

MORAL CONSCIENCE IN PHILOKALIC SPIRITUALITY: INTRODUCTORY REFLECTIONS ON THE WRITINGS OF ABBA DOROTHEUS OF GAZA

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ABSTRACT: Moral Conscience in Philokalic Spirituality: Introductory Reflections on the Writings of Abba Dorotheus of Gaza.

This study explores the central role of moral conscience in Philokalic spirituality, with particular reference to the writings of Abba Dorotheus of Gaza. As one of the most profound spiritual teachers of early monasticism, Abba Dorotheus offers a unique synthesis of ascetic psychology and theological anthropology, revealing how conscience operates as the inner voice of divine truth within the human soul. His pedagogical method—marked by realism, pastoral sensitivity, and clarity—illustrates the dynamic interplay between divine grace and human freedom in the moral formation of the person. By uncovering the subtle mechanisms of temptation and self-deception, Dorotheus provides a timeless spiritual framework for understanding the discernment of good and evil in everyday life. In a secularized and morally fragmented world, his vision of the conscience as the “eye of the soul” regains special relevance, inviting contemporary readers to rediscover the integrity of the inner life and the responsibility of authentic spiritual freedom. Thus, the Philokalic approach to conscience articulated by Abba Dorotheus remains a living contribution to both Orthodox theology and the broader discourse on moral transformation and spiritual authenticity.

Keywords: *moral conscience, spirituality, ascetic theology Abba Dorotheus of Gaza.*

Introduction

The doctrine of moral conscience occupies a central place in Christian spirituality, insofar as it concerns the human person's relationship with God, with one's neighbor, and with oneself. Although the term conscience does not always appear in biblical or patristic language in its modern sense, the Fathers of the Church frequently referred to the "inner judge," to the "law written in the heart" (cf. Rom. 2:15), and to the voice that reproves or exhorts toward the good¹.

Among the spiritual writers of the early centuries, Abba Dorotheus of Gaza (sixth century) distinguishes himself through a particularly clear and systematic treatment of conscience. In his well-known Teachings, he devotes an entire chapter to this topic, providing definitions, practical admonitions, and concrete illustrations. For Abba Dorotheus, conscience is a divine gift implanted in the soul of every human being, and the spiritual life both begins with and is sustained by attentiveness to it². The enduring relevance of this teaching is evident: in a world increasingly marked by relativism and moral disintegration, the rediscovery of the inner voice of conscience – illumined by divine grace – remains the foundation of every authentic Christian existence.³

Abba Dorotheus of Gaza (c. 505 - c. 565) was one of the most influential ascetic writers of the Christian East, remembered especially for his *Instructions (Didaskaliai)*, a collection of spiritual discourses and letters that deeply shaped Byzantine and later Orthodox monastic spirituality⁴. Born into a wealthy Christian family in the region of Antioch, Dorotheus received a solid education in both secular and sacred learning before en-

1 Helen M. Alvaré, Jeffrey B. Hammond, *Christianity and the Laws of Conscience. An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 23-111.

2 Cf. Dorotheus of Gaza, "Instruction VI: On Conscience", in *Discourses and Sayings*, trans. Eric P. Wheeler, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977, pp. 135-147. See also PG 88, col. 1653-1672. See more Dorothee de Gaza, *Œuvres spirituelles*, Introduction, texte grec, traduction et notes par Lucien Regnault, o.s.b., et Jacques de Préville, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1963, 575 pages.

3 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Key aspects of the Freedom of Conscience", *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință - Supliment (Journal for Freedom of Conscience)*, Les Arsac, France, Editions IARSIC, 2016, pp.30-37.

4 Eric P. Wheeler, *Dorotheos of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings*, Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications, 1977, pp. 11-15.

tering monastic life⁵. He first joined the monastery of Seridos near Gaza⁶, where he became a disciple of two renowned spiritual elders, Saints Barsanuphius and John the Prophet⁷. Under their guidance, Dorotheus grew in humility and ascetic discipline, later assuming responsibility for the training of younger monks.

