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St. John Cassian and the orthodox teaching of the divine grace

St. John Cassian the Roman and some aspects of the historical age he lived

St. John Cassian is born around 355–357 in the roman province Scythia Minor – Dobroudja, on the territory of contemporary Romania¹. He is named Cassian – a sobriquet given to him by ancient annalists (St. Gregory from Ture, Cassiodor) in connection with his native place². In the East he is well-known as “Roman”, because of the Latin language in which his works were written. As a member of an ancient Christian family from Latin Dobroudja, St John Cassian the Roman obtains the typical for his time classical education. In the year of 380 he goes to Palestine and lives in one of the monasteries of Bethlehem, where he probably becomes a monk. He lives approximately 10 years in the Egyptian desert, where he get acquainted with the ascetical tradition of the East and communes with many well-known anchorites and ascetics as Moses and Pafnutius. There St John Cassian writes his “Conferences with the Egyptian ascetics”. At the end of the 4th century in Egypt the notorious persecutions of the origenists and anthropomorphists brake forth. They cause a hard commotion among the dwellers of the Egyptian desert and that’s why St. John Cassian leaves Egypt in 399. He goes to Constantinople, where he is attracted by the never fading fame of St. John Chrysostom. He becomes one of his closest trusted men and even is ordained by Chrysostom as a deacon. He experiences the persecutions against the great shepherd on behalf of the

1 Coll. Gennady from Marseille, *For the notable men* 61; Quasten, I. *Patrologia*, vol. 3, “Patri latini”, Assisi, 1992, 486.

2 In the Scythia Minor there is an area, belonging to the generation of “The Cassians” with inscriptions from II–III ages, See Marcov, G. “Сотериология преп. Иоанна Кассиана Римлянина”, *Messenger de l’Exarchat*, 101, Paris 1979, 161.

Alexandrian archbishop Theophilus and empress Eudoxia. In 404 he is sent to Rome as a head of a delegation, representing the church clergy of Constantinople, with a plea for cooperation and help on the part of pope Inocent on the occasion of the persecution against St John Chrysostom. There, in Rome, a cordial friendship between St. John Cassian and Archdeacon Leo – the future pope of Rome, begins. St. John Cassian the Roman never comes back to Constantinople, because of the persecution against the followers of St. John Chrysostom. He sets off for Gaul (contemporary France). In 415 he settles down in Marseille, where he establishes two coenobian monasteries – one for men and one for women. In Marseille St. John Cassian writes “The Institutes for the coenobia”. He finishes his first work “Conferences” and at archdeacon Leo’s request he exposes the orthodox teaching of the Incarnation of the Logos, in 7 books, against Nestorius.

St. John Cassian the Roman lives in an epoch of a great importance for the life and development of the Christian Church. There are many remarkable personalities in this historical background – St. John Chrysostom, St. Leo the Great, St. Ambrose of Milan, St. Augustine of Hippo³, St. Gregory the Theologian... In 356 reposes St. Antony the Great. In 380 the emperor Theodosius the Great proclaims the Christianity as an official religion in the Roman Empire. Gradually the whole Empire becomes Christian, but at the same time the moral life of many Christians get worse. The Church begins to get secularized. In response of that process the monasticism appears. Indeed, in certain periods of its history, the monasticism falls under the influence of some ideas from the teachings of Plato and Origen, but its positive role in the life of the Church is more important. St. Basil the Great has very essential contribution for the monasticism, because he succeeds to keep it into the Church, by giving its rules, regulating its life and status. In certain extent, St. John Cassian’s role and contribution for the West are analogous. He introduces the tradition and the practice of the East to the Western monasticism⁴. The founder of the western monasticism – St. Benedict of Nursia recommends in his Rules to

3 Bulgarian theological science adopted the notion “blessed” for Augustine, as though he has a lesser significance for the orthodox theology and as if he is not a saint. Unlike the roman-catholic agheology, the orthodox one does not know the category “blessed” and when despite that uses it, its meaning is not like that one in the Roman-Catholicism. Augustine is canonized by the Roman Catholic Church as late as 1295. That’s why probably he remained as “blessed” in the orthodox theology. The Orthodox Church commemorates St. Augustine on 15th of June. In this article Augustine is called both “blessed” and “saint” as the Holy Fathers till 9th century called him.

