



"Let Go of the World": Exploring the Role of Suffering in Hesychastic Spirituality Among Orthodox Hermits

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Abstract. This study explores the role of suffering in Orthodox Christian monasticism and the concept of self-transcendence (ST) as a coping mechanism. While ST is recognised in psychology for fostering resilience and meaning making, its significance in Eastern Christian asceticism has not been extensively studied. Using semi-structured interviews with monks from Mount Athos conducted in April 2024, and applying interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the research investigates how different experiences of suffering—categorised into the suffering of the body and the suffering of the mind—serve as catalysts for spiritual growth and coping strategies. The monastic path is viewed as a threefold journey consisting of phases of calling, transition, and perfection. The study examines the correlation between various traumatic experiences within all three phases in a monastic context, interpreted in a spiritual framework and through the lens of modern psychological theories. Comparisons with ST models proposed by Frankl, Reed, and Maslow indicate a convergence between spiritual discipline and psychological development. The study provides new insights into religious coping, identity reconstruction, and personal growth during significant life transitions.

Keywords. Self-transcendence, Orthodox Christian Monasticism, Religious Coping, Spiritual Transformation, Voluntary Suffering, Meaning Making.

1. Introduction

Self-transcendence (ST), as described by Viktor Frankl and later scholars, is a defining feature of spirituality and a key dimension of human fulfilment (Frankl, 1966; Koltko-Rivera, 2006; Wong, 2015). It involves seeking meaning beyond self-interest, often through embracing suffering and engaging in existential struggle. This universal human aspiration persists across socio-cultural and religious contexts, despite creating an inherent tension within human nature. While ST has been widely examined in psychological literature as a factor in resilience, meaning-making, and advanced human development (Worth & Smith, 2021; Park, 2017; Koltko-Rivera, 2006), its role within religious ascetic traditions, particularly Eastern Christianity, remains underexplored. Orthodox monasticism represents an extreme life shift, involving the breaking of old identities and social connections to pursue spiritual transformation through ascetic practices such as *hesychasm* (inner stillness and continuous prayer) and *self-kenosis* (self-emptying). This study argues that practices such as prayer, confession (*metanoia*), spiritual guidance, daily discipline, and

ascetical labour collectively cultivate both short- and long-term ST experiences, serving as vital emotional coping mechanisms in those settings. By examining how ST aids emotional coping with detachment in monastic life, this study bridges gaps in the relevant theological and psychological literature.

This article is a part of a broader investigation into how ST serves as a coping mechanism for Orthodox Christian monks. From the perspective of ST theory, the Orthodox monastic vocation can be understood as a deliberate and sustained effort to ascend to ST, achieved by overcoming personal weaknesses (passions) and cultivating strengths (virtues) in the context of significant ascetic challenges. In the Orthodox tradition, monastic life typically begins with relocation to the monastery, requiring a transition into a radically unfamiliar and often uncomfortable setting. This first phase of the new life is primarily dedicated to long hours of personal prayer, participation in church services, spiritual counselling, and the confession of past and present wrongdoings or mistakes¹ and aims to illuminate the monk's harmful behavioural and thought patterns.²

The path of self-transcendence in the Orthodox monastic tradition is often described using a traditional threefold framework: purification, illumination, and perfection (*theōsis*). However, monastic life is characterised as a dynamic process rather than a linear ascent, with the final stages of spiritual development being rarely fully achieved. The monastic hierarchy typically begins with the novitiate, the initial phase of monastic life, which ultimately leads to tonsure, where a monk takes either temporary or eternal vows, depending on the specific monastic tradition. This phase is a time of spiritual training, during which the monk begins to embrace eschatological views and prepares for the ascetic path (Makrides, 2002). In this context, detachment from family, worldly life, and former identities is reinterpreted as a new life on gospel principles, but in a more extreme and fuller expression.³ This radical reorientation serves as a coping mechanism, enabling individuals to navigate the meaning-making process within adversity. Leaving the monastery during the novitiate stage is possible, and temporary vows can be relinquished. However, after taking eternal vows, leaving the monastic life is highly undesirable, as it may have a profoundly negative spiritual impact. Ultimately, the monastic journey may culminate in attaining the rank of *schema* (*megaloschema* or *angelic schema*), the highest monastic rank, which symbolises complete dedication to spiritual life.

2. Hesychasm

Christian Orthodox monasticism, rooted in the hesychastic tradition, represents a spiritual path that aims to imitate Christ as fully as possible. Its ultimate goal is *theōsis*, or deification—a dynamic, lifelong process of profound inner transformation

¹ Referred to as *sins*, from the Greek word *amartia*, which literally means “to miss the target.”