Around the year 540, Dorotheus founded his own monastic community near Gaza⁸. There he composed his *Instructions*, which present a synthesis of patristic wisdom in a simple, practical style, addressing themes such as humility, obedience, mutual love, and especially the role of conscience as the inner guide of the spiritual life⁹. His writings circulated widely in Greek, Syriac, and later in Slavonic and Latin translations, exerting a lasting influence on both Eastern and Western Christian traditions¹⁰.

Abba Dorotheus' Perspective on Moral Conscience

For Abba Dorotheus, conscience is not merely a psychological disposition or an inner mechanism of self-defense, but a divine gift implanted in the human person from creation itself. It is the voice of God in the depths of the soul, the “natural law” that urges one toward good and restrains from evil. “Every man has within himself a teacher, his conscience, and he must obey it in all things”¹¹, writes Dorotheus, underlining the universality of this gift. This understanding rests on a twofold foundation: biblical and

5 Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, London, Penguin, 2003, p. 37.

6 Jan Stenger, “What Does it Mean to Call the Monasteries of Gaza a ‘School’? A Reassessment of Dorotheus’ Intellectual Identity”, in *Vigiliae Christianae*, no. 1 / 2017, pp. 59-84.

7 John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, Bloomington, World Wisdom, 2008, pp. 64–65

8 Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1966, pp. 69–71.

9 Eric P. Wheeler, *Dorotheos of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings*, pp. 20-25.

10 See more Dorothee de Gaza, *Œuvres spirituelles*, Introduction, texte grec, traduction et notes par Lucien Regnault, o.s.b., et Jacques de Préville, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1963, 575 pages. See also rev. Dumitru Stăniloae, „Avva Dorotei – Viața, opera și răspândirea ei”, in *Filocalia sau culegere din scrierile Sfinților Părinți, care arată cum se poate omul curăța, lumina și desăvârși*, vol. IX, București, Humanitas, 2017, pp. 381-388.

11 Abba Dorotheus, *Instructions, Discourse III: On Conscience*. English translation in Eric P. Wheeler, *Dorotheos of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings*, p. 93.

ascetic. On the one hand, the Apostle Paul affirms that “the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness” (Rom. 2:15). On the other hand, the monastic tradition of the desert insists that the spiritual life begins with vigilance of the heart and attentiveness to its movements. Dorotheus brings these two dimensions together, showing that the interior voice of conscience is not a mere natural reflex, but the expression of God’s law present within the human person.

Thus, conscience becomes both the fundamental criterion of morality and the starting point of the ascetical journey. It accompanies the person in every action, either reproving or approving. For Dorotheus, to heed one’s conscience means to allow oneself to be guided by God Himself, whereas to neglect it means to extinguish the inner light, risking the hardening of the heart and the loss of spiritual sensitivity. Abba Dorotheus is a Philokalic Father who addresses in a unique way the dimensions of ascetical life, uncovering both the snares of the adversary and the ways in which the struggler is tempted. Through his spiritual guidance, Abba Dorotheus reveals the depths of ascetical experience and the spiritual capacity to express profound realities in simple language. “Although very faithful to the spiritual teaching of the Fathers, he is not a mere compiler. Being a great analyst, one can also observe in him an effort toward synthesis, of discerning the dominant lines of Christian spirituality. He connects man’s striving for perfection with his relationship to Christ and the following of Christ”¹².

