

**FINDING ONE'S WAY INTO GOD'S GARDEN:
BEING A ROMANIAN ORTHODOX NUN**

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Abstract

This thesis explores women's Orthodox monastic life in contemporary Romania. The analysis presents the results of a three weeks long field research based on qualitative methods in two monasteries. It focuses on three main aspects: the connections between the monastic setting and the outside world, nuns' everyday routines and religious experiences. The first part of the thesis describes the impact of the external realm on monastic life and shows how nuns negotiate their interactions with the profane space. The second and third parts deal with the ways in which nuns' subjectivities are reshaped inside the monastery. The main argument is that nuns evolve between two sets of binaries: inside (monastic setting)—outside (external world) and interior (spirit)—exterior (body). These become essential in considering some broader problematics: women and postsocialism, daily practices in monastic life and the importance of bodily disciplines and voluntary will in reshaping one's subjectivity.

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1. Introduction

Tatiana first thought about joining the monastery and leaving behind her “worldly” existence when she was nineteen. Now she is twenty nine; six years ago she made a big step forward and left her home and family in order to dedicate her life to God. It happened when she was in her senior year of high school and the final exams were close. One of her classmates convinced Tatiana to go to church and pray so that God would help them pass the exams. After graduation, Tatiana started to go more and more often to church and soon she was attending all of the five weekly sermons; in the meantime, she found a confessor who guided her spiritual development. In spite of her frequent quarrels with her mother who was against any of her religious impulses, one year later she began to study theology. At the same time, during holidays Tatiana started to travel around the country together with a friend in order to visit some monasteries. After experiencing the monastic way of life without any constraints, in her third year of studies she voluntarily joined one of the monasteries she had visited. Tatiana followed her dream to become one of “God’s brides” even though she had to run away from home and many of her experiences inside the convent were discouraging her to continue on this path. In addition, she continued her studies and this year she will earn her MA degree in theology. Tatiana is only one of those women who lead their daily lives in a convent and divide their time between work and prayer.

In this thesis, focusing on two Romanian Orthodox monasteries which represent two different types of monastic life, I will examine the life context in which women of different ages decide to enter the convent, their everyday routines and religious experiences. Also, I will discuss not only why they choose to join the monastery but also what is that keeps them there day after day. This puzzle becomes even more intriguing if we take into consideration the historical context in which the study was realized. After forty-three years of communism, in 1989, Romania became a democracy. Under socialism, numerous members of the clergy

were persecuted and incarcerated and many monasteries were closed. The shift in the political system was accompanied by a revival of the religious feeling and Christian beliefs (Naumescu 2007: 25) and many people started to go to church again. In these conditions, it is interesting to see what motivated women to become nuns in a period when Romania was making important and decisive steps towards a free market economy and modernization. How do they decide to join the monastery when so many opportunities unheard of twenty years ago are available to them and what makes them stay? How do nuns and novices present their daily lives in the monastery? How are their lives inside the monastery influenced by what is happening in the exterior world? How is the difference between outside and inside constructed?

In addition, in my thesis I will illustrate how nuns' subjectivities are reshaped along the continuous religious training through a constant and rigorous schedule of praying and working and how their subjectivities are modeled during interactions with the other members of the monastery. In order to discuss the main changes they undergo once they enter the monastery, I will focus on three aspects: the relationship between nuns and their bodies, the complex and multi-sided relationships among monastics, and the relationship between nuns and God. Knowing that the confessor is the only man in a women's community, I will also address the gender aspect of these relations. While trying to find answers to the next set of questions I will also channel my attention to the effects that the monastery as a cloistered space has on these relations: What are the implications of having to respect a strict daily schedule and of living in an enclosed space? What is the outcome of the constant acts of disciplining the body to which women are subjected (by others or by themselves) and how can it be related to the spiritual development? How can the relationships between the

members of a nunnery¹ be described? Can one talk about a gender hierarchy and gendered relations within a nunnery?