² Referred to as *passions* in Orthodox tradition.

³ e.g. 2 Cor: 9-10: Known yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor yet making many rich; having nothing and yet possessing everything.

aimed at obtaining God’s likeness. *Theōsis* involves gradually reconfiguring human consciousness, reshaping thoughts, desires, perception, imagination, will, and actions through the continuous *synergy* (Greek: *synergia*) of divine grace and human effort (Miscovich, 2024). From the human side, spiritual progress depends, but is not limited to, various factors, including commitment to monastic discipline, past experiences, and personality traits. Spiritual transformation within Orthodox monasticism expects the achievement of *apatheia* (a state of passionlessness) and *hesychia* (a state of inner stillness). The term *hesychasm*, derived from the latter, is considered a foundational principle of Orthodox spirituality, setting high standards for the entire Orthodox tradition, although it was primarily developed within monastic settings.

The origins of hesychasm vary according to different sources, generally linked to the Desert Fathers, around the 4th century in Egypt and Palestine, or even earlier (Ware, 1995; Ware, 2022; Kleinhempel, 2022). For 17 centuries, the rich patristic corpus has produced a wealth of reports on mystical experience and practical manuals for hesychasts. This body of work remains integral to the Orthodox spiritual tradition and includes multiple significant texts. Among the most renowned are the [Philokalia](#), a compilation of writings by Eastern Christian mystics from the 4th to 14th century, and [The Way of a Pilgrim](#), more known to Western readers, which focuses on the practical application of the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner".

3. Participants and Materials

3.1. Participants

The study involved Orthodox monks from the monasteries and hermitages on Mount Athos, an isolated peninsula in Greece, where the ancient monastic practice of hesychasm has been practised as a living tradition from the 9th century. Mount Athos is a unique environment that hosts 20 monasteries and numerous hermitages, with over 2,000 monks. Interviews were conducted in both hermitage (anchoritic) and coenobitic monasteries; Coenobitic monks live in communal monasteries, while anchoritic monks reside in isolated hermitages. Furthermore, I decided to analyse the experiences of coenobitic and anchoritic monks separately due to the differences between these two traditions. This paper focuses mainly on hermitic monks.

3.2. Materials

The study uses a research diary, recording devices, interview notes, and transcription software (Notta.ai) due to its accuracy in transcribing spoken English for transcribing interviews. Additionally, literature, including books and recordings provided by the participants, was utilised for further thematic analysis.



Figure 1: Mount Athos (From author's personal collection)

4. Hesychast Brotherhood

The examined monastic brotherhood is a small, highly disciplined community “centred around the spiritual fire” of the Jesus Prayer. The community has about ten monks, several novices, and occasional visitors or workers. The leader of the community is “Abba”, a ninety-two-year-old elder. With about seventy years of hesychastic experience, many widely regard him as a modern living saint. Abba provides spiritual authority and maintains continuity with the patristic teaching of hermitic life and contemplative prayer. The daily life of the brotherhood revolves around an intensive prayer rhythm, with monks dedicating themselves to the Jesus Prayer between five and seven hours each day, depending on their rank and level of commitment. Monks who follow a lighter schedule have concentrated sessions of the Jesus Prayer from evening until late at night. The advanced practitioners pray their vigil at night; in times when it is most difficult to concentrate, they retire after 7:00 pm and wake up at 1:00 am to engage in three to four hours of uninterrupted prayer. At all other times, the Jesus Prayer should be continued in mind or whispered unceasingly, accompanying various activities.

The monks live in individual cells and gather for communal liturgical services twice a week, on weekdays and weekends. Participation in the sacraments of the Eucharist and Confession plays a crucial role in spiritual transformation, serving as a primary means of reaching the deification or *theōsis*—the ultimate goal of union with God (Russell, 2004; Torrance, 2013). The community's everyday life is modest. The cells are small and have minimal facilities. Besides a bed, each cell typically contains a small stove for boiling simple food and coffee, a chair, an iconostasis, and spiritual books. The hygiene facilities are also quite basic. Nutrition generally consists of one main meal and one evening tea daily.⁴ The monastic diet is typically vegan and includes vegetables, fruits, bread, olive oil, and olives, with some days featuring wine,

⁴ While the fasting regimen in the Orthodox monastery is strict, it is not stricter than in Buddhist monasteries.

fish, and other seafood. Meanwhile, milk, butter, cheese, eggs, and meat are prohibited.⁵ In addition to their prayer life, the brotherhood maintains the community's everyday operations. Brothers take on simple tasks (Desert Fathers, for example, besides prayer, were mainly occupied with making baskets), such as cooking, managing transportation, hosting guests, and offering spiritual guidance (both online and offline). When greeting each other, the brothers kiss one another's hands to express fraternal love and humility.