The ascetical work of liberation from the passions is achieved insofar as the struggler engages personally in an inner combat with the self, becoming aware—through the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word—of the uniqueness and eternity of his being. This awareness, or “*self-consciousness*”, constitutes an ascetical state of the soul that mystically experiences victory over evil through Jesus Christ. The life of the ascetic is thus marked by Paschal joy, as a source of grace and participation in the restored humanity of Christ. Through ascetical striving and communion with Christ, evil and demonic powers are revealed as transient, while the human person, living in Christ, receives the possibility of conquering evil in a unique man-

12 Rev. Dumitru Stăniloae, „Avva Dorotei – Forma și conținutul operei avvei Dorotei”, in *Filocalia sau culegere din scrierile Sfinților Părinți, care arată cum se poate omul curăța, lumina și desăvârși*, vol. IX, București, Humanitas, 2017, p. 386.

ner and of walking the divine path of the Gospel. "Every man is another salvation, every soul is another aspect of the image of God, which has never before existed in history or in all creation, and never again will be. And this concerns the greatness of each human being. Therefore each one is a completely different path from every other man, from non-being into being. The paths resemble each other, at times they are almost parallel, but never identical: like the rays of a circle, as Abba Dorotheus of Gaza describes"¹³.

From the perspective of Abba Dorotheus, conscience appears at the very moment of man's creation. Thus, one may affirm that, in terms of origin, there was never a time between the creation of man "in the image and likeness of God" and the existence of conscience. "When God made man, He planted within him something divine, like a warm and luminous thought, having the quality of a spark which illumines the mind and shows it the difference between good and evil. This is called conscience, and it is the law of his nature. It is prefigured by the wells that Jacob dug (Gen. 26:13-14), as the Fathers have said, and which the Philistines stopped up. By listening to this conscience, the patriarchs and all the saints before the written law pleased God"¹⁴.

Thus, conscience has its origin in the act of creation, being "the oldest law that God gave to man, when He created him", and its quality is divine. The image of conscience as a "spark that illumines the mind" can be placed within the framework of the account of man's creation in the Book of Genesis: "And God said, Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the domestic animals, all the creeping things that creep upon the earth, and over all the earth! So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:26-27).

This thought of conscience, which illumines the mind, is defined with respect to its origin as the "law of human nature". Thus, God places conscience in the soul of man as a law—not in a juridical sense, but as the

13 Rafail Noica, *Cultura Dubului*, Alba Iulia, Reîntregirea, 2002, p.155.

14 *** „Ale celui între sfinți Părintelui nostru Dorotei felurile învățături lăsate ucenicilor săi când a părăsit mănăstirea avvei Serid și a întemeiat, cu ajutorul lui Dumnezeu, mănăstirea sa, după moartea avvei Ioan prorocul și după tăcerea desăvârșită a avvei Varsanufie. III: Despre conștiință”, in *Filocalia sau culegere din scrierile Sfinților Părinți, care arată cum se poate omul curăța, lumina și desăvârși*, vol. IX, București, Humanitas, 2017, p. 414.

mode and form through which He communicates with man. In this line of analysis, that is, conscience as the law of nature, Saint Nectarios of Aegina presents conscience as the knowledge of the moral law: "Conscience is the awareness and knowledge of the soul which discerns between evil and good deeds and judges impartially their quality, condemning the evil and approving the good. The soul possesses innate conscience, which means that the soul has the power to know what is just and what is unjust; the soul has received this power from God for the purpose of knowing the divine will and of identifying its own will with the divine will"¹⁵.

Saint Dumitru (Stăniloae) explains this expression of Abba Dorotheus ("law of human nature") and interprets the theological meanings of the ontological-dialogical relationship between God and man through the voice of conscience: "Conscience is the thought planted by God in man, like a warm and luminous spark. Conscience fully illuminates the mind and obliges it to discern between good and evil. In conscience, the human meets the divine. It belongs both to God and to man. Through it, man exists in an ontological-dialogical relationship with God. It is the face of man turned toward the Sun of existence. It is a thought of God, yet 'sown' in man, and through this it pertains to man. Through it, man speaks with himself, yet through himself he sees God and responds to God. Through the commandments and the absolute admonitions of conscience, the commandments and admonitions of God speak. Man is a pole of God. A conscience without the mind or reason cannot act. But neither can these act without conscience. Therefore, the mind or reason of man is also luminous, but also warm, for within it is the fervent desire not only to know a truth in itself, but the truth as good, as that which can bring happiness and make one virtuous. Therefore, reason is never cold in its activity"¹⁶.

