

THE FRUITFUL SERENITY OF INDULGENCE

Just as the times, the places, and the nature of people, so will be the stature of priesthood, the severity of monkhood and the preaching style. The temperament, culture, and charisma of the priest will inevitably be influenced by the traditions, history, geography, and mentalities of the respective community. The sermon is conceived and carried out in a certain way in a mountain village, among shepherds, hunters, gardeners, or beekeepers, and in different way in a port, on a ship, in the desert, on the battlefield, or in a fishing village. One can capture the attention, respect, and obedience of winegrowers in one way, and in a completely different way, one can win over the islanders, prisoners, soldiers, students or farmers, just as the urban hallmark requires different energies and rhetorical tactics compared to the rural universe etc.

Coming back to our subject, the Transylvanian hills involve a different stature, with a different ethos expression than that imposed by the Dobrogean South, the North of Bukovina, the outskirts of Bucharest, the allogeny from Banat, the one from Constanta etc. Furthermore, when

the experience of the priest (abbot, preacher) is rich, having passed through various, even antipodean environments, the scope of his convictions and the core of his pleas beneficially increase the penetration force of the message.

I had the joy of writing a few introductory pages to *Amvon*, the first volume of “sermons on Sundays over the year” delivered by Father Archimandrite Dumitru Cobzaru, published in 2016 by Renașterea Publishing House. (In 2017 the second volume appeared as well, foreworded by Rev. Iustin Tira). I am honoured to be able to pair them now, with this quick wanderer through the forest of wise counsels, fresh spiritual feelings and attached indulgence that you have just entered.

Before anything else, I will allow myself an indirect detour, revealing the captivating force of Father Archimandrite Dumitru Cobzaru.

In March 2016, I had an emotional encounter meant to unsettlingly recalibrate my perspective on his highness. It was about the launching of *Amvon* at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Cluj. There, a few steps from the tomb of His Eminence Bartolomeu Anania, I found myself in front of dozens of illuminated faces, most of them spiritual sons of father Cobzaru, of dizzying diversity. Octogenarian peasants, with wise, silent, meaningful looks. Towering men from public administration, lawyers, engineers, financiers, doctors, entrepreneurs, teachers, officers, with figures touched by that responsible sternness that irrevocably marks the allure of decision-

making personalities. Teenagers tenderly frowned by the reading of the holy books and the fervor of that particular moment, of cultural soberness and spiritual communion. Successful ladies, with princely stature, politely looking, but obviously used to triumph in any environment, alongside with humble women, to whom kneeling at icons has long since become second nature to them. Elderly clerics, nobly burdened by the decency and needs of existence. Tall young theologians, prematurely hardened by the rigors of fasting. Rigorous academics, playful students, silent monks who wanted to be invisible, university professors proud of the encyclopaedic traditions of the city, cultural journalists slightly embarrassed by the religious framework of the event... As well as a promising number of preschool children, specifically brought by their parents to demonstrate to the Father that they follow his advice of not leaving the church exclusively for the use of the grandparents. And among all these, the author's family – mother, sister, brothers, nephews, brothers-in-law– that is, the very axial dimension of the speaker.

Moldavian by origin (thus affectionate, nostalgic, slow in nature and speech, although fierce in action), father Dumitru Cobzaru allowed himself to be fervently adopted and polished politically by the rigors, historical specificity and ethno-religious particularities of the Transylvanian land. In addition, he was blessed with the good fortune of being subtly prepared diplomatically, but also

tremendously church-wise energized, by the “Lion of Transylvania”, His Eminence Bartolomeu Anania. This energetic contact determined his builder allure, strengthened his skilled leader qualities, sealed the resistance structure of a personality generously gifted to tame antinomies serving symbioses, coagulating divergences to make them work in mutual stimulation.

Well, coming back: at the moment when we felt all those looks focused on us in effervescent expectation, we had the proof and, at the same time, the dimension of the Priest power. And I glimpsed something of the greatness of the pulpit. Something very different from what usually represents the authority of the chair, the purpose of the tribune, the rostrum, the presidium etc.

