

# ASCENDING TO CHRIST, BECOMING ANTHROPOS - AS DEPICTED IN A FRESCO AT THE SUCEVITA MONASTERY

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## Introduction

*The Ladder of the Divine Ascent* of Saint John Climacus is one of the most representative texts of Christian spirituality. Not only in the East, but also in the West, *The Ladder* was translated into the vernacular languages, it was revered, it was read and it was taught by the spiritual fathers, it became more than a symbol, it became almost a living reality<sup>1</sup>. Its exceptional destiny can be followed and appreciated by the fruits it gave throughout centuries: *The Ladder* had an enormous influence in the formation of generations of Christian monastics and laypeople alike. Its style, considered very similar to that of the *apophthegmata partum*, its content embedded with valuable spiritual teachings, the profound experience the author shows to have, an *amazing grace* that follows the reader, all these realities helped *the Ladder* place itself at the very center of the Christian soul and never depart from it.

In the Orthodox Romania, *The Ladder of the Divine Ascent* found receptive soil<sup>2</sup> and this is to be noticed following some traces that cannot be fully revealed in this study. *The Ladder*, as it is commonly known, is depicted on the northern wall of one of the most beautiful monasteries in northern Bucovina, the Sucevita

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<sup>1</sup> Bertaud-Rayez, «Échelle Spirituelle», in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Tome IV, première partie, Beauchesne, Paris, 1960, col. 62-86.

<sup>2</sup> Ică Ioan Jr., «La Scala di Giovanni Climaco in Romania. La fortuna di un libro, il simbolo di un popolo», in *Giovanni Climaco e il Sinai, atti del IX Convegno ecumenico internazionale di spiritualità ortodossa, sezione bizantina*, Qi-qajon, Bose, 2002, pp. 250-264.

Monastery<sup>3</sup>. Such depiction may help us better understand and interiorize more profoundly *the Ladder's* message. Its composition, its placement, the use of the colors, the push-up that any visitor's soul experiences in its presence, are all suggesting that the depiction of *the Ladder* at Sucevita was intended to proclaim a divine truth but also to invite the reader to launch himself into a divine ascent. Thus, one should then ask, what are the spiritual delights to which both Saint John Climacus and the painter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century are inviting the one watching to partake in?

### **Ascending to Christ...**

As previously analyzed by scholars<sup>4</sup>, the theme of the divine ascent is one of the most present and most representative aspects of the worldwide religions. The theme does not exhaust the modality of expressing the religious aspirations, but this concept must be related to a certain intuition of reality of the fallen situation of humankind. As the gods are often coming from on high to share with the humans their revelations, the humankind tends to reverse the sense of this godly initiative and to ascend. One of the most representative images in the Old Testament treating this matter is the Ladder which Jacob saw in a vision after he impetuously had to leave his father's house (Gen. 28, 12-13). The image had a large use in the Christian theology and homiletics<sup>5</sup> and its success can be traced back to the New Testament that presents a Jesus speaking about himself (John 1, 51), using the terminology that presented the event of Jacob's vision: our Lord is the Ladder that Jacob saw and His incarnation is the fulfillment of that prophecy<sup>6</sup>.

It is evident that this image and its interpretation in the New Testament were the inspiring points of St. John Climacus in choosing

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<sup>3</sup> Maria Ana Musicescu și Mihai Berza, *Mănăstirea Sucevița*, Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, București, 1958.

<sup>4</sup> Nicolae Corneanu, *Scara și treptele ei în viața dubovnicească*, în „Mitropolia Moldovei și Bucovinei”, anul XXXIV (1958), pp. 453-459; Idem, *Simbolismul Scării și treptele ei în religiile necreștine*, în „Mitropolia Ardealului”, anul IV (1959), pp. 396-401; H. Leclercq, *L'Échelle du ciel*, DACL, Létouzey et Ane, Paris, 1920.

<sup>5</sup> H. Leclercq, *op. cit.*, col. 62-86.