Conscience as the law of nature, from the perspective of Abba Dorotheus' teaching, undergoes a process of transformation, being rediscovered by man in the light of the mystery of the Incarnation of our Savior,

15 Sfântul Nectarie din Eghina, *Cunoaște-te pe tine însuși sau Despre virtute*, trad. Gabriel Mândrilă and Laura Mândrilă, București, Sophia, 2012, p. 214.

16 *** „Ale celui între sfinți Părintelui nostru Dorotei felurile învățături lăsate ucenicilor săi când a părăsit mănăstirea avvei Serid și a întemeiat, cu ajutorul lui Dumnezeu, mănăstirea sa, după moartea avvei Ioan prorocul și după tăcerea desăvârșită a avvei Var-sanufie. III: Despre conștiință”, in *Filocalia sau culegere din scrierile Sfinților Părinți, care arată cum se poate omul curăța, lumina și desăvârși*, note 1071, pp. 414-415.

Jesus Christ. This work does not imply replacing conscience with another “law,” but rather offers the opportunity to live in perfect communion with God. “Since it was covered and trampled by people through the advance of sin, we needed the written law, we needed the holy prophets, we needed the very coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, in order to discover it and awaken it, to rekindle that hidden spark, through the observance of His holy commandments”¹⁷. Thus, through the redemption accomplished by Christ, conscience becomes pure and luminous, prepared to discern the meanings of existence. At the same time, conscience is revealed in a new way to the person who, through Baptism, becomes a guardian of God’s commandments.

Through Abba Dorotheus’ expression “a burning spark,” we understand that in the ascetical life, those who strive in Christ can hear the divine voice, even beyond what the great Moses experienced on Mount Sinai. “The well-known episode of God’s revelation to Moses, while he was tending the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro, is as follows: And he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness, and came to the mountain of God, to Horeb; and there the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, ‘I will go over and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.’ And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush and said, ‘Moses! Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ And He said, ‘Do not come near here; take off your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground’”¹⁸.

Through the act of the Incarnation, the voice of moral conscience becomes life in Christ. “He said many times: ‘I am the life... and you will be alive,’ which we perceive as it becoming our very own life. It is not ours by its essence, but it becomes an inheritance, so that we may make it truly our own. This transfer of divine-human life unfolds continuously through what Saint Symeon the New Theologian calls the continuous mystical Incarnation of Christ in us, in the sense of an increasing participation of human beings in His divine-human being. Thus, through this birth of Him within us and through our imitation of Him, we attain the measure of deification, to the extent that He not only is born in us, but also makes us

17 *Ibidem*, p. 415.

18 Constantin Coman, *Despre vederea lui Dumnezeu*, București, Bizantină, 2016, p. 23.

participants in His divine and human existence"¹⁹. This life signifies the spiritual ascent of man on the path toward divinization.

Regarding the temporality of conscience, Abba Dorotheus emphasizes that it is never lost, precisely because of its divine character. The life of the ascetic is placed under the spectrum of the light of conscience, which, in the state of purification from passions, clearly reveals the divine will. This expression highlights the state of pure conscience: "For when our conscience tells us to do something and we disregard its voice, and again it speaks and we do not act but continue to trample upon it, we cover it up and it can no longer speak clearly, under the burden imposed upon it. But like a lamp shining through a mist, it begins to show us things in a more smoky, darker way, and thus, because of the advance of sin, no one can clearly see his own face, but as in water disturbed by many impurities"²⁰.

Thus, conscience, insofar as it remains pure, reveals clearly the divine voice, and man has the opportunity to observe his spiritual state objectively. Pure conscience shows the image of man in the light of God, who illumines it. In this uncreated light, God speaks to us about what we are and what we should become, through the work of the spiritual life. "Conscience is an honest teacher. Whoever listens to it proceeds without error. Conscience judges no one who has reached the peak of virtue or of sin"²¹.