Figure 2: Frescoes in the church on Mount Athos (From author's personal collection)

5. Discussion

In this research, I intend to analyse the element of voluntary, intentional suffering as an integral aspect of hesychastic spirituality, distinguishing two primary dimensions: suffering of the body and suffering of the mind (see Figure 3). The suffering of the body plays a crucial role during the early stages of monastic life, serving as the preparatory phase of purification aimed at reducing bodily needs to a minimal level. Over time, this limitation becomes a habitual part of one's lifestyle. The suffering of the mind in the context of Orthodox monastic spirituality was not examined from a psychological lens. This study is one of the first attempts (see Gravier, 2018, for comparison) to understand how adverse mental experiences can promote spiritual growth. In the context of Hesychast spirituality, a self-transcendent orientation enables individuals to maintain well-being during adversity, transforming loss into an opportunity for spiritual growth and healing (Reed, 2010, p. 421).

⁵ This traditional Mediterranean diet, combined with fasting, is widely regarded as one of the most beneficial dietary models, associated with numerous health benefits. The study conducted in Vatopedi Monastery indicates an extended life expectancy and good health, with one notable issue being vitamin D deficiency, likely due to the constant wearing of the black robe (Karras et al., 2017).

Suffering of the Body	Suffering of the Mind	Coping
Reduced vegan food intake	Nostalgia/family separation	Jesus
Sleep deprivation	Identity/career/education/experience aspirations	Prayer/Contemplation/Sacramental life
Prostrations	Time/privacy/entertainment/pleasures limitations	Supportive isolated monastic environment/nature
Modest living/lack of comfort	Intensive mental temptations/ "Dark night of the soul"	Discipline & motivation
		Extended mental abilities: Synergia/Mind-Bishop/Self-Transcendence

Figure 3: Voluntary intentional suffering in the Christian Orthodox monastic context

6. Start of a Monastic Life

From the perspective of logotherapy and existential psychology, the monastic call often arises from what Frankl (1985) referred to as "noogenic neurosis" experience. It was shared that this existential frustration can appear to very "successful" individuals, as was the case with one of the brothers, who exclaimed: "Only a fool would leave the life I had!" (Fr. A, personal communication, April 4, 2024). Despite holding a prestigious, well-paying job, a good family, and achieving sports success, he felt "cursed" by an internal emptiness and frustration, as the search for meaning had not been fulfilled (Fr. A, personal communication, April 4, 2024; Frankl, 1985). Individuals who invest in their ego may eventually reach existential limits, causing them to turn towards seeking a deeper connection with higher causes and caring for others (Yalom, 1980). However, in contrast with the search for meaning in a non-religious context, the research confirms that the monastic path requires divine calling (*esoteriko kalesma*) (Paganopoulos, 2010).

Moreover, the study identifies other key factors that can initiate or solidify a monastic calling, including personal, existential, or spiritual crisis, guilt over past sins, contradictions between a new religious mentality and modern life, and a desire to intensify spiritual experiences. Mystical experiences, spiritual visions (e.g in dreams), physical illnesses followed by healing, influential spiritual texts and meeting with charismatic spiritual figures are among other potential catalysts of monastic life (Fr. A, personal communication, April 4, 2024).

Typically, a profound spiritual relief accompanies the initial stage of joining the monastery. One monk reported that he found the "best place in the world" and was afraid that all people would run to the monastery. However, this period of spiritual relief is limited and mixed with suffering. The novices undergo an accelerated transformation in new settings, a painful process that includes deep self-analysis and

detailed confessions—not only of actions but also of thoughts—three to four times a week, aimed at transforming the worldly behaviour and thought patterns to align with a new monastic worldview radically different from the modern secular way of life (Paganopoulos, 2010). On a physical level, this transformation is supported by intense physical labour and rigorous spiritual discipline. In Vatopedi (one of the biggest monasteries on Mount Athos), novices must work 5–6 hours a day, with only one or two meals. They wake up at 3 am for nighttime prayers, participate in 4–6 hours of communal prayer in the church (or engage in individual vigils), and practice concentrated Jesus Prayer, accompanied by hundreds of prostrations (Paganopoulos, 2010).