<sup>6</sup> Calogero Riggi, «Introduzione», in *Scala del Paradiso*, Città Nuova, Roma, 1989, pp. 10-12.

it as a metaphor to describe an ascent to heavens, to Christ<sup>7</sup>. This inspiration renders the initiative of writing the Ladder as a Christ centered one<sup>8</sup>, as stated in the final exhortation: „baptized in the thirtieth year of His earthly age, Christ attained the thirtieth step on the spiritual ladder”<sup>9</sup>. The life of Christ is the chosen model of this ascent, and being mindful of it, St. John chooses as a conclusion of his work the word expressed by St. Paul in his epistle to Ephesians (4, 13): *Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*, that offers a vision of Christ not only as a model, an exemplary path to follow to some degree in an external way, but rather as the model everyone has to become. Following Christ is in fact becoming Christ<sup>10</sup>, and the Ladder is stressing with care and love the presence of Christ in founding one’s choice to follow its many and often sometimes difficult steps<sup>11</sup>. „The sight of the one we love makes us change completely”<sup>12</sup> is the formula that might be taken as the heart of the *Ladder* and its reason of existence.

Therefore, ascending to Christ implies not only respecting a set of certain values but obviously changing one’s very being. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, Saint Paul is putting together two realities that are correlative in ascending to Christ, and Saint John in writing the Ladder shows a deep understanding of them. The final destination of our spiritual journey is to reach „*the stature of the fullness of Christ*” but this is necessarily the fulfillment of another desire and purpose of our existence that is arriving at being „*a perfect man*”. Becoming Christ does not signify destroying one’s

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<sup>7</sup> „The holy virtues are like the ladder of Jacob”; St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of the divine ascent*, 9, Paulist Press, New York, 1982, p. 152.

<sup>8</sup> Gheorghios Martzelos, «Il fondamento teologico della spiritualità dei padri sinaiti», in *Giovanni Climaco e il Sinai...*, p. 87

<sup>9</sup> St. John Climacus, *op. cit.*, 30, p. 291.

<sup>10</sup> „Not even a mother clings to her nursing child as a son of love clings to the Lord at all times”; *Ibidem*, 30, p. 287.

<sup>11</sup> „The man deemed worthy to be of this sort during his lifetime has God always with him (...). The will of the Lord becomes for him a sort of inner voice through illumination. (...) The dispassionate man no longer lives himself, but it is Christ Who lives in Him”; *Ibidem*, 29, p. 284.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 30, p. 287.

identity but rather it implies affirming it in an authentic way that is the Incarnation must not be treated as a dispensable reality but rather must be seen as something that has direct importance to our very existence as humans. Christ's presence is vital to us reaching *mature manhood* as the pauline words express it. With this in mind, St. John Climacus writes his abecedary of the spiritual life: Christ is the target of my existence and making Him interior to me signifies making me interior to Him. Without these premises, the Ladder does not have a meaning: the tears of repentance, the severe ascetic warfare, the purification of thoughts, all of these might result in vane forms of auto celebration and not necessarily effective manifestations of our true, loving self. Because, as the Ladder directs us even today, now in a post Incarnation time, we still need to ascend, to go up, „useless servants as we are” (Luke 17, 10)<sup>13</sup>.

It is noteworthy, however, that St. John in his *Ladder* does not seem overly preoccupied by the effects of Adam's fall<sup>14</sup>. His theology is not centered largely on the effects of the transgression but rather on how the consequences of our bad choices can and must be healed. The *Ladder's* reader doesn't attend a court in which the guilt is to be properly defined and punished, but in a medical facility in which a complex system of dealing with any disease is put at the service of humankind. This made the scholar Martin John Rupert to notice that we should not „interpret the ascent as an invitation to a potential destruction, but rather as a sure way to salvation”<sup>15</sup>.

### **Creation, Fall and... *the Ladder***

The exterior northern wall of the *catholicon* of the Sucevita Monastery embraces with its colors every visitor that enters the monastery's gate. On these walls we find the large fresco of „the divine ascent” proposed by St. John Climacus in his homonymous

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, 1, p. 73.

<sup>14</sup> In *The Ladder* of Saint John, Adam usually appears recorded together with other examples of sinners of the ancient history, but he is never considered the sole responsible for our present state of being.