This Philokalic perspective, through its teaching and through the grace of the Holy Spirit dwelling within it, offers the Christian the opportunity to attain moral perfection and to maintain a conscience that is discerning and sensitive. This constitutes one of the highest aims of the Christian life. Through a pure conscience, like a clear crystal, the light of God enters the soul and penetrates every corner of it. As long as this light remains within us, it guides our thoughts, elevates our feelings, strengthens

19 Nathanael Neacșu, *Conștiința dogmatică și viața duhovnicească în gândirea părintelui Sofronie Saharov*, Iași, Doxologia, 2015, p. 82.

20 *** „Ale celui între sfinți Părintelui nostru Dorotei felurile învățături lăsate ucenicilor săi când a părăsit mînăstirea avvei Serid și a întemeiat, cu ajutorul lui Dumnezeu, mînăstirea sa, după moartea avvei Ioan prorocul și după tăcerea desăvârșită a avvei Varsanufie. III: Despre conștiință”, in *Filocalia sau culegere din scrierile Sfinților Părinți, care arată cum se poate omul curăța, lumina și desăvârși*, p. 415.

21 Talasie Libianul, *Despre dragoste, înfrînare și petrecerea cea după minte către Pavel presbiterul*, in *Filocalia sau culegere din scrierile Sfinților Părinți, care arată cum se poate omul curăța, lumina și desăvârși*, vol. IV, p. 8.

our will, and assists us in ascetical practice. When this occurs, a Christian not only experiences spiritual ascent but also becomes an instrument of salvation for others. The ascetical history of the Church illustrates this truth with countless examples from the lives of its saints, such as Seraphim of Sarov, John of Kronstadt, Saint Ambrose of Optina, Blessed Xenia of Petersburg, Archbishop John Maximovitch, and others who followed this ascetical path in the Philokalic spirit.

In the spiritual analysis of moral conscience, Abba Dorotheus presents three paths for guarding the conscience: toward God, toward one's neighbor, and toward worldly things. Each of these stages represents a way in which the ascetic can uproot passions with the aid of conscience, cloaked in the garment of humility. The spiritual discipline of "guarding the conscience" thus unfolds along these three horizons: attention toward God, toward one's neighbor, and toward material possessions.

Regarding the guarding of conscience toward God, the ascetic must observe the commandments and obey his conscience in relation to God. "And one can guard the conscience toward God when he does not despise His commandments, even in those things in which no one sees him, and in those things that are asked of him by no one. He who does this guards his conscience toward God in secret. For example: when we neglect prayer, when a passionate thought rises in our heart and we do not watch over ourselves or restrain ourselves, but consent to it"²².

The second horizon of conscience is directed toward our neighbor. "And the one toward the neighbor is to do nothing that he knows might distress or harm his neighbor, whether through action, word, appearance, or gaze. For even our appearance can harm the neighbor, as I have often said. And the gaze can also harm. Simply put, anything that a person knows could give rise to a thought in the neighbor through which his conscience may be defiled, and which he knows is capable of harming or distressing the other, he must guard against and refrain from doing. This is what it means to guard the conscience toward one's neighbor"²³. Words and ges-

22 *** „Ale celui între sfinți Părintelui nostru Dorotei felurile învățături lăsate ucenicilor săi când a părăsit mănăstirea avvei Serid și a întemeiat, cu ajutorul lui Dumnezeu, mănăstirea sa, după moartea avvei Ioan prorocul și după tăcerea desăvârșită a avvei Varsanufie. III: Despre conștiință”, in *Filocalia sau culegere din scrierile Sfinților Părinți, care arată cum se poate omul curăța, lumina și desăvârși*, p. 417.