Trying to go beyond the common sense perceptions, my thesis aims at presenting the Orthodox monastic life in contemporary Romania, while showing how it is influenced by “worldly” social changes². Thus, I argue that every larger social, economic or political transformation in the outside world has its own echo in the enclosed space of nunneries; monastics do not base their existence only on their spiritual development but they supplement it with “worldly” concerns, the external world acting like a mediator between the body and the spirit’s necessities. In discussing these things, the gender aspect should not be left aside. The Orthodox Church itself is a male dominated hierarchical structure. Compared to monks’ vertical ascending career opportunities and the status they have in the public eye, the nuns have a secluded avenue of social mobility. Having to work both inside and outside the monastery, the nuns have less time for praying, and thus fewer chances to achieve a spiritual development similar to that of the male confessor who spends the majority of his time inside the monastery and does not engage in physical labor.

By exploring the inconsistencies between the official discourse (based on religious writings and teachings) and the actual practice of a group of monastics, this research will provide, on a larger scale, a wider significance in terms of women’s experiences of postsocialist transformations and, on a lower scale, the possibility to shed light on the position Orthodox nuns hold in relation to the contemporary society.

My thesis evolves around three important themes: women and postsocialism, daily practices in monastic life, and the importance of bodily disciplines in reshaping one’s subjectivity. In my attempt to position my research in the current debates on these topics I

¹ I use the Catholic term “nunnery” to refer to female Orthodox monasteries. I chose this term in order to avoid the frequent repetition of words such as “monastery”, “monastic” and “monasticism”.

² In this thesis I use “worldly” in reference to something that usually pertains to the outside world and has mainly mundane characteristics; the opposite of this concept is something that for the most part belongs to a spiritual sphere.

will first present the historical context in which it was realized and then offer a brief review of the relevant literature which brings them into discussion.

1.1. From Socialism to Postsocialism: Religion and Monasticism in Romania

In my research I chose to focus on Romanian Orthodox monasteries. I picked Romania for both subjective and objective reasons: first, I had access to an Orthodox Romanian monastery and second, monastic communities are on the rise in Romania after being threatened with disappearance during communism (Reidhead: 931). Orthodoxy is the main religion in Romania and it had a surprising monastic revival after the fall of socialism. The Romanian Orthodox Church has held the position of “the dominant church in the state” since 1925 (Foszto 2006: 272) and it has 637 monasteries and hermitages³ with over 8000 nuns and monks (The Romanian Orthodox Church n.d.). All members of the Church’s hierarchy are monks and come from different monasteries—according to the Orthodox norms, they are the only ones who can advance upwardly in their religious careers.

During the communist era, the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the state was very controversial. Even though the Church showed at first its support towards the regime, the socialist governments persecuted various members of the clergy. The most drastic measure taken against the Church and monasticism was the decision to reduce the monastic personnel. The rationale behind this action was not to allow people capable of work to enter the monasteries instead of working for the construction of socialism. According to the Decree 410 issued on 28 October 1959,

monks entering monasteries should be at least fifty-five years old and nuns fifty years old. They should renounce any pension or salary from the state and should not be married. Theology students were allowed to enter monasteries at any age after completing military conscription (Leustean 2008: 31-2).

³ A hermitage is a place of retreat for monastics. It fulfils the same functions as a monastery, but it is smaller and has fewer members.

Discussing the Serbian monastic life during socialism, Bakic-Hayden (2004: 15) states that the communist government promoted an atheist society. The same thing also happened in Romania; as a result of this state policy, communists excluded religion from the school curriculum and advised people not to attend church's sermons or else there would be repercussions (Leustean 2008: 32). Towards the end of the 1960s people were allowed again to enter the monasteries, but it was forbidden for them to take the final vows.⁴

According to the Orthodox norms, the process of becoming a nun implies a systematic series of actions that sets the basis for a religious life (Bakic-Hayden 2004: 14). For women, there are three main stages in the Orthodox tradition: sister (*soră*), dressed sister (*soră îmbrăcată*) and nun (*călugăriță*). During the communist era, the Church introduced an intermediary stage between dressed sister and nun, which nowadays is present only in a small number of monasteries, in order to compensate for the fact that women could not become nuns: the rasophore nun (*rasofoară*). The first stage—being a sister—lasts at least three months during which the women are living in the monastery and are gradually initiated into the religious practices. At the same time, their vocation is being tested. In terms of clothes they must wear only black: a kerchief, a long large skirt and a long-sleeved blouse. The second stage—dressed sister—lasts between six months and three years throughout the duration of which they increasingly move along the path of their religious formation. Also, they receive the black robe (*rasa*) and *scufia*⁵. When they become rasophore nuns the candidates receive in addition a white shirt they wear under the black robe and *dulama*⁶. Towards the end, the sisters take their temporary vows. During the last stage, they take the perpetual vows that certify their status as nuns. Analyzing the Orthodox Serbian monastic tradition which is very similar to the Romanian one Bakic-Hayden (2004) states that, as part

⁴ When a woman takes her final vows she officially becomes a nun. Before that she is a sister, a dressed sister and, during communism, a rasophore nun. I explain in detail what each of these stages means in the next paragraph from the thesis.

