

Towards a model of ‘ecumenical asceticism’ in Sophrony Sakharov and Basil Pennington

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Keywords

Sophrony Sakharov, Basil Pennington, asceticism, ecumenism, inner transformation

Abstract

In the contemporary complex ecosystem of Christian spirituality and asceticism one can easily identify common patterns in the theology of two spiritual fathers and directors, Fr. Sophrony Sakharov (Archimandrite, Eastern Orthodox, 1896 – 1993) and Dom. Basil Pennington (OCSO, Roman Catholic, 1931 – 2005). Both authors elaborated influential models of asceticism and spiritual life for the Christian West, while exploring and adapting the Eastern Byzantine liturgical and ascetical tradition. I examine in this paper whether their writings suggest a stable model of ‘ecumenical asceticism’, by analyzing three common concepts of their theological thought: extended vision of the world (monastic asceticism and lay asceticism), inner transformation (Jesus Prayer and Centering Prayer), and typologies of ascetic progress (vertical ladder and horizontal ladder). The model they propose is an expanded asceticism, which is not an exclusive privilege of athletes of contemplation, but it is an inclusive form of preparation for the works of grace, accessible to every single person. Thus, it is characterized by a deep consciousness of universality and centered on the inherent and ontological unity of humankind. This approach puts asceticism (as a process of inner transformation) at the foundation of the inter-confessional dialogue and explores practical examples of continuous learning and exchanging between Eastern and Western Christian traditions.

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