23 *Ibidem*, pp. 417-418.

tures are capable of piercing the hearts of our fellow humans and causing them harm. To act in such ways not only injures the neighbor but also stains our own conscience. Being constantly prepared and vigilant to avoid harming or troubling our neighbor, and instead to love and help them, is the path to maintaining a good conscience, in the spirit of the Gospel.

Regarding the third horizon of conscience, toward the world and material things, Abba Dorotheus emphasizes the proper and good use of possessions. "And the guarding of conscience toward things consists in not misusing an object, in not damaging or discarding it, but even if one sees something discarded, no matter how insignificant, not to ignore it, but to pick it up and put it in its proper place"²⁴.

In his discourse on conscience, Abba Dorotheus proceeds to another teaching on the fear of God, thereby highlighting the close connection between the guarding of a pure conscience and the fear of God. The vigilance over a pure conscience, it seems, teaches and deepens our awareness of God's presence in every moment²⁵. For Saint Dorotheus, there are two expressions of the "fear of God": one initial, the other perfect. The first involves the formation of a desire for God motivated by fear of condemnation and suffering, serving as a starting point. This desire gradually gives rise to the love of God, which dispels the initial fear. Once the love and beauty of the good are known, a new and profoundly different fear emerges, defined as the love that carries the saint toward perfect fear. Saint Dumitru (Stăniloae) develops this image of the awareness of living eternal love through the personal relationship of the human being who desires to be with God. "But only with God can you be eternal, remaining yourself also eternal through their love and through your own endless love toward them".

The Contemporary Relevance of Moral Conscience in the Writings of Abba Dorotheus

The Dorothean vision of conscience carries profound implications for contemporary ethical reflection. In a society increasingly shaped by moral pluralism and secular norms, the notion of conscience as a divine law offers

24 *Ibidem*, p. 418.

25 Bogdan Constantin Taifas, *Profunzimi și suprafețe. Conștiința și ținutul curat al inimii*, Sibiu, Agnos, 2014, pp. 153-154.

a counter-narrative to relativism, grounding ethical action in transcendent truth. By cultivating a pure and discerning conscience, individuals are not only morally accountable but also positioned to act as agents of social transformation. Ethical vigilance, therefore, is inseparable from social responsibility in Dorotheos' framework²⁶. This perspective is particularly relevant for Orthodox Christians navigating contemporary moral challenges, from interpersonal relationships to broader societal issues. Dorotheos' emphasis on love, humility, and vigilance provides practical guidance for living ethically in complex social contexts, demonstrating that personal sanctity and social ethics are mutually reinforcing²⁷.

In the contemporary world, characterized by ethical fragmentation and moral ambiguity, Dorotheos' model of conscience provides a robust framework for ethical reflection and action. By cultivating a conscience attuned to God's will, individuals are empowered to navigate moral challenges with clarity, resist the pressures of relativism, and contribute positively to the moral and spiritual fabric of society. The Dorothean paradigm thus integrates personal sanctification with social responsibility, highlighting the ongoing relevance of Patristic ethical thought for modern life²⁸. The modern world presents significant challenges to moral conscience. Secularization²⁹ has diminished the influence of traditional religious frameworks in shaping moral norms, leading to a widespread relativization of values³⁰. At the same time, the recognition of religious diversity has broadened the discourse on freedom of conscience³¹, often reducing it to a matter of personal autonomy detached from transcendent reference.

Dorotheos' teaching offers a contribution for integrity in the small things because in a culture of compromise and utilitarian ethics, the em-

26 Teofan Mada, "Moral Conscience in Eastern Patristic Theology", in *International Journal of Orthodox Theology*, no. 2 (2014), pp. 75-89.

27 *Ibidem*.

28 Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995, pp. 123-136.

29 Nicu Gavriluță, *Secularizarea și camuflările sacralului*, București, Polirom, 2025; Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Aspecte ale secularizării și ale omului secularizat", *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Theologia Orthodoxa*, (2006), L-LI, no.1, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, pp. 251-266.

