576, trans. Veniamin, 435–436.

¹⁵⁸ Greis, *Von der Menschenfreundlichkeit Gottes*, 601–603; cf. *ibid.*, 453–458.

¹⁵⁹ Palamas, *Homily* 53, 48, ed. Pseftonkas, 576, trans. Veniamin, 435–436; cf. the πρεσβεία again in *Homily* 53, 49 and 53, 61.

Reaching the age of twelve, Mary has spent nine years in the Temple (Protoevangelium of James 8.2). This might evoke the aforementioned legislation that came recently from Rome that nuns have to undergo at least nine years of basic monastic formation. More important, however, seems the fact that Mary in the end leaves the Temple. She “forsakes the world for the world’s sake” (§ 50), and for the sake of the world, for her ministry in the Incarnation of God, she again leaves the Temple.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, Mary’s “novitiate” is a preparation for a ministry outside.

Palamas’ *Homily 40* on St. John the Baptist shows a number of similar features. This homily, too, was delivered on Mount Athos,¹⁶¹ where the preacher is speaking of “us, whose life is monastic.”¹⁶² Again, he represents the Forerunner of Christ as a model for hesychastic life; firstly, as living in solitude: “As the world was unworthy of him, he dwelt continuously in desert places from his earliest years, leading a frugal life without cares or worldly concerns, a stranger to sadness, free from coarse passions and above base, material pleasure, which merely beguiles the body and its senses.” And again, the separation from the world entails a total attachment to God: “He lived for God alone, beholding only God and making God his delight.” We have seen this “Θεῷ μόνῳ” in very similar words in *Homily 53*, 47. Instead of the Temple, we here have the desert, and instead of “καθάπερ ἐν παραδείσῳ” for the Theotokos, “it was as if he [the Baptist] lived somewhere exalted above the earth.”¹⁶³

What kind of formation could John the Baptist have followed? What could he have learned during his years in solitude? In his *Triads*, Palamas states that it was not profane philosophy or secular education at all:

Where in the desert were the schools of the vain (but as they say, ‘saving’) philosophy? Where were the voluminous books and those who cling to them all their lives and try to convince others [to do the same]? But where in these books are precepts for the eremitic and virginal life? Where is their struggle written down, to exalt them for the sake of imitation by those who get to read them?¹⁶⁴

In *Homily 40*, Palamas does not mention any education or formation of John the Baptist at all, but it is evident that he needed to be versed in the Sacred Scriptures, in the Prophets and the history of Israel, to announce the coming of

¹⁶⁰ Palamas, *Homily 53*, 32, ed. Pseftonkas, 567, trans. Veniamin, 428.

¹⁶¹ Palamas, *Homily 40*, 26, ed. Pseftonkas, 440, trans. Veniamin, 323.

¹⁶² Palamas, *Homily 40*, 20, ed. Pseftonkas, 437, trans. Veniamin, 320.

¹⁶³ Palamas, *Homily 40*, 6, ed. Pseftonkas, 430, trans. Veniamin, 314.

¹⁶⁴ Palamas, *Triads* I,1,4, ed. Meyendorff, *Défense*, 16–17.

Christ and the Kingdom of God as a prophetic message, as well as in the Law of Moses, to denounce the adultery of Herod Antipas.

In this context (the beheading of the Baptist, Mk 6:14-30), Palamas interprets Herod and Herodias as his own opponents:

Standing accused by the prophetic, apostolic and patristic words which we offer, initially it is as if they shut them up in books [like the Baptist in prison], saying: "Let them stay in there, and may nobody use them or pronounce them," for they do not listen to the Lord who tells us, "Search the scriptures; for in them ye shall find eternal life" (cf. Jn 5:39).¹⁶⁵

With Jesus' own words Palamas declares the importance of the Scriptures and exhorts the assembly to explore them. *Homilies* 40 and 53, both delivered in a cenobitic monastic setting, presuppose more than just basic biblical knowledge on the part of the listeners. In addition, there should also have been novices present, and such a homily as part of the liturgical celebration clearly form part of the monastic formation. Again, this does not fit with Barlaam's accusation that the hesychast monks would despise the Sacred Scriptures or even forbid the novices to read them.

"And he was in the deserts, it says, till the day of his shewing unto Israel" (cf. Lk 1:80).¹⁶⁶ Like the child Mary, John the Baptist has to leave his hermitage when the time of his ministry has come: "But did John, the Lord's Baptist and Herald, leave that peaceful wilderness? He did, but he was sent by the Lord to give his people knowledge of salvation (cf. Lk 1:77) and to rebuke the disobedient."¹⁶⁷ Like the Theotokos and John the Baptist, St. Gregory Palamas and other hesychast monks had to leave their beloved hermitages, be it to minister as bishops, to engage in theological debates, or even to take up political issues. It remains an open question if the preparation for such ministry, even outside a cenobitic setting, could reasonably be called a "novitiate." If it is about following a vocation from God, to serve Him in His brothers and sisters, then I would say: yes. And it seems to me to be one of the questions for the twenty-first century whether we should not actively promote respective possibilities for the sake of the Church and our monasteries.