⁵ A special black hood worn by nuns on their heads.

⁶ A black coat worn by nuns.

of the ritual, they receive new names and strands of their hair are cut, action which symbolizes the “cutting off [of] all previous thoughts of the world” (ibid.: 14). Nuns also receive some new accessories, symbolizing the passage from being a dressed sister or a rasophore nun to being a nun: *culionul*⁷, *paramanul*⁸, the belt (*centura*), the mantle (*mantia*) and *metania mare*. Bakic-Hayden further mentions that after taking this vow they are no longer addressed as “sisters”, but as “mothers” (ibid.: 14).

The harassment to which monastics were subjected during state socialism ended with the fall of the regime in 1989. After the “rebirth” of the religious phenomenon during postsocialism (Gillet 2001: 10), the public image of the Romanian Orthodox Church underwent an important crisis because of the numerous accusations that significant members of the clergy collaborated with the communist regime. Due to the cruelty of the deed, the widely publicized case of a nun who was crucified and killed during an exorcism ritual at the Tanacu monastery in 2005 also affected the image of Romanian monasticism. Despite these events, monasticism had a decisive role in the process of reconstructing the Church after nearly half a century of persecutions. All the monasteries and hermitages closed forcibly during communism were reopened and new churches and monasteries were built (The Romanian Orthodox Church n.d.) with the help of the Orthodox Church, politicians and businessmen who donated substantial amounts of money or construction materials. During postsocialism, monasteries were recognized as important centers of spirituality and became renowned places for pilgrimage tourism. Also, the Church got involved in social and philanthropic activities and put the basis of charity associations in order to help orphans, elders and persons with disabilities (The Romanian Orthodox Church, n.d.). The new patriarch, The Most Blessed Daniel, together with members of Church’s hierarchy, is now trying to improve the image of the Church and monastic life. Therefore, he brought some

⁷ A specific cylindrical hat without flaps worn by nuns.

⁸ A piece of cloth embroidered with religious messages that monastics wear on the skin underneath the black robe.

changes; he instituted new criteria in terms of age, education and religious vocation for selecting those people who can join the monastery and associate their image with that of the Romanian Orthodox Church. First, one must be at least eighteen years old to join a monastery (Romanian Patriarchy n.d.) and second, one needs to have a high school diploma or still be in school in order to serve God. Moreover, those nuns and monks who are under fifty and do not have a high school diploma must get one. Another new rule is that monks cannot become priests anymore without graduating from university and that those ones who are already priests and are under fifty have to go back to school to earn a diploma in theology.

1.2. Socialism and Postsocialism: A Gender Perspective

One of the stated intentions of the Communist parties from Central and Eastern Europe was to emancipate women, even though this was not their real priority; their ultimate aim was in fact to increase the labor force in the state's factories (Molyneux 1981). As a result, women were encouraged, and at some point forced by external factors⁹, to leave the comfort of their houses and find a job. The same idea was behind the Romanian government's 1959 decree which had as an outcome the removal from the monasteries of those nuns and monks capable of working for the state. The state offered various social benefits to those who were employed in order to draw women out of the home and into paid labor force. In order to ease this transition, there were also developed specific services which favored women's entering the paid work. Weiner (2007: 27), talking about the situation in Czech Republic, states that women were offered generous maternal leaves to raise their offspring while still receiving a certain percent from their salaries; additionally, the amount of household work was reduced through the socialization of domestic work. To some extent the communist regime emancipated women, but it didn't eradicate sexual inequalities. Communist parties implemented a set of public policies concerning women which brought

⁹ In Romania, some women were forced to work in paid employment because their families were dispossessed of their land and properties in the process of collectivization and nationalization (Harsanyi 1994: 40).