<sup>15</sup> John Rupert Martin, *The illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*, Princeton University Press, 1954, p. 15.

book. From West (right) to East (left) the themes of the fresco are unfolding as follows: the creation of man, the live of St. Pachomius the Great, the founder of the coenobitic form of monastic life, the ladder of Saint John Climacus and, finally, a procession of different saints that form a large Deisis with Our Lord Jesus Christ at its center. The extremely noticeable presence of the depiction of the Ladder on this wall associated with other themes of history of salvation and of the times to come causes one to ask what was the original intent of the theologian who was inspiring this unusual fresco and what was he proclaiming in doing so<sup>16</sup>? Not only is *the Ladder* from the Sucevita Monastery a tribute to an authoritative source of a culture who saw in the monastic live its zenith<sup>17</sup>, but it is also a portal of introducing us, mystagogically, in the presence of the basic creed of the Christian Church<sup>18</sup>.

At a first glance, the message of the entire wall seems very clear: *The Ladder* is the answer to the Fall of the first humans<sup>19</sup>, its consequence, showing the procession of the saints as the consequence of taking the Ladder seriously. The dogmatic message seems monolithically and very well structured, but there might be an impression of something missing. The passage from the Fall to the Ladder seems too abrupt. And furthermore, interpreting the Ladder as simply an answer to the fall of the first human being leads us to a legitimately ask: „Where is the Cross?”. Is the ladder

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<sup>16</sup> According to I. D. Stefanescu, *L'Évolution de la peinture religieuse en Bucovine et en Moldavie depuis les origines jusqu'au XIXème siècle*, Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, Paris, 1928, pp. 186-187, the theologian behind this canon might be the bishop Macarie of Roman.

<sup>17</sup> Anca Vasiliu, *Les Monastères de Moldavie XIV-XV siècles, Les architectures de l'image*, București, Paris, Milano, 1988, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> „ (...) L'image religieuse n'est point un simple objet d'art; elle a une valeur plus haute, un sens plus profond; le peintre s'appliquera donc volontiers à traduire par ses compositions les idées des théologiens. Chaque partie de la décoration aura désormais une intention symbolique: chaque groupe de saints, chaque cycle de scènes occupera dans l'édifice sacré un place spéciale et jouera un rôle nettement défini dans la grande démonstration théologique que l'Eglise a pour charge de présenter aux yeux des fidèles.” Charles Diehl, *Manuel d'art byzantin*, Librairie Alphonse Picard et ses fils, Paris, 1910, p. 453.

<sup>19</sup> „La Scala appartiene all'economia della salvezza. (...) l'ascensione monastica sui gradini delle virtù verso il regno di Christo rappresenta la risposta alla caduta del primo uomo.” Ioan Ică Jr., *op. cit.*, pp. 275-276.

the sole answer to the Adam's fall? Can it stand by itself without any reference to the Cross<sup>20</sup>? The history of our salvation, the Creation itself cannot be understood without having in mind the Incarnation, the Death and the Resurrection of Christ<sup>21</sup>. The theme depicted on the northern wall of Sucevita Monastery speaks about the Creation, the ascetic warfare and a procession of the saints, without taking into consideration expressing the Incarnation in an artistic form.

### **Man – The Image of the kenotic Creator**

In answering to these legitimate questions, let us consider, first, that the connection between the Creation and the Ladder of Saint John as presented by the frescos at Sucevita Monastery is strongly affirmed by the use of the persons and symbols that are correlative and can be found in both scenes. It is a sign that the theologian who wanted them depicted in this fashion was aware of their connectivity and for him it was not an issue the hiatus that seems so obvious for us. In the scene of the Creation, the Creator is represented as Christ himself. He calls out of nothing the entire world and finally he creates the man, Adam, and the woman, Eve. After these panels, He is no longer represented, but rather Adam is the one who becomes the main personage as he gives names to all the animals or as he looks very happy together with his partner Eve in the middle of the Garden of Eden.

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<sup>20</sup> This might be interpreted as pelagianism.