The religious foreboding, the mystical trembling, the hopeful tension and the trusting dedication inexorably chain the person of the speaker, but exactly to the extent that it animates and wings him. Lazily gazing at that crowd of parishioners, I was touched not so much by the responsibility of the preacher, but by the condition of the priest, about which the present book also fully testifies.

The ability to adapt to the infinity of psychologies, virtues and vices, to the specific temperaments, to the age, social, mental and professional condition of those who come to confession. Invariably and irrepressibly, you burden yourself with everyone’s confession, with the more or less disgraceful facts of the dozens, hundreds, countless confessed people, without ever being able to

quantify how much and to what extent your consciousness was attacked, your privacy was assaulted, your mind was filled and your being was disturbed by the terror of the rivers of temptations, sins and wanderings poured into your hearing.

Thank God, father Cobzaru's nature has enough restraint and enough judgement to encompass, select values and understand everything that is presented to him, imposed or submitted. Whether it is about the special burial conditions and memorial services for suicides, the possibility of changing the priest, the fact that monasticism can bring out the best, but also the worst in a person, the waves of social depression, the limits of mourning, the behaviour towards unbelievers, the sadness of conversion, the excesses of flattery, or the nature of sin as suffering for both body and soul; whether alcoholism, adultery, divorce, abortion, adoptions, heresy, sectarianism, fanaticism, neo-Protestant temptations, or the ugly mistake of some abbots of sending their monks to beg; regardless of the subject, the priest discerns in a balanced way, opts wisely, pierces with gentleness, exhorts with justice and, at the limit, firmly severs.

With pleasant humility, Father Archimandrite Dumitru Cobzaru declared himself a long time ago (and he modestly reiterates his status whenever he has the opportunity) a practitioner opposed to dogmatics (this is "too Mathematical to express God"), a builder less acquainted with the art of writing, but more a man of the land and

a better administrator than a wandering captive through the labyrinths of theological disputes. It goes without saying that, under rigor, he can also deal steadfastly with theorizing arcana, doxological polemics, ecumenical subtleties, inter-ecclesiastical divergences etc. But the nine years of proud austerity at Nicula Monastery definitively imprinted their ultra-constructive extent in the soul, stature and biography of his reign.

This is how he notes with playful indulgence how, at Vatopedi, the monks are offered, under certain circumstances, the joy of a bar of chocolate; he is annoyed when he hears that a priest refused the memorial service for a woman who died after an abortion; he honestly declares that the priest can also give up an excessively risky parishioner (for various reasons); he vehemently opposes fasting on Saturdays and Sundays (when there is a descent), or he accepts that it is not obligatory for the bride and groom to be virgins (but there should not be any fornication), as he does not fail to emphasize the danger of the priest's exaggerated closeness (empathy) to the his spiritual sons. Likewise, if many are surprised and excited by the plea for face-to-face confession, others will be embarrassed by the opposition to cohabitation and "trial" marriages, while not a few wives will oppose the idea of married life "martyrdom" (mainly for maternal reasons) instead of divorce...

Briefly, if we often encounter a serenity comprehensive-indulgent, we never fall into laxity, relativism, excessive

permissiveness. In addition, not only once is the author's well-advised wisdom well, i.e. piquantly doubled by the playful instinct, which spices up the reading as much as possible. How can one not smile or become ironic when, during confession, the future husband eloquently affirms that he has never sinned with the future bride, while she (the woman, well, more God-fearing) humbly confesses that, yes, she has broken the covenant!

A reading as substantial, multi-directional and challenging as thrilling and refreshing. The pedagogical grace, the long experience in working with human nature and frequenting glaringly different social environments - along with the dizzying variety of questions and the sincerity and frankness of the answers - make the answers contained here as many proving mirrors of our faces.

✍ Dan C. Mihăilescu