about some improvements in their position in society. Important measures were taken in several areas, such as education, employment, legislation, family policy, and political representation (Molyneux 1981). Even though the Romanian Communist party promoted equal rights and equal participation for women and men in the labor market and claimed that the socialization of the domestic sphere was necessary for the emancipation of women, it continued to associate women's image with the domestic realm and with the idea of motherhood. This is proven by the 1966 anti-abortion law which sets the basis of a very strict pro-natalist demographic policy (Harsanyi 1994: 43). Therefore, Romanian women had to carry a double or even triple burden: job, household work and child care. Moreover, the problem of job segregation cannot be overlooked (Weiner 2007: 30). Women who were in the paid labor force did not have access to the whole range of jobs available. Even though they could advance in their careers (especially those who were party members), they were "assigned" to certain categories of jobs which were seen as more feminine or less important¹⁰.

Postsocialism brought a light of hope in people's lives, but also a series of uncertainties. Democracy and market economy came along with an increased rate of unemployment and a reduction of state subsidies (Gal, Kligman 2003 [2000]: 11). Even so, Romanian women had to work outside their homes in order to survive. Statistics show that in Romania, at the end of 1992, women were more affected than men by the economic changes as 60 percent of the unemployed were women (Harsanyi 1994: 48). Romanian women also enjoyed more freedom during postsocialism: they had the chance to put the basis of women's organizations in order to defend their rights, were better represented at the political level and had reproductive freedom. This is the social context in which I studied a particular segment of women—Romanian Orthodox nuns. The historical framework I provided helps in

¹⁰ The majority of women were working in textile and food industries, administrative and service sectors while men were working in "metal processing, chemical, and construction industries" (Harsanyi 1994: 42).

understanding how they perceive the world and the women outside the monastery, what their reasons for joining the monastery were and what the impact of larger postsocialist transformation on monastic life was. Thus, my thesis contributes to the existent literature on female monastic life and on women and postsocialism. During the transition from socialism to capitalism, foreign and local social scientists focused on studying the social, political and economic changes that reconfigured women's lives (Gal, Kligman 2003 [2000]; Kligman 1998; Miroiu 2004) but they did not pay attention to the fields of gender and religion and did not take into consideration the women who found alternative life styles in this period, like nuns did. In their studies on women and postsocialism, most feminists analyzed women's situation by looking at the opportunities and difficulties they faced in this period. Previous research in the field failed to consider how this category of women coped with the social changes and how monastic life regenerated and modified in the postsocialist period. Thus, it would be interesting to find out the effects of postsocialist transformations on monastic life.

1.3. An Overview of Monastic Life

The process of religious formation is long and complex. From the time they arrive at the monastery, women are taught how to overcome their personal desires, to control and regulate their bodies in order to facilitate the establishment of a relation between God and them. In the Orthodox tradition, these women who divide their lives between prayer and work are "doubly neglected" (Bakic-Hayden 2004: 3) because they are not as visible as monks are (monks have the chance to advance in their careers inside the Church and they can also become confessors) to the outside world and because in many cases they do not have the opportunity to help other people by sharing their monastic experience. Still, there are a number of recent studies which deal with women's monastic life.

In her ethnography of a Mexican Roman Catholic convent, Rebecca Lester (2005) gives an insightful account of how young women who want to become nuns reshape their

gendered identities during the process. She shifted the focus of her research from studying women's reasons for joining the convent to studying the daily mechanisms that keep those women inside the monastery. Lester argues that they chose to enter the convent because they do not identify with either of the two dominant embodiments of femininity in contemporary Mexican society: the modern independent woman and the traditional dependent one. The Romanian Orthodox nuns I interviewed gave similar explanations; they do not identify with the dominant image of the modern woman who puts her career before family, marries late in life and has only one or two children. At the same time, they expressed their disapproval of uneducated women dependent on their husbands, claiming that a woman should be educated, but even in this situation her main concern should be her family.

While discussing the production of proper subjects in the monastic setting, Lester makes references to the work of Goffman and Foucault. I followed the same path as Lester did and I arrived at a similar conclusion. Even though their insightful accounts of “institutional life and subject formation” (Lester 2005: 22) can be very useful in offering explanations for the way in which one's subjectivity is reshaped in an enclosed setting, their theories (Goffman—his theory of total institutions; Foucault—his theory of disciplining the body) nevertheless have some drawbacks that prevent us from applying them to contemporary specific cases.