6.1. Suffering of the Body

Remarkably, the abstinence in monastic life involves much more than dietary restrictions. It is rather a holistic process "that involves sleep deprivation, constant prayer, the use of a rosary, and deep prostrations in solitude, all aimed at purifying the body and mind from spiritual and physical toxins" (Paganopoulos, 2010, p. 175). In this context, fasting is part of a broader process of purification that begins with transitioning from the "desert of modernity" to a monastery. When combined with prayer, confession, and Holy Communion, fasting becomes part of what Mauss (2006, pp. 77–95) referred to as "techniques of the body." These techniques contribute to the development of the "ascetic self", discussed by Foucault (2021) (Paganopoulos, 2010, p. 175). Additionally, maintaining a structured routine, with regulated schedules and repetitive daily activities, promotes better health, overall well-being, and both physical and moral improvements (Arlinghaus & Johnston, 2019; Brown, 2022; Ruggeri et al., 2023), similar to the benefits seen in sports (Lidor et al., 2014) or military training (Smith et al., 2022). However, despite similarities between the elements of monastic spirituality and sports and military, the overall effect is different due to the spiritual meaning in ascetic training, prompting a transformation not only on a physical and psychological level but also on an ontological level.

Compared to coenobitic (communal) monks, the lifestyle of hermits, or hermitic monks, requires exceptional self-motivation and discipline to maintain a regular daily schedule without external monitoring. One participant noted, "Nobody is controlling you, and only you are responsible for that" (Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024). While in communal monasteries, monks adhere to a strict timetable for everyone and are limited in their movements; hermitic monks, on the other hand, establish their own personal regime. Monks have no deadlines or financial rewards, nor are they subject to financial penalties for poor performance. Their daily struggle often involves overcoming tiredness and sleepiness, as well as thoughts about their past life and concerns for family and friends. Furthermore, the inability to measure tangible results of everyday transformative efforts of monastic activities can negatively affect motivation (Casey, 2020; Keplinger & Feldbauer-Durstmüller, 2023; Spiegel, 2020). Nevertheless, despite numerous obstacles, monks demonstrate an exceptional commitment to self-transformation techniques, unparalleled in secular contexts, dedicating almost the entire day to spiritual growth.

The key factor in maintaining motivation within the monastic life is the prayer routine, described as "fuel for the engine" (Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024). Without an active prayer life and a strict commitment to the monastery's or personal schedule, spiritual progress can be significantly hindered (Mancia, 2022). The rule of St. Basil the Great and similar monastic guidelines, foundational to hermitic monasticism, stress the importance of a continuous rhythm of prayer and work (*ora et labora*) in cultivating stability, humility, and attentiveness to God. Straying from this rhythm weakens the transformative process of ascetic life (Newman et al., 2023; Karl & Fischer, 2018). Additionally, the monastery environment, with its shared rituals, mutual accountability, and social isolation, plays a crucial role in sustaining motivation and fostering spiritual growth. This relational framework not only enhances obedience and perseverance but also fosters a sense of belonging and meaning, which are essential for coping with the challenges of an ascetic life (Paganopoulos, 2010).

Another essential element of physical asceticism is sleep deprivation. It can be realised mainly through early rising at 3:00 am (see Helms, 2004), or through segmented sleep patterns, where individuals get three to four hours of rest interrupted by nighttime prayer. In some cases, advanced hesychasts take even more extreme measures, such as sleeping while sitting or standing like St. Joseph the Hesychast,⁶ coping documented ascetical practices of the saints and elders. From the pure scientific point of view, sleep deprivation has multiple pathological effects, including memory loss, hallucinations, and overall health deterioration, which are often interpreted as symptoms of neurological dysfunction. There is a claim that divine visions might, in fact, be hallucinatory experiences during prolonged wakefulness. In contrast, monastic traditions view these experiences as both of spiritual origin and spiritually transformative. Self-mortification practices are understood as signs of intellectual cleansing and mental purification, drawing the ascetic closer to the divine (Farré-i-Barril, 2011).