4 St. Athanasios the Great was the first of the Eastern Fathers who introduced the ascetical tradition of the East to Rome, during one of his five exiles.

the monks to read every evening the works of St. John Cassian. That's why, firstly we can say in firm confidence that the contribution of St. John Cassian to the monastic tradition of the West is very tangible during one of the most important periods of the Church history. Secondly, his dogmatic works are written wholly on the basis of his personal experience, as his spiritual works. When we read Cassian's works we can see clearly, that St. John makes one authentic theology on the basis of his personal experience, he lives his theology, he never writes something that he wasn't experienced or wasn't "saw". To his dogmatic works pertains also the famous 13th Cassian's conference "On God's protection", where his teaching about the grace is revealed. In his work "On the Incarnation of Lord, against Nestorius", St. John Cassian exposes the orthodox teaching about Lord Jesus Christ. Thank to this work, the West immediately responds to the heresy of Nestorius and condemns it on a council. More than that, it helps for the formation of the theological views of Pope Leo the Great and for the composition of his Tome, that lies down in the fundament of Chalcedonian dogma in 451, concerning the relation between the two natures in Lord Jesus Christ.

St. John Cassian dies around 435 in Marseille and immediately after that his veneration as saint begins both in the East and the West. Unfortunately, later on the accusations in semi-pelagianism restricts his veneration in the West only in Marseille, where annually the citizens of the town celebrate the memory of their patron and saint on 23 of July. The Orthodox Church commemorates him on 29th of February or on 28th of February, when it is not in a leap-year.

The teaching on the grace and the 13th Cassian's lecture

In his spiritual teaching St. John Cassian the Roman in certain degree is influenced by Origen and Evagrius, but in the teaching about the grace, he is mainly a disciple of St. John Chrysostom⁵.

5 C. Tibiletti maintains, that St. John Cassian exposes the teaching on grace under the influence of St. Gregory of Nissa – see Tibiletti, C. "Giovanni Cassiano. Formazione e dottrina", *Augustianum* 1977, 15, 371. We can rather say that St. John Cassian exposes his personal spiritual experience, which is in direct connection with the ancient monastic and ascetic tradition of the Egyptian desert fathers – it is not by chance that St. John Cassian insists firmly on the role of the human freewill in the act of the man's salvation. In comparison with the rest Eastern fathers he really underlines the meaning of the human will, putting it on the same level with the Divine one. In 13th conference he writes that sometimes the human will anticipate the Divine (Conf. 13, 12). And namely because of that he is considered as a semi-pelagianist in the West. But on the other hand, St. John Chrysostom also speaks about the synergy between the human will and the Divine will in the act of salvation – this is the teaching of the Orthodox Church about the grace ac-

In the 13th conference St. John Cassian reveals the orthodox teaching of grace and at the same time indicates the mistakes of Pelagius and St. Augustine.

According to Pelagius, Adam is created as mortal. His mortality and the corruption of the human nature are not a consequence of the sin. The original sin doesn't bring to an inherited corruption of the human kind, because the death is a natural necessity. There is no inherited guilt or corruption by reason of sin and that's why the human nature is not good, nor yet evil. When a person commits evil, it is a misuse of the freewill. As a consequence of the denial of the inheritance of the original sin in the human kind and its influence over the human nature, Pelagius thinks that the man is able to deserve holiness and grace by his own and unassisted. According to his teaching, the moral life of the man is autonomous and he is capable by his own to attain salvation and the Kingdom of God. Denying the consequences of the original sin to Adam's descendants, Pelagius at some degree denies the Redemption of the human kind accomplished by Lord Jesus Christ. In his view, the man can, if he wants, even not to commit sin. He is free to determine himself to the good or to the evil. About the baptism of children Pelagius thinks as it follows: since there is no inherited sin and the human nature is good, then the children should not be baptized, because the personal sin appears after some age, when the person could incline to a commitment of sin by the freewill⁶. On the Third ecumenical council in 431, in Efes, the Pelagius' teaching is condemned as a heresy, as the teaching of Nestorius.