Talking about total institutions¹¹, Erving Goffman (1990 [1961]) stated that, once they enter such a setting, individuals start to change their conception of self as a result of the dissolution of connections with the outside world. Moreover, their subjectivities are being shaped because “all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority” (Goffman 1990 [1961]: 6) that has the power to control the ways bodies operate. In time, in order to make sense of their new situation, individuals begin to identify themselves

¹¹ Examples of total institutions: monasteries, prisons, mental hospitals, army barracks and labor and concentration camps.

with the other inmates and with the new way of life. Goffman's idea of total institution cannot be fully applied in my study because the monastery is no longer an enclosed place, the border between the inside and outside world being more fluid since, for economic and educational reasons, nuns have started to work outside the monastery. In addition, a nun enters the monastery out of her own will and, consequently, she does not give up entirely her agency. An exception is in the case when a child enters the monastery (or is being sent by her parents), has little contact with the outside world even from the beginning of her life and the only rules she knows are the monastic ones. This is exactly why in postsocialist Romania children are not allowed to join the monastery, being considered that they do not have the capacity to make such an important decision. According to Goffman, nuns would have to give up their individual will after joining the monastery; because of this inconsistency his theory cannot be fully applied when talking about monastic life.

Foucault also studied the subject formation in an institutional setting (the army, the monastery). According to him, bodily discipline is the main technique through which subjects are created; the regulation of the body is achieved through the strict control of desires. All of these disciplinary practices provide a starting point for the production of docile bodies, bodies that "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault 1995 [1975]: 136). Foucault's account of the institutionalized disciplinary practices which regulate the bodies was denounced by various feminists, such as Bartky (1988), because he fails to make a distinction between the bodies of men and those of women. Nevertheless, in the case of total institutions such as convents, it still represents a useful model of analysis, because both nuns and monks are subjected to similar performances once they join the monastery. Differences arise only when talking about the monk priest (confessor) who lives in a nunnery. Throughout my thesis, I follow Foucault's notion of discipline but I am also aware of the fact that his interpretation is only half valid in my case. Nuns voluntarily join the monastery and

thus they do not resist the monastic practices imposed on them. They do resist the disciplining techniques if they think that they were particularly being treated unfairly by those who hold a position of power.

Nuns' subjectivities are not created only inside the monastery as a result of the disciplining practices; they bring with them inside the monastery their previous experiences from the outside world. For nuns' religious formation it would be ideal that somewhere on the path of their spiritual training these two subject positions would collude in a single coherent one. Rebecca Lester (2005) claims the same thing: that what is needed is a "model of subject formation that both recognizes and takes seriously the distinct subjective experiences of all the participants while at the same time attending to the specific and moral content of this process and how it positions the 'new' subjects in relation to existing understandings and categories" (ibid.: 23).

Even though there are differences between the Orthodox monastic order and the Catholic orders, I find Rebecca Lester's ethnographic study very useful for my research as I used a similar theoretical framework, but in a totally different context. Most of the differences between the two religious institutions are in regard to the internal organization. In my opinion, these differences do not influence significantly the fact that both Orthodox and Catholic nuns voluntarily devote themselves to a spiritual existence and take special vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. However, there is a striking difference between the Siervas order studied by Lester which is an "active-life" order and Orthodox nuns who are cloistered. Thus, some differences between the two orders in experiencing the process of becoming a nun might come from the fact that unlike Catholic nuns who are deeply connected to the social issues of the community, Orthodox nuns are less implicated in social activities. So, when using Lester's model of analysis in my thesis I will pay attention to these differences.

Another relevant piece written by Rebecca Lester (2008) is a case study of a young postulant (novice) from a Roman Catholic convent in Mexico. She focuses on the experience of religious vocation by discussing the specific case of Celeste who tries to make sense of her experiences of leaving her body and commuting with God. Lester argues that the local cultural practices of interpreting one's own experiences in a reflexive manner has a heavy influence on the self; in addition, the embodied experience is materialized according to "broader social and ideological commitments about what makes us human and what makes that humanity meaningful" (Lester 2008: 72). This approach is relevant for my study because it deals with the way in which a novice reflects on the notion of religious vocation and tries to find the meaning of her personal relationship with God along her religious developmental path while using not only spiritual insights, but also psychological ones. This study is also helpful in discussing the relation between the physical flesh-and-blood body and inner desires.