<sup>21</sup> Even if Adam wouldn't have fallen, Christ would of been incarnated. As Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae referred to it in a note to St. Maximus the Confessor: „Le monde était destiné, même hors du péché à recevoir en lui l'incarnation du Logos, la mort et la résurrection de son humanité, et de la création entière en lui. Mais le péché a conféré à l'incarnation le caractère de kénose extrême, à la Croix son caractère sanglant et à la Résurrection son caractère de victoire sur la mort. Sans le péché, il y aurait eu une incarnation, une croix et une résurrection mystiques car le créé comme tel, même ayant atteint l'apatheia, devait recevoir en lui Dieu d'une manière encore plus parfaite, reposer de son agir et de ses attributs propres et ressusciter à une activité exclusivement divine”. *Filocalia*, vol. III, p. 328, in André Scrima, *L'avènement philocalique dans l'Orthodoxie roumaine*, in „Istina”, no 4 (1958), p. 464.

The similar idea is considered also in depicting the Ladder: Christ is on the top of the ladder as he awaits the mounting file of monks, while he seems so painfully absent in the very extent of the ladder and in the metaphorical context of that terrible battle that takes place around it. He does not seem to interfere too much nor with Adam in Paradise nor with the monks that are climbing the physical ladder. One may then ask, is He an absent God? The colorful text from Sucevita gives a negative answer to this inquiry. According to St. Irenaeus of Lyon, Adam was created „as not yet mature but endowed with a divine task to develop his capacities to their fullness”<sup>22</sup>. As difficult as it may seem, this reality is presented in the monastery frescos in a beautiful dance of colors and symbols. Adam is the image of his Creator, as it can be clearly observed in the fresco, and the physical resemblance of the created to his Creator is suggesting an intimate closeness between the Creator and Adam; between the two there is not only an external similitude but also a relation of parentage, according to Genesis 1, 26-27<sup>23</sup>.

As the theme further develops, the Creator in His aspect of Adam's Prototype disappears to make room for a white, bright light which inundates the space of the Paradise. This light is embracing the new created reality in its wholeness until the moment of the Fall, at which point, after the first sin, it disappears to make room for a common blue sky, a silent witness of a working Adam and a sad Eve. It seems that this light is a symbol of the kenotic presence of the Creator after the king of creation that is the man comes into being.

Another symbol of this kenotic presence is the different types of the garments the first pair of human beings is wearing before, during and after the Fall. As strange as it may seem, in the Eden depicted at Sucevita, Adam and Eve are represented richly clothed and not nude. After the fall, however, they are depicted without those richly ornate clothes, but on the contrary, with their hips covered with some leafs as a sign of precariousness and nudity.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Adv. Haer.*, 4, 38, in Lars Thunberg, *The Human Person as image of God in Christian Spirituality*, I. vol., edited by Bernard Mc Ginn, J. Meyendorf and Jean Leclercq, Crossroads, New York, 1985, p. 294.

<sup>23</sup> C.L. Crouch, *Genesis 1:26-27 as a statement of humanity's divine parentage*, in „The Journal of Theological Studies”, vol. 61, part 1, april 2010, pp. 1-15.

The symbol of the light and that of the garment are Christological symbols and they are related with the baptism as a return to the creation before the fall or as a recreation and regeneration of the humankind<sup>24</sup>. And in the Sucevita frescos, they are so present and powerful because through them we see the presence of a God ready to establish a proper and dialogical context in which, freely and unconstrained, the man can develop its full manhood. One cannot be saved unless he wants it, and he cannot be forced to do so because „the beginning of salvation is a good intention”<sup>25</sup>, says St. John Climacus. The creation, as suggested by the fresco, is not accomplished yet and the man has a word to say about this, his opinion on that is decisive and he assumes a risk that may conclude in a horizontal history that leads nowhere, but into violent and useless death. The scene of the creation at Sucevita ends with the first crime of the human history, Cain murdering Abel, as an *etcetera* of all the meaningless episodes of perpetrated hatred and violence that were to follow throughout the entire history.

*The Ladder* is not only reversing the sense of this history, but in its depiction retakes these symbols and it reinterprets them centering them upon Christ and his salvation. The white light is so present in the color of angels (garments and wings) who are accompanying the climbing monks<sup>26</sup> and even more so in the garments of Christ<sup>27</sup>. The followers of Christ are figured in their specific monastic garments<sup>28</sup> as a sign of their willingness to re-

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<sup>24</sup> Andre Hamman, *Introduction, Baptism, Ancient Liturgies and patristic texts*, Alba House, New York, 1967, pp. 22-29; Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church, History, Theology and Liturgy in the first five centuries*, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, 2009, pp. 560-562.