6.2. Suffering of the Mind

The suffering of the mind in the context of monastic spirituality is not yet well studied, and its process and effect are more complex than physical deprivation. This form of voluntary suffering involves profound feelings of nostalgia, loneliness, and homesickness due to the life-long separation from home, family and previous social connections. Modern research on loneliness (e.g., Hawkey et al., 2009) reveals its strong connection to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Monastic nostalgia and homesickness also have parallels with migration studies and long-term isolation environments (e.g., astronauts and remote workers), where prolonged separation from familiar social networks and environments can lead to increased

⁶ St. Joseph the Hesychast (1897–1959) was an Athonite monk renowned for his extreme ascetic practices, including prolonged vigils, minimal sleep, and continuous prayer, which have had a profound influence on today's hesychastic spirituality (Groza, 2014).

stress, mood disturbances, and identity challenges (Hughlett et al., 2020). However, in contrast to migration and remote work experiences, monastic separation from the family is permanent and therefore may have more intensive adverse effects. One participant, for example, shared that he had a tremendous adverse experience, seeing his family members in dreams almost every night (Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024). Another participant noted that the temptations of nostalgia, especially during the beginning or transitional phase of the monastic journey, are so severe that many novices leave the community (Fr. B, personal communication, April 6, 2024).

Understanding how to link the overwhelming adverse effects of nostalgia and homesickness to spiritual growth from a psychological perspective remains a challenge. Biskas et al. (2022) found that nostalgia enhances spirituality through two mediators: self-continuity (the sense of connection between one's past and present selves) and life meaning. These elements help individuals transcend the material and connect with the sacred. Nostalgic memories that evoke a sense of loss often involve redemptive narratives, which reinterpret past painful experiences in a spiritually meaningful way. Nostalgia can also create tension that motivates individuals to act more decisively. Monks often intensify their prayer and fasting to overcome their nostalgia. For this reason, nostalgia acts as an instigator and catalyst for spiritual growth.

Also, the suffering of the mind includes feelings of alienation and frustration due to extreme life-changing conditions and unrealised plans and aspirations. Identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) considers that identity is maintained through role-related behaviours and social validation. With extreme life shifts, such as monastic admission, individuals experience identity dissonance, which can lead to psychological stress until a new identity framework stabilises. Role exit theory (Ebaugh, 1988) structures this trajectory as a 4-step process: it involves first experiencing doubts, then seeking alternatives, facing turning points, and ultimately creating an ex-role identity. Monastics often undergo similar phases, beginning with doubts about choosing the monastic path, searching for alternative options, which culminate in a new, sacred life, while considering their previous life as mistaken. This theme is extensively elaborated upon, for example, in two famous spiritual biographies: Augustine's *Confession* and Thomas Merton's⁷ *The Seven Storey Mountain*, where both authors recount their early lives as spiritually misguided before embracing a life of faith (Augustine, ca. 400/1997; Merton, 1948).

Also suffering of the mind includes the lack of privacy, limited leisure, entertainment and simple pleasures. Monks often live in shared dormitories and follow communal routines, thus constantly visible within the community. Monks are so busy that they often have little to no personal time. Monk's tonsure includes vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, rejecting material comforts and personal autonomy, which requires continuous self-scrutiny. From a psychological perspective, leisure pursuits are an effective tool for managing stress and emotional fatigue. The absence of leisure can hinder psychological flourishing, particularly in high-demand environments such as monasteries. The repetitive nature of monastic routines can

⁷ A famous spiritual thinker and Catholic monk, whose diary was published 25 years after his death, reveals with outstanding clarity and nuance the "naked" monastic spiritual life.

increase the sense of meaning, but it could also lead to cognitive dullness or emotional fatigue (Heintzelman & King, 2019).

This reflection is linked to the big theme of desire and pleasure in Orthodox spirituality and ascetism, which cannot be covered here. Shortly, in Orthodox anthropology, desire is not ultimately bad. For St. Maximus the Confessor, an influential Orthodox Church father and theologian from the 7th century, desire is a natural movement of the soul that can become disordered due to misuse. He identifies passions as inverted virtues that are "contrary to nature" but can be transformed through ascetic effort, seeing asceticism as a form of purification and reorientation of desire (Salés, 2025). Building on Maximus' theology, contemporary Orthodox scholar Fr. Nikolaos Loudovikos (2020) proposes the concept of "analogical identity"—a Christian selfhood formed through dialogical participation in Christ. Loudovikos emphasises that the ascetic suppression of worldly desires is not a rejection of natural human needs, but rather an advanced path to embodied fulfilment in Christ.

Besides issues, also common for all individuals but intensified within the monastery, monks often face intense temptations, which are traditionally viewed within the Orthodox tradition as demonic provocations aimed at inducing sin or persuading the monk to leave the monastery. This experience can be explained from the perspective of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual holds two conflicting beliefs. In our case, it is a commitment to monastic vows (obedience, chastity, poverty) and the relinquishment of desires and attachments from the former life (such as comfort, relationships, and autonomy). This internal conflict creates psychological discomfort, motivating the individual to resolve the dissonance by either reaffirming their new identity through intensified prayer, confession, and ascetic practices or abandoning their commitment and leaving the monastery.⁸ Although the precise number of novices and even monks who leave the monastery is not widely available, interviews suggest that a significant number of novices leave monastic life in the early stages, highlighting the intensity of these internal struggles.