St. Augustine forms his teaching about the sin, freedom and grace in the dispute with Pelagius. Like him, St. Augustine also makes some wrong conclusions. According to his view, Adam is created immortal, but the original sin made him mortal and damaged the spiritual nature of the whole mankind. The sin of the first men is inherited evil, that transfers to the humankind and its consequences are the death, corruption, the lost of freedom, which man

cording to the tradition of the Eastern Fathers as St. Macarius of Egypt, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Ephraim of Syria, St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory of Nissa, St. John Chrysostom, St. John Damascene. See Μπαλάνου, Δ. *Είναι κακοδόξος η περή χάριτος διδασκαλία του Ιω. Κασσιανου*, Επιστημονική Επετηρίς 1935–1936, 63–69. That's why the late fr. Ioannis Romanidis has the right in some degree to say with a touch of bitterness that the western scholars always perceive "a hidden pelagianism" in the teaching on salvation of the Eastern fathers. See Ρωμανίδη, Ι. *Το προπατορικόν αμάρτιμα*, Θεσσαλονίκη 1970, 27–30. The synergy between the human will and the Divine will is fulfilling in completeness only after the baptism of the man.

6 See Plinval, G. "Pelagio e il pelagianesimo", in: *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, IX, 1075; Giovanni Cassiano, *Conferenze ai monaci, a cura di Dattrino*, L. Roma, 2000, 32. (in Introduzione); Мейндорф, Ы. *Введение в святоотеческое догматическое слово*, Нью-Йорк, 1982, 237.

had in paradise. Thus he fell in such strange condition of weakness of will, when it cannot feel a desire to the good, but it doesn't wish it because it doesn't want it⁷. As a result of the first man's sin, all people became bearers of the sin and the whole humankind – a mass of perditions (“*massa perditionis*”)⁸. The human nature changed in such manner, that within it even a single drop of good did not remain. If yet a person makes good deeds, it is a fruit only of the grace, which acts in the man, because Christ redeemed all from the power of devil, sin and death. Only by himself, by his own free will, the man cannot do anything good, because the sin is not in the will, but in the human nature itself. Thus, if some are saved, despite the entire corruption of the humankind and human nature, they are those, who God predestinated for salvation and chose from the world.

St. Augustine said: “Those are chosen, who are called by His will and who are predestinated and foreknown by Him. The chosen ones are chosen by grace, not according their merits, because every merit is given by grace”⁹.

This teaching of St. Augustine about the grace and the salvation is adopted later by the Protestantism, which goes too much further with the teaching of predestination (*praedestinationismus*), which also is deeply rooted in the theological reflections of Augustine.

St. Augustine forms his teaching about the grace and freedom mainly on his own personal experience. In his “Confessions” (the best and most famous Augustine's work) he describes his life before and after his baptism in Christ. So his assertion that the salvation of man is an act exclusively of the grace of God is entirely sincere and experienced by him with a great faith and trust in God. But this is not the exact teaching of the Bible, the Holy Fathers and the Church.

Pelagius and St. Augustine have a dispute on the grace and the freedom of the will. They are on controversial positions. It is interesting, that the Byzantine fathers avoid the extremities in the views of both of them, but despite all they are accused in semi-pelagianism. This is especially the case when we speak about St. John Cassian the Roman. In fact the definition “*semipelagianismus*” is attributed mainly to St. John Cassian in the end of 16th century and in the

7 See. Aurelius Augustine, *Confessions* 8, 9, 21, *Opere di Sant Agostino*, Le Confessioni, a cura della Cattedra Agostiniana, Direttore P. Agostino Trappe, O. S. S. A, Roma, 1991, 240.