Next, I am going to discuss the recent work of two religious studies scholars interested in female monasticism in Orthodox tradition. In her research, Milica Bakic-Hayden (2004) focuses on Serbian Orthodox women monastics in postsocialism. Looking at three generations of nuns (who entered the monastery in the '50s; in late '60s and '70s; in mid '80s and '90s) coming from different social backgrounds, she argues that even though they joined the monastery in different historical contexts and experienced in distinct ways the outside world (in terms of education, class privilege or religious knowledge) the nuns experience faith and monastic life in a uniform manner. This community is held together by each woman's will to be close to others who share the same Christian beliefs and at the same time condemn what is happening in the outside world. Bakic-Hayden's study is relevant for my thesis because we both discuss Orthodox monastic life in the context of postsocialist transformations. Another reason for which her research relates to mine is the fact that Bakic-

Hayden also analyzes women's life stories while paying specific attention to their motivations for joining the monastery and staying there. In addition, she deals with the way educated women perceive their life at the monastery. The Serbian nuns she interviewed joined the monastery for different reasons: they came from very religious families and felt very proud to serve God, they came at their parents' suggestion, hoping to find answers to some existential questions or as a result of the fact that they were disappointed by what was happening in society (war) and found no purpose in living in that meaningless world. The older nuns were less educated than the younger ones and joined the monastery when they were very young; there were also exceptions, but in most cases the abbess was the most educated woman in the monastery. The professional women entered the monastery in their late twenties or even later in order to seek a deeper meaning for their lives.

In this context I turn to the work of Alice Forbess (forthcoming) on Orthodox monastic life, in which she explores the production and transmission of religious knowledge in another Romanian monastery than the ones I studied. She constructs her research around the concepts of mysticism and charisma, analyzing the way in which these terms are used both by the novices and by the older nuns who train them. Taking over the distinction Harvey Whitehouse (1995 cited in Forbess, *ibid.*) made between two types of religious knowledge—"doctrinal" mode of religiosity and "analogic" mode of religiosity—she argues that the Orthodox Christians' knowledge she talks about can be inscribed in the second category. The "analogic" mode of religiosity is a subjective and mystical type of religious knowledge based on "multi-sensory data linked with individual experiences" (*ibid.*: 38) while the "doctrinal" one is grounded in "logical comprehension and intellectual revelation" (*ibid.*: 39); the former is "predominantly non-verbal, emotional and sensual rather than intellectual" (*ibid.*: 39) while the latter is characterized by the "stability, routinisation and universal appeal" (*ibid.*: 40) found in biblical writings. So, following Forbess, religious knowledge in Romanian

monasteries is based more on “obedience to the spirit” (ibid.: 60) rather than on rules and official knowledge coming from written religious texts. In my opinion, in the context of Romanian monastic life we cannot dissociate these two types of religious knowledge because they are equally important as monastics constantly use written text that describe the life of many saints in order to learn from their experiences and strengthen their faith, especially when they want to escape a temptation.

Vlad Naumescu (forthcoming) also examines the process of religious training, but in the case of Ukrainian Orthodox monks. He argues that, for novices, “imagination plays an active role in creating the mystical experience” (ibid.: 1) in the process of learning how to discover God. His analysis of this process is very helpful for my study, even though there are differences between monks and nuns that have to be taken into consideration. For example, the latter are viewed as being more charismatic than the former. Besides the regular charisma—a special virtue or gift divinely conferred to all monastics, confessors can achieve another type of charisma: priest charisma or, as Forbess calls it, charisma of office (ibid.). Both these types of charisma can be increased if the monastics behave in an exemplary manner and their religious merit and reputation is acknowledged at a larger scale. Hence, in my thesis when discussing the confessor’s role in a nunnery and the relationship between monastics and God I will talk about charisma and argue that it is gendered. Still, if one looks strictly at the learning process and at nuns daily practices I think that there are more similarities than differences. Naumescu’s study represents a good starting point for understanding the differences between nuns and monks and the gender inequalities that can arise in a nunnery. A visible gender inequality is that nuns do not practice certain religious rituals, such as exorcism, which attest the spiritual gifts that monks have and, at the same time, represent an important source of income for the monastery. This fact confirms that monks enjoy a greater recognition in the outside world while nuns are put in their shadow.