30 Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

31 Kevin Boyle, Juliet Sheen, *Freedom of Religion and Belief. A World Report*, London and New York, Routledge, 2003.

phasis on fidelity in seemingly minor moral decisions highlights the formative role of everyday choices in shaping moral character. Dorotheus' three-fold orientation of conscience challenges the individualistic reduction of conscience to private preference. It reminds contemporary societies that authentic freedom of conscience involves responsibility toward others and the common good³². Dorotheus implicitly distinguishes between external freedom of action and inner freedom of the soul. In contexts where freedom of conscience is legally protected but morally unformed, his perspective shows that legal guarantees are insufficient without the cultivation of a living and discerning conscience³³.

In today's pluralistic environment, the notion of freedom of conscience is frequently invoked in legal, political, and ethical debates³⁴, ranging from bioethical dilemmas to religious expression in public life. Dorotheus' perspective invites a deeper reflection: freedom of conscience cannot be equated simply with the right to subjective self-determination, but must be rooted in truth and responsibility. By situating conscience in the dynamic of listening, vigilance, and relational accountability, Dorotheus provides a hermeneutical key for reconciling personal freedom with communal responsibility in a diverse society.

Conclusions

According to the above, the writings of Abba Dorotheus, one of the important Fathers of philokalic spirituality, though rooted in the monastic experience of Late Antiquity, illuminate the contemporary discourse on conscience and freedom. His teaching underscores that conscience is not merely a private faculty but a relational and moral compass, one that ensures authentic freedom only when cultivated and preserved in fidelity to

32 Georgios Mandzaridis, *Morala creștină*, trad. Cornel Coman, București, Bizantină, 2024, p. 350; see from another point of view: Jürgen Habermas. *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008.

33 *** „Ale celui între sfinți Părintelui nostru Dorotei felurile învățături lăsate ucenicilor săi când a părăsit mănăstirea avvei Serid și a întemeiat, cu ajutorul lui Dumnezeu, mănăstirea sa, după moartea avvei Ioan prorocul și după tăcerea desăvârșită a avvei Varsanufie. III: Despre conștiință”, in *Filocalia sau culegere din scrierile Sfinților Părinți, care arată cum se poate omul curăța, lumina și desăvârși*, p. 418.

34 Teofan Mada, *Conștiință și compromis*, Alba Iulia, Editura Reîntregirea, 2006, pp. 27-28.

God, oneself, and others. In a secularized and religiously plural age, this patristic vision offers both a corrective to moral relativism and a constructive path toward integrating freedom of conscience with responsibility and truth.

Abba Dorotheos stands as a Philokalic Father who addresses, in a uniquely profound manner, the essential aspects of ascetic experience and unveils the subtle snares of the adversary, as well as the ways in which the spiritual struggler is tempted. Through his spiritual guidance, Abba Dorotheos reveals the inner depths of the ascetic life and the dynamic of the soul in its journey toward purification and divine illumination. His writings demonstrate an exceptional spiritual insight, manifested in the ability to express profound theological and anthropological realities in simple and accessible language.

In Abba Dorotheos, one encounters not only an acute discernment of the human heart and its inner conflicts, but also a pedagogical genius that makes the path of spiritual vigilance comprehensible to all who seek God. His synthesis of spiritual realism and pastoral empathy renders his thought ever-relevant, offering a timeless model of how divine wisdom can be communicated with humility, clarity, and love.

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- ✦ *** „Ale celui între sfinți Părintelui nostru Dorotei felurile învățături lăsate ucenicilor săi când a părăsit mănăstirea avvei Serid și a întemeiat, cu ajutorul lui Dumnezeu, mănăstirea sa, după moartea avvei Ioan prorocul și după tăcerea desăvârșită a avvei Varsanufie. III: Despre conștiință”, in *Filocalia sau culegere din scrierile Sfinților Părinți, care arată cum se poate omul curăța, lumina și desăvârși*, vol. IX, București, Humanitas, 2017.
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