8 See: *For the grace of Christ* 2, 34 PL 44, 402.

9 There, 2, 12–14. Quoted on Meyendorff, J. 239; In the critical edition of Fr. Augustino Trappe these thoughts are not exposed in the same manner as Fr. Meyendorff interprets them, as well as many of the contemporary orthodox theologians.

beginning of 17th century in the heat of the debate between protestant and roman-catholic theologians about the teaching of justification and salvation, the grace and the freedom¹⁰. The orthodox teaching about the grace, which St. John Cassian preaches, seems strange and foreign even to his western contemporaries. Prosper of Aquitaine, a disciple and follower of St. Augustine, is the first who points out “the mistakes” of St. John Cassian. The fundamental “mistake” of Cassian’s teaching is that he doesn’t lapse into the extremities of Augustine and because St. John Cassian very profoundly disproves both Pelagius and Nestorius, the defenders of the Augustine’s teaching about “predestination” call the Cassian’s followers “Marseillers” and in the age of scholasticism they call them openly “semi-pelagianists”. While St. John is alive, his teaching is considered as correct by many authoritative theologians in the West as St. Vincent of Lerins, Gennadius of Marseille, St. Faust from Reims (in Provence, France)¹¹, St. Hilarius of Arles. At the Council of Arles in 475, the teaching of St. John about the grace is acknowledged as correct. The dispute between the followers of St. John Cassian in the West and those of St. Augustine continues afterwards and at the council of Orange in 529 St. John’s teaching is condemned as incorrect¹². This attitude to St. John Cassian’s teaching continues till today, despite that very famous roman-catholic scholars and researchers prove the groundlessness of the accusations against St. John, indicating that his teaching about the grace is more close to that of St. Augustine, than to Pelagius¹³.

In order to moderate the “heretical” teaching of St. John Cassian about the grace, the famous scholar and publisher of texts of the Holy Fathers A. Gazet adds to the 13th Cassian’s conference one supplemental chapter (19), which is a periphrasis of Dionysius from Certosino, written in 1450, with the

10 See. Καλαγηρου, I. *Η χάρις τόν ιερών Αυγουστίνον*, Γριγόριος Παλαμάς 64, 1980, 293. In Dictionary of the catholic theology E. Amann writes that the notion “Semipelagiens” enters the theological science in 16th century for a designation of St. John’s mistake, known as “the mistake of the Marseilles”, but this name is never met in the ancient Christian literature. See Amann, E. Semipelagiens, in: *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique*, t.14, 1796, Paris 1947.

11 Prof. Iliya Tsonevsky in his “Patrology” obviously makes a mistake under the influence of the protestant and roman-catholic researches. He firstly writes that Faust is one of the most notable representatives of the semi-pelagianism, but after that he mentions that Faust struggled against the arianism, macedonianism and pelagianism.

12 See Marcov, G., 182. The Council in Orange points the danger of the predestination in the teaching of St. Augustine, but also rejected the St. John’s teaching, where the will of man is equal to the Divine in the act of the salvation.

13 See Chadwick, O. *John Cassian, A study in primitive monasticism*, Cambridge 1950, 127; Cristiani, L. *Jean Cassien, La spiritualite du desert*, Abbaye de S. Wantrille 1946, 238; Tibiletti, C. op. cit. 378.

idea to make the St. John's teaching more acceptable to the roman-catholic doctrine¹⁴.