<sup>25</sup> St. John Climacus, *op. cit.*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> „(...) an angel helps the solitary”, *Ibidem*, 27, p. 262.

<sup>27</sup> This is to be taken as an obvious symbol of a Ressurrected Christ who inspires with His presence the ascensional movement of the monks. For the monk, considers John Chryssavgis, „does not treat the body as a tomb; rather, together with the body, the monk is completely entombed in order to be completely risen. Thus death gives way to resurrection (...)”. *John Climacus from the Egyptian Desert to the Sinaite Mountain*, Ashgate, Burlington, 2004, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> This is why between the icon of creation and the icon of the ladder, on the same northern wall of Sucevita, the artist painted the icon of the life of Saint Pachomius the Great, from whom the form of the monastic habit is to be taken.

cover the garment of grace that was once lost because of the sin<sup>29</sup>. Contrary on the left side of the ladder, the artist depicted the falling monks indecently nude, with their legs uncovered as the demons are rushing them into the open mouths of Hades. The dialectic is the same. Analogically, we, as Adam did, are exercising our power of saying yes to Christ and to His will during our lives. As for Adam, to be on the ladder and to be recovered from the horizontality of a meaningless history inaugurated by the sin of the first human beings, does not mean that we can allow to ignore the terrible dimension of this freedom, of this call of being dialogue partners with Christ. We can also say no, and for some this means that the Hades is painfully present. This is why, from the ladder no one seems to descend but merely to fall.

Another significant element is that in the scene of the temptation, Satan is depicted in the form of a serpent with a crown on his head. The same type of crown is to be found in the hands of the angels that are at the right side of the ladder and it is also found on the head of the first monk that arrives at the top of the ladder<sup>30</sup>. This symbol of the crown shows the deceiving nature of sin who often presents itself as virtue, but also speaks about true lordship and the consequences of serving the wrong lord, the lord of this world. In the icon of the creation, Adam is represented as writing a contract in the presence of the devil<sup>31</sup>,

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The reference to the baptismal garment of light is obvious, but the two should not be confounded, for the baptismal garments are recreating the original glory and the monastic habits are a sign of exercising this glory by assuming every day the death and resurrection of Christ.

<sup>29</sup> In this context *sin* is not to be taken as the *original sin*, but as St. John Climacus often says, the sin of ignoring the presence of Christ or of His salvation. Since He came, the many sins the Law was talking about are to be reduced to one only sin, that is separation from Christ or fighting against Him and against those who obey Him. St. John Climacus, *op. cit.*, 1, p. 73.

<sup>30</sup> Rev. 2, 10: „Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life”. The difference is that while the angels are keeping the crowns on their hands suspended over the heads of the climbing monks, on the top, the guardian angel himself puts the crown on the head of the monk who managed to climb till the top. The crown is present during the climb and also is something to be obtained as the Ladder goes up.

<sup>31</sup> This depiction is to be found very often in the Romanian iconography. See

suggesting that Adam delivered himself to a false lord thinking perhaps that a kenotic Lord might be also an absent one...

However, as we look at the Christ in the top of the Ladder we do not see the impassible God who waits patiently to give a proper reward to the faithful servants who obeyed and exercised themselves in all sorts of virtues. His image is one of the most dynamic of the entire composition. He is getting out of his *mandorla* in a vigorous attempt of receiving with his entire presence the first arrived monk. Martin Rupert, after studying the gesture of the Christ from the top of the ladder as appears in the manuscripts of the Ladder, noticed that there are generally two types of depicting Christ in this scene. One is the Christ who grabs the hand of the monk who nears the last rung, the so-called *anastasis* type, and the other represents Christ offering a crown to the same monk and this is to be associated with the imagery of the martyrs<sup>32</sup>, and I would dare to say, of the Crucifixion since the first martyr to be crowned like this is the „Protomartyr”, the crucified Christ<sup>33</sup>.