¹⁶⁵ Palamas, *Homily* 40, 17, ed. Pseftonkas, 436, trans. Veniamin, 319.

¹⁶⁶ Palamas, *Homily* 40, 6, ed. Pseftonkas, 430, trans. Veniamin, 314.

¹⁶⁷ Palamas, *Homily* 40, 26, ed. Pseftonkas, 440, trans. Veniamin, 323.

Concluding Remarks: “Enlighten My Darkness”

Neither Philotheos Kokkinos in his *Vita* of St. Gregory Palamas nor Palamas himself in his own writings have left us a *ratio formationis*, that is, regulations for the formation and education of novices. These we find, of various kinds and differing extent, in the legislation of Byzantine emperors (e.g., Justinian), the canons of councils and synods, and in *typika*. From all these, however, we cannot reasonably reconstruct a monolithic, comprehensive, and consistent version. With the examples analyzed above, I have tried to look at Palamas’ own monastic life against this contemporary background, to show conformities and differences, and also some affinities with the Western monastic tradition. More important, it would indeed seem, is how these details contribute to the larger picture of Palamas’ own personality, beginning with his childhood in a pious home, already influenced by monastic spirituality, his comprehensive secular education, even before entering monastic life, his mastery of the Sacred Scriptures and the Fathers, his ascetic endeavors, his continuous prayer, his love for the hesychastic life as a living communion with God, and also his willingness to leave his favorite way of life, when necessary, to accept this, too, as a call, as a vocation from God.

Philotheos reports in his *Vita* that Palamas in the third year of his original “novitiate” with Nikodemos, “eagerly practicing fasting, keeping vigil, watchfulness and unceasing prayer to God day and night,” in some way adopted the Theotokos as his inner “novice master,” as a guide, patron, and intercessor (ὁδηγόν τε καὶ προστάτιν ὁμοῦ καὶ μεσίτιν προϊσταμένω τὴν Θεομήτορα). One day, St. John the Evangelist appeared to him, sent by the Theotokos, to ask him why he kept crying “Enlighten my darkness, enlighten my darkness” all the time. Palamas, in his answer, recognizes himself as full of passion and sins (i.e., the darkness) and thus asks for God’s mercy and illumination “to know his saving will and put it into practice.” The “apostolic visitor” then comforts and assures him of the constant accompaniment by and support from the Theotokos.¹⁶⁸ There are several aspects worth accentuating.

First, whatever I may have learned, added to my shelf of knowledge and capabilities as a kind of possession, be it biblical, theological, or philosophical, be it ascetic discipline or the various forms of prayer, nothing can substitute for the will of God and, even more, for putting it into practice. The greater the knowledge, the greater the need for light. It may be a hagiographic *topos*, but St. Gregory will have sensed its truth. Moreover, such illumination, if it is granted, is not once and for all, but the quest for it is a lifelong task. In this sense, the novitiate does not end before death. Secondly, I would like to take St. Gregory’s vision as an

¹⁶⁸ Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 18, ed. Tsamis, 46–47, trans. Russell, 71–72.

encouragement for a broad education of novices, according to everyone's gifts, the needs of the respective communities, and the Church, just as it was in the case of St. Gregory. At the same time, I must keep this constantly under the heading of "enlighten my darkness" in order to discern the spirits within myself. Philotheos reports another, later vision of St. Gregory. A vessel full of milk in his hand started to flow over, the milk turning into excellent wine, which however was wasted. With reference to Jesus' parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30), Palamas is then told not to waste his gifts but to use them for the good of all, thus beginning to write, teach, and subsequently engage in the theological debates of his time.¹⁶⁹ The theologians and spiritual directors, monks and fellow Christians, which we need today, should know not only their subject matters, but also their own darkness. If their confidence in God's help is part of their life, then it is also an important part of the message itself. Thirdly, there is the Theotokos as a peculiar "novice master." She was willing to receive God Himself within her. In her, God became incarnate. From her, He comes to the world. Every Christian is called to be God's temple (1 Cor 3:16, 6:19). I consider this an important part of our monastic spirituality which we must also convey to all that come to us, not least to the novices.

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¹⁶⁹ Kokkinos, *v.G.Pal.* 35-36, ed. Tsamis, 66-68, trans. Russell, 90-92.

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