The differences between the teachings about the grace of St. Augustine, Pelagius and St. John Cassian are due to the dissimilar interpretation and understanding of the sin. According St. Augustine, the original sin leads to a losing of the image of God in the man and his free will. Therefore, the sin is not in the will, but in the nature of man. Thus, the children are born in sin and they need a baptism not because personal sins, but because of the original sin. St. Augustine replaces the freewill and the ability of the man to determine towards the good or the image of God, which is lost, with "preliminary grace". The Pelagians ignore the grace at the expense of the freedom and they teach that the man can attain a spiritual advance only through faith and personal pursuit to perfection. Both Augustine and Pelagius separate the grace in several kinds, while to St. John Cassian and all eastern fathers there is only one grace. In the teaching of St. John about the grace Prosper Aquitan¹⁵ and the rest of the followers of Augustine see something very disturbing. Namely, this is the St. John's view about the synergy and the interaction between God's grace and human's freedom in the salvation of man. This teaching about the synergy is the difference between St. John and both Augustine and Pelagius. In fact, this is the orthodox teaching about the grace and the freewill and St. John becomes a good exponent of it. He writes: "In the act of salvation both the Grace of God and our freewill participate. Sometimes for the man is possible to desire the virtues by his own, but for their realization there is always a need of the God's help"¹⁶. St. John Cassian explains that the grace of God and the human will sometimes appeared to us as opposite, but in fact they act in accordance and they are equally necessary for our salvation. When God see that we wish to endeavor the good, then He directs our will- ingness. But if we do not strive to the good and do not wish it, because of our coldness toward it, then He gives us saving advices by which He creates or renews the good will in us¹⁷.

14 See Quasten, J. op. cit. 490.

15 In defense of his teacher Augustine, Prosper Acquitian writes a work against St. John Cassian and tries to prove that in his writings the teaching on grace is wrong. See Prosper Acquitian, *On the Divine grace*, PL 51, 213–276.

16 See Conf. 13, 9 SC 54, 160, Преподобный Йоанн Кассиан Римлянин, *Писания, Свято-Троицкая Сергиева Лавра*, 1993, 408.

17 See Conf. 13, 11 SC 54, 162, p. пр. 410.

Through many biblical examples St. John Cassian illustrates that the man with his free will cooperates with the grace of God in the act of salvation¹⁸. God gives to every man a desire and ability to make good¹⁹. The grace guides the man toward the good, but also requires efforts from him: “And so the manifold wisdom of God grants with manifold and inscrutable kindness salvation to men; and imparts to each one according to his capacity the grace of His bounty, so that He wills to grant His healing not according to the uniform power of His Majesty but according to the measure of the faith in which He finds each one”²⁰. According to St. John Cassian, our little efforts are generously awarded by the Divine Grace with immortality and endless bliss. St. John Cassian very delicately points the mistake of St. Augustine about the predestination: “For the purpose of God whereby He made man not to perish but to live forever, stands immovable. And when His goodness sees in us even the very smallest spark of good will shining forth, which He Himself has struck as it were out of the hard flints of our hearts, He fans and fosters it and nurses it with His breath, as He “willeth all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”²¹. St. John uses wholly biblical examples to prove that God does not want anyone to perish and that it is blasphemy to think that He desires the salvation of a few chosen only, but not of all. Those who perish, St. John says, they perish against the will of God, Who wants the salvation of all. St. John Cassian explains that the Divine grace calls to salvation all people without exception, because if it would call only a few chosen, then it would mean that not all are infected with infection of the original sin. But St. Paul said that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans. 3: 23)²². With this affirmation St. John illustrates his faith that without the Divine grace the salvation of the man is impossible. God is not only a reason for our good deeds, but also for our good desires. In every person He stimulates a desire to the good, but in such manner that the man by his freewill has an opportunity to desire towards the opposite, not only to the good. So, God is a cause of our freedom. He doesn’t force us, but gives us an opportunity of choice – the grace of God helps us in the exercising of the virtues, without excluding of the freewill²³.