Monastic life is a demanding, lifelong commitment that must be carried out individually and represents a high standard of responsibility, as was stated in the interview: "Nobody will do it for you; only you are responsible" (Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024). Indeed, such strict daily discipline required high motivation as it aimed at achieving God's likeness and inheriting eternal life. This pursuit becomes a motivation that enables monks to endure a high degree of suffering

⁸ Interestingly, similar mechanisms appear in addiction recovery programs. Early recovery stages often involve high relapse risk because individuals experience intense cravings (old habits) while trying to maintain sobriety (new identity). With some similarity to monks, recovering individuals employ cognitive and behavioural strategies—such as support groups, mindfulness, and ritual practices to resolve dissonance. Success depends on meaning-making frameworks: Orthodox monks interpret temptations as spiritual warfare, while recovery programs frame cravings as part of the healing process (White, 2007). It might be interpreted as both groups employ similar techniques: ritualised practices, prayer, and confession in monasticism; meetings and affirmations in addiction recovery, to reinforce the new identity and reduce cognitive dissonance.

in order to transform. However, ideally, monks should strive for spiritual perfection not because of fear of punishment and hell, nor to attain a place in heaven, but because of a deep, sincere love for God and all of His creation.

Modern theories of motivation may provide some insight into how motivation operates in monastic settings. The main idea of self-determination theory (SDT) is that three psychological needs—autonomy, relatedness, and competence — affect human motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In monastic life, autonomy is expressed through voluntary commitment to ascetic discipline. Relatedness is fulfilled through communal worship and spiritual brotherhood. Competence is developed through mastery of spiritual practices, where paradoxically, one of the indicators of spiritual progress is the feeling of the “worst sinner”. In contrast to non-religious contexts, where success is often linked to attractiveness, wealth, and other socially accepted standards, monastic “spiritual success” is linked to cultivating humility, often through the development of a negative self-image, as St. Joseph the Hesychast teaches: “People often need to step on you” (Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024).

However, cultivating humility, one of the main virtues for hesychastic spirituality, can be a painful process in the initial stages, often triggering ego-defensive mechanisms (Freud, 1936). According to respondents, true humility is a gift from God and could be attained through regular self-denial (Fr. A., personal communication, April 5, 2024). Therefore, Abba instructs his disciples to repeat the ‘strange exercise’ for the humility cultivation: ‘I am worse than anyone; I am the worst of all sinners. I am dust and ashes. I am scum and filth. I have known for a long time that I am proud, selfish, wicked, lazy, and a prodigal’ (Abba, participant observation, April 5, 2024). This practice is particularly important during moments of receiving compliments or criticism, as both can pose potential spiritual harm. This perspective seems odd to the modern cult of ego and the emphasis on self-esteem, within contemporary culture of acceleration and expansion (Rosa, 2018).

Moreover, monastic routine activities, such as chanting, prayer, and manual labour, when performed with a high concentration, might induce flow states where time seems to dissolve, and the monk feels united with the Divine (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Furthermore, according to Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, monastic life intentionally suppresses lower-level needs, such as comfort and pleasure, to focus on higher developmental levels of self-transcendence (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Asceticism redirects the energy typically spent on basic and material needs in traditional life toward higher spiritual goals. Similarly, Viktor Frankl’s logotherapy suggests that the primary human drive is not pleasure, as Freud proposed, or power, as Adler argued, but rather the pursuit of meaning (Frankl, 1985). This idea is clearly illustrated in the lives of monks, who aspire to the ultimate goal of deification by seeking to nullify their pleasures while avoiding any signs of power through extreme self-denial and humility. Ultimately, pursuing divine likeness and eternal life provides a rich framework of meaning that sustains motivation, even in the most extreme ascetic conditions and opens new fields for future studies.

6.3. Tonsure

The decision to be tonsured is typically made by an elder of the community. Once monastic vows are taken, there is no turning back; the previous life is irreversibly changed and replaced by a path which is usually discovered over a significant period but remains still unclear. This transformation often leads to new doubt, especially when suffering and painful experiences intensify, starkly contrasting with the expected peace and comfort. For this reason, Fr. A advises a young novice about to receive tonsure: "Think a thousand times before making such a decision, as there is no way back; it is a decision for life" (Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024).