At Sucevita's frescos we find both acts being performed in the same time. With His right hand Christ grasps the hand of the uppermost monk securing him a safe passage to His presence, to His world, while the guardian angel puts the crown on the same monk's head. Both acts are rich and significant as they speak about the kenotic Lord we have seen in the Garden of Eden. And only understanding this gesture we can understand why, in rendering the history of salvation, the artist at Sucevita didn't paint any of the scenes of earthly life of Christ. Only looking to Christ we understand that the Ladder *is* the Cross, a Cross that speaks not only about a historical event, but about an event that takes place today<sup>34</sup>.

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N. Cartoian, *Zapisul lui Adam*, in „Artă și tehnică grafică”, caiet 3, martie 1938, but its theological sources and background are not understood very well, so much that Paul Henry dismisses the representation as mere folklore. *Folklore et iconographie religieuse*, Melanges de l'Institut Francais des Hautes Etudes en Roumanie, Paris, 1937; Idem, *Les Eglises de la Moldavie du Nord*, Ernest Leroux, Paris, 1930, p. 246.

<sup>32</sup> John Rupert Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> „Blessed is who mortifies his will to the very end... He will be placed at the right hand of the Crucified”. St. John Climacus, *op. cit.*, 4, p. 106.

<sup>34</sup> „Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts”; Heb. 4, 7.

The Ladder of the Divine Ascent is in fact a meditation of taking one's Cross and following Christ as instructed in the Gospels<sup>35</sup>; suspended between Heaven and Hell on a piece of wood, the monks are living the mystery of the One suspended on the Cross. Christ is not absent from the ladder because He is on the Cross, on the same Cross that is prefigured in the Baptism and in the Ladder as a symbol of the Christian life. The ladder is hiding in the impetuous mounting of the faithful the very presence of Christ, so that He is not absent, is just kenotic, inspiring from inside the man to become in His likeness that is to continue and to accomplish the eternal destiny of manhood. Only assuming the Cross we can taste the Resurrection<sup>36</sup>, the Pascha<sup>37</sup>; but as for Him, there is no distance between our death and resurrection because in Him we experience both at the same time. We contemplate the Crucifixion of Christ and his Resurrection – this being the kenotic image – and in the same time we take into consideration our crucifixion and our resurrection in the symbol of the ladder.

The ladder is not important as correcting necessarily an original sin that occurred after the creation, but as taking the man, today, into the vivid experience of assuming the Cross and following Christ on the path He opened<sup>38</sup>. The Creation is depicted there only as a remembrance of the fact that *becoming* is the verb that stays at the very heart of human reason of being, and that becoming is the intimate perspective and the personal call of mankind, now and today. Adam's sin is my sin, his fall is my fall, and his participation at the resurrection might become mine<sup>39</sup>. My

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<sup>35</sup> Mark 8, 34.

<sup>36</sup> „La vita monastica (...) si trova in perfetta continuità con il battesimo; e uno stato di vita in cui tutto è concepito per permettere all'uomo di realizzare il più pienamente possibile la partecipazione alla morte e alla risurrezione di Christo, significata e inaugurata dal sacramento.” Placide Deseille, *La dottrina spirituale di Giovanni Climaco*, in *Giovanni Climaco e il Sinai...*, p. 111.

<sup>37</sup> The Ladder at Sucevita is paralleled on the interior by the painting of the life of Moses, the one with whom the Exodus, the pasha of the Jews, is associated.

<sup>38</sup> „La spiritualité hésychaste transcende structurellement la poursuite de l'état adamique comme terme final de la quête mystique, et ne l'impose pas en tant que stade qu'il faudrait nécessairement réaliser avant de pouvoir avancer plus loin, vers la *theosis*”. Andre Scrima, *op. cit.*, p. 462.

<sup>39</sup> If I sin I do not sin because Adam sinned but because I want to. His sin is not the cause but the first of the sins. And St. John begins the Ladder by defining

sin is not the consequence of his sin, as I am recovered and covered with the garments of grace that I have lost before. Since the Incarnation of Christ the problem is no longer how to deal with a curse that continuously poisons my nature but rather how to follow Christ in becoming more and more like Him<sup>40</sup>. Therefore, in depicting the Creation and the fall the artist at Sucevita did not consider merging it with the symbol of the Ladder as he did with the Crucifixion and the Resurrection of Christ, but he associated it with the icon of the ladder only at a formal symbolical level, offering some keys of interpreting the ladder itself. The scene of the ladder is not the direct consequence of that of the Fall, but is to be understood as the consequence of the Cross and offers the hope of the final Resurrection. The history of Genesis is only a source of hermeneutical approach of the realities that are now and are to come.