18 See Conf. 13, 12 SC 54, 165–167.

19 There.

20 See Conf. 13, 15 SC 54, 175, p. pp. 417.

21 See Conf. 13, 7 SC 54, 155, p. pp. 406.

22 Conf. 13, 7 SC 54, 157.

23 See Conf. 13, 18 SC 54, 181.

God is the reason of the growth of the faith and the Divine grace conforms the dignity of everyone, so that the salvation is not only in our faith. St. John writes: “We plainly assert our unconditional opinion that the grace of God sometimes overflows the narrow limits of the faith itself”²⁴. God is a cause not only of the deeds, but also of thoughts. He gives birth to the virtues in us and completes them and we must obey with humility to the grace²⁵. In the human heart God arouses a desire for cooperation, for synergy in the act of the salvation. “It cannot then be doubted that there are by nature some seeds of goodness in every soul implanted by the kindness of the Creator: but unless these are quickened by the assistance of God, they will not be able to attain to an increase of perfection, but the freewill of man always have to accept or reject these acts of the grace... The Divine grace prevents the will of man, for it is said: “My God will prevent me with His mercy” (Ps. 58:11) and again when God waits and for our good delays, that He may put our desires to the test, our will precedes, for it is said: “And in the morning my prayer shall prevent Thee” (Ps. 87:13)²⁶. It is hardly to believe that such splendid connoisseur of the Scripture like St. Augustine did not know these biblical texts. But when St. John Cassian quotes them, it is obvious that he writes wholly on the basis of his personal experience. It could be said that the dispute between Cassian and Augustine (represented by Prosper Aquitan) in fact is a dispute about the grace on the basis of the experience of the communion with God. It is a collision of two practices, of two different traditions in the knowledge of God. In the commentary of the notorious word of St. Paul in 1st Cor. 13:10, St. John Cassian says: “And therefore the aforesaid teacher of the Gentiles, though he bears his witness that he had obtained the grade of the Apostolate by the grace of God, saying: “By the grace of God I am what I am”, yet also declares that he himself had corresponded to Divine Grace, where he says: “And His Grace in me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: and yet not I, but the Grace of God with me”. For when he says: “I labored,” he shows the effort of his own will; when he says: “yet not I, but the grace of God,” he points out the value of Divine protection; when he says: “with me,” he affirms that it cooperates with him when he was not idle or careless, but working and making an effort”²⁷.

Of course, St. John Cassian speaks a lot also about the human deeds and freewill in the act of salvation, but as a whole he teaches that they are a fruit of

24 See Conf. 13, 16 SC 54, 176, p. pp. 417.

25 See Conf. 13, 3, SC 54, 150.

26 See Conf. 13, 12 SC 54, 167, p. pp. 412.

27 See Conf. 13, 13 SC 54, 169–170, p. pp. 414.

the synergy between God and man. The same is the teaching of many Eastern Church fathers²⁸.

28 In almost the same form St. John Cassian's teaching about the grace could be found in the writings of: St. Macarius of Egypt, *Lect.* 20, 3–6 PG 34, 652–653; 37, 10 PG 34, 757a; St. Gregory of Nissa, *The Great Catechism* 5 PG 45, 21; PG 45, 76–77; St. John Chrysostom, *Comment. On Romans* 11, 1 PG 60, 483; 8 PG 60, 477; 14, 6–16, 9 PG 60, 533–561; *Comment. On Ephes.* 1, 2 PG 62, 13; St. Isidor of Pella, *Lett.* 2, 159–280 PG 78, 178; St. John Damascene, *The exact expos.* 87 PG 94, 1137.

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Свети Јован Касијан и православно учење о дожанској благодати

Студија представља анализу учења светог Јована Касијана о благодати, које је формирано на основу утицаја дела многих теолога и отаца источног и западног дела Цркве. Аутор истражује критички приступ светог Јована делима Пелагија и Августина, особито у контексту Касијанове 13. поуке, са акцентом на питањима слободе, првородног греха и његових последица по човека и људску природу. Својим закључцима аутор упућује на даље истраживање сотириолошких последица богословских поставки поменутих отаца и учитеља Цркве.