Figure 4: Jesus Prayer, written in Greek (From author's personal collection)

During the tonsure ceremony, the Abbot prays for Divine support in the monk's journey toward "life after death" (*meta-thanaton zoe*), symbolising the death of the old "worldly self" (*kosmikos eautos*) (Paganopoulos, 2010, pp. 133-134).⁹ This ritual signifies the monk's spiritual rebirth, where the old self is considered dead, and the new self aspires to the afterlife (La Fontaine, 1982; Bloch & Parry, 1982). The tonsure ritual is viewed as a symbolic "suicide" of the worldly persona (Paganopoulos, 2010, p. 134). Monks often encapsulate this idea with the saying: "If you die before you die, you will not die when you die." Mantzaridis (1990) elaborates, "In monasteries, humans are not born; they only die. The life of the monasteries is a preparation for death. But preparing for death, just like death itself, is full of life" (p. 211).

Also, sacramentally in tonsure, similar to baptism, all sins are forgiven. Consequently, monastic tonsure often brings immense relief to new monks, who frequently experience an emotional uplift similar to the grace felt during the initial period of religious conversion. However, after this period of relief, the monk soon finds again immersed in the next stage of suffering and traumatic experiences. This combination of suffering and relief reflects the paradox at the heart of monastic life,

⁹ The main goal of hesychast spirituality is closely associated with the hypo-egoic state, a particular psychological condition marked by a diminished focus on the self (Leary & Guadagno, 2011).

affirming the self-transcendent experience that also serves as a coping mechanism for the further intensified hardships of monastic life (James, 1902).

7. Result – Perfection?

Advanced stages of spiritual development, besides profound mystical experience widely documented in patristic writings (e.g. St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395), St. Dionysius the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius) (5th–6th century), St. John Climacus (c. 579–649), St. Isaac the Syrian (7th century), St. Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022)) also might bring intensification of suffering, paradoxically accompanying profound spiritual transformation (McGuckin, 2005; Sacharov, 1999). While these experiences are psychologically, spiritually and ontologically significant, they cannot be clearly expressed within empirical or scientific categories without some reduction.

Contemporary neurotheological research, particularly the work of Andrew Newberg and his colleagues employ the term "enlightenment" for self-transcendent experience and identifies its five core elements: (1) a sense of unity or interconnectedness, (2) overwhelming intensity, (3) clarity of mind and insight into fundamental truths, (4) surrender or loss of conscious control, and (5) irreversible transformation in beliefs, goals, and identity (Newberg & Waldman, 2016). Newberg and Waldman (2016) differentiate between "small" and "big enlightenment," highlighting a key distinction in the permanent effects of "big enlightenment," which radically and irreversibly change the lives of those who experience them.

While the mystical experiences described in rich patristic narratives could be characterised with the term "big enlightenment," the lasting impact of such experiences remains a topic of debate. For instance, St. Sophrony Sakharov, describing his elder, St. Siluan the Aphontine, emphasises a temporal momentum character of those mystical states which may later be accompanied by intensified suffering. Once St. Siluan has tasted the "sweetness of Paradise," losing it leads him to "deep inner crying," similar to Adam's lament over the loss of Paradise, an existential grief that accompanies monastic life (Sacharov, 1999; Chirilă & Pașca-Tușa, 2023). Drawing on St. Silouan the Athonite, intense mystical experiences of Divine "sweetness" are brief and transient. They often leave the soul yearning for their return. In response, monks intensify ascetic and prayerful efforts—such as described St. Silouan's prolonged vigils, prostrations, and near-total fasting, or St. Seraphim of Sarov's thousand-day prayer standing on a stone.

However, even after such extreme practices, regaining the same mystical state can remain elusive, leading to spiritual confusion and inner struggle. Thus, profound mystical encounters might not be marked by a state of constant peace, but rather by a dynamic rhythm of exalted and challenging states. However, this is a matter of speculation and requires further elaboration via in-depth analysis of the available mystical reports from a psychological perspective to reach any substantive conclusion. Indeed, experiencing a sudden shift from a great revelation to a state of darkness can be overwhelming. Such phenomena highlight the intense and dynamic nature of the spiritual path, where moments of profound revelation and joy coexist with periods of spiritual desolation, often referred to as the "dark night of the soul" (St. John of the Cross, 1952). During this challenging phase, monks may experience the absence of

God's presence, which can manifest as a profound form of suffering, but it is a necessary step in transitioning to further stages of spiritual development.