If the Cross is the true content of the ladder on which the humans are mounting, the ladder is presenting the Cross from our perspective. Strangely enough, at Sucevita is to be noticed that, from Christ's perspective, the ladder is not unfolding as it should, meaning that on His right we find the fallen and in His left are presented the saved ones. In fact, as suggested before, the ladder is offering our own perspective of the Cross, our own point of view, and from this perspective, as we watch the image, at our right we have the angelic order and at our left the demonic chaos is enacted. The artist was so careful in rendering this perspective so that entering the gates of Sucevita everyone is put in the presence of a choice after being informed of the consequences: *Behold I have put before you the good and the evil*<sup>41</sup>... In this very disposal of the scene we could notice the presence of the kenotic Lord, who renounces His own perspective, his own view, in order to offer a formal prevalence of ours.

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the humans as mainly „endowed with the dignity of free will”. St. John Climacus, *op. cit.*, 1, p. 73, that is he is stressing out the fact that the Adam's sin can no longer be invoked as a source of sinfulness. See also, John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ, Life in Death*, SVSP, New York, 2006, p. 89.

<sup>40</sup> „There must be no talk of a «lapse» (...). To everyone who has received the Lord in baptism, He has given the power to become children of God.” St. John Climacus, *op. cit.*, 29, p. 285.

<sup>41</sup> Deut. 30, 15.

## Conclusions

Reading an iconographer's text, which is an icon, requires mainly a key to understand it and an open heart to accept what is to be revealed after the opening is performed. Knowing perhaps that through the ages the key of understanding the frescoes at the Sucevita monastery might become lost, the iconographer preferred to offer himself the key in deciphering the mystagogy of his paintings. In understanding the Ladder of the divine ascent and its role in transforming one's heart he depicted the symbolic detail of the Genesis in order to discover the real point of departure in interpreting the Ladder, which is, strangely, not the Genesis itself, but the Crucified and Resurrected Christ. The icon of the Genesis develops westwards ending on the western wall with the scene of the Final Judgement, while the Icon of the Ladder develops eastwards accomplishing itself in the Great Deisis that adorns the altar from outside. In doing so, the iconographer managed to make both the scenes of Creation and of the Ladder to convene in the same point: Christ himself. It is beautiful to see that angle that opens so wide, trying to embrace the entire world, and who has the same point of departure: Christ.

At Sucevita the iconographer didn't want to „illustrate” a famous book in order to impress both the monk and the pilgrims that might have been visiting the monastery. Associating the Ladder with the Genesis, would lead the follower to a greater understanding of who he is and what is he meant to do in order to become. The tension between being and becoming is at the heart of the Ladder of Saint John Climacus. The beautiful part is that this tension is not taking place outside Christ. In fact, through baptism we are refashioned in Christ and after this inaugural moment we are becoming more like Christ. And if in the text of the Ladder there were words to speak about this, at Sucevita there are colors, visual symbols and there is also the category of the *diaphanous* through which two realities are merged and expressed distinctly in the same time, without confusion and without separation.

The key of understanding a text of basic Christian spirituality and its depiction on a wall of an ancient monastery is Christ himself and into Him both the First Creation and the Regeneration are

taking their lawful place. And furthermore, through Him the human-kind is to launch itself to the depths of the eternal love and communion with the One we were created for. From the moment in which He touches with His hand the presence of the man ascending to Him, the Ladder never ends, it only begins and in this eternal beginning we are called to taste the freshness of His presence and the beauty of His voice: „Behold, I make all things new”<sup>42</sup>. Or, as Saint John Climacus put it: „If it is true that love never fails and that the Lord will guard the coming in of your fear and the going out of your love, then love has no boundary, and both in the present and in the future age, we will never cease to progress in it, as we add light to light”<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Rev. 21, 5.

<sup>43</sup> St. John Climacus, *op. cit.*, 26, p. 251.

**Ascending to Christ, becoming anthropos  
- as depicted in a fresco at the Sucevita Monastery -**

Archim. Hrisostom RĂDĂȘANU

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