8. Coping

Considering the numerous struggles and extreme living conditions, how do monks not only survive but also thrive and maintain a high sense of well-being at the monastery? (Day, 2017). One answer lies in the development of specific mental abilities. Ascetic practices train attention and self-control, helping monks manage intrusive thoughts and emotional impulses. This mental discipline can lead to a transformed sense of self. Inbar Graiver's modern study, which analyses monastic communities of Late Antiquity, shows that monastic asceticism cultivates a disciplined mind capable of suppressing distractions and fostering profound spiritual clarity (Graiver, 2020).

At advanced spiritual levels, coping evolves into a deeply integrated transformation process. The hesychast enters *synergia*, a state where human energies interact directly with Divine energies, triggering a shift in perception known as "synergetic perception" (Horujy, 2010). It is a full-scale recalibration, where traditional senses are transformed into spiritual faculties, marking the beginning of an ontological transformation (Horujy, 2010). The *nous*, or divine intellect, plays a governing role, activating the "noetic law". The "noetic law" represents a new paradigm where all human energies are merged into a unified whole, with the *nous* serving as the central force guiding the individual's spiritual ascent toward the divine (Horujy, 2010).

The Jesus Prayer is used extensively in all stages of monastic life, functioning as a primary spiritual engine—a kind of "spiritual petrol" that fuels monastic transformation. It serves not only as a tool for keeping the mind concentrated and unscattered, but also activates what St. Gregory Palamas, the principal defender of hesychasm in the 14th century, called the "mind-bishop" (*nous-episkopos*). St. Maximus the Confessor referred to this as "naked mind"—a spiritual state of extended mental activity. In addition, from the perspective of existential psychology, monks also redesign their sources of meaning. Sources of vertical and horizontal self-transcendent orientations take a leading position, whilst other sources are also reoriented within deeper spiritual frameworks. Deeper, more meaningful and spiritually oriented sources of meaning have more potential to create meaning (Schnell, 2020, pp. 61-62).

9. Conclusions

This article is one of the first steps and an invitation for both Orthodox and psychology scholars to collaborate and contribute to the study of the phenomenon of spiritual transformation within the Orthodox monastic context. Further discussions may include, but are not limited to, the effects and meanings of sleep deprivation, fasting, the Jesus Prayer with prostration, monastic motivation, nostalgia, identity separation, lack of pleasure or entertainment, suppression of sexual desire, celibacy and demonic provocations.

Hesychastic spirituality guides monks toward pursuing self-transcendence in its elevated form through the ontological transformation of human nature, cultivating extraordinary abilities and demonstrating profound virtues, which ultimately develop a kind of “superhuman existence”. Similarly, with the positive psychology 2.0 approach, hesychasm reveals the full extent of human potential and enables individuals to become fully human (Wong, 2019). Suffering, arising from existential and spiritual frustration, leads to significant personal and spiritual growth by tapping into deep sources of meaning. This could be a logotherapeutic explanation for why people become monks despite the suffering and difficulties of monastic life.

In the context of Hesychastic spirituality, suffering works as a voluntary negative experience that promotes elevation to ST. Supported by various coping mechanisms, individuals in the monasteries are able, with a corresponding approach and daily significant investment, to reestablish normal functioning and undergo significant personal transformation, up to extended life possibilities. The monastic path of hesychasm shows that suffering is not only something to be avoided but also a necessary element of profound spiritual growth. Through self-transcendence, when individuals voluntarily and consciously embrace suffering in pursuit of higher goals, it is reframed as an engine for personal growth and development.

Ultimately, nobody knows what actually happens in the minds of monks. They rarely share this sincerely, with a few notable exceptions, such as Thomas Merton. Is it a fertile life full of mystical revelations, or is it a constant fight with various temptations, combined with the tiredness of waking up at 3 am for prayer and the desire to have a substantial meal? Perhaps the mix of both.

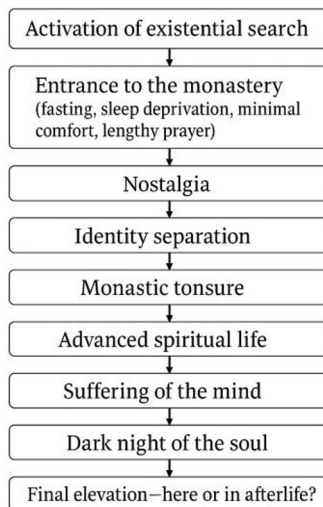


Figure 5: The schematic description of a path of ST in monastic life

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