Even though all of these studies represent important inquiries into monastic life, in my opinion they fail to take into consideration the whole range of aspects of monastic life. This is why in my thesis I focus on three large themes, each of them being discussed in a separate chapter in the analysis part: the connections between the outside world and the monastery, the daily routines of monastic life and the process of reshaping nuns' subjectivities (both from exterior towards the interior and the other way around) in order to achieve a spiritual improvement. A central point is represented by the gender aspect; thus, I discuss the position held by the confessor in a nunnery as he is the only men in a community of women. While doing this I pay attention both to the personal context in which women decide to join the monastery and to the broader historical context, the postsocialist period. By taking a closer look at these aspects and not dissociating between the life before entering the monastery and the one they have inside the monastery, we can fully understand the path they follow in the process of their religious formation. As most of the nuns I interviewed entered the monastery during postsocialism it is important to see how they understand the broad social changes and how these changes influenced life in the monastic setting.

1.4. Outline of the Thesis

The thesis is structured in four main chapters. In the first one, I give some background information on Romanian monasticism during state socialism and postsocialism and depict women's position in society during these periods. Using Foucault and Goffman's theories of discipline and total institutions and other studies on monastic experience, I also provide a theoretical framework in order to analyze women's lives in the monastery. In the second chapter I present the methods I used, the research design and discuss my position as a researcher in the field. In the next three analysis chapters I describe the findings of my research, examining the links between the monastic community and the outside world, the everyday life inside the monastery and nuns' embodied experiences.

2. Methodology

In this section of the thesis I will outline the methods I used in my study, present the two research sites where I conducted the interviews and the participant observation and explain why I chose them, and finally expose the difficulties I encountered during fieldwork and discuss my position in the monastery.

2.1. Methods

In my research I used a combination of qualitative methods of inquiry: participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. The interviews gave me the opportunity to ask a set of pre-determined questions (using an interview guide), the freedom to ask follow-up questions and discuss other relevant topics that came up spontaneously. Another important advantage of using interviews was the fact that the interviewees formulated the answers in their own terms, the information I received being filtered through their own experiences, understanding and interpretation of events. This provided the study with additional “authenticity, reciprocity, and intersubjectivity” (Stacey 1991: 112). When using interviews a researcher also takes some risks that s/he must assume. In my case, there is the possibility that the informants chose not to share certain information if they perceived it as being too intimate or if it came in contradiction with their status as nuns.

Even though I interacted with many nuns and had informal conversations with them while they were engaged in different activities, they did not all agree to be interviewed in a formal setting. Because I did not want to make them feel uncomfortable while talking to me at any time I chose not to record the conversations, but to take notes and keep a research diary in which to write my observations as complete and as soon as possible. In the course of the day I was writing down as many scratch notes as I could (key words or short phrases). Later in the evening these were translated into more detailed notes in which I described in

chronological order the events I attended that day and the discussions I had. I wrote down everything I remembered, remaining open to add to my study new topics that came up in the conversations and could enrich my study on monastic life. I constantly reviewed my notes and included also personal observations: impressions, concerns, problems that I was dealing with at the time, and future questions that I wanted to ask.¹²

In order to overcome the limitations associated with the use of interviews, to gather more complete data and have a more insightful overview of the analyzed issue, I also conducted participant observation. Hence, during the three weeks of research I spent at the two monasteries I observed the nuns' everyday behavior—during the sermons, while they were doing manual labor (cooking, cleaning, taking care of the church, gardening), but also their use of language. Throughout the time spent at the monasteries I also had a number of informal conversations with the nuns. This type of discussions was very important for my research because the informants felt at ease to discuss some topics that they avoided during the formal meetings. Hence, they gave me the opportunity to ask different questions which helped me clarify and supplement the information I received during the interviews. Of course, using participant observation as a research method to collect data implies some risks. In the beginning, during my first days spent at the monastery, they tried to control the way they behaved, acted a bit unnatural and some of them even avoided me. But after a few days they got accustomed to my presence there and we became familiar with each other. In my opinion, using both interviews and participant observation, I got a more in-depth understanding of their reasons to become nuns, of their way of life at the monastery and of their perceptions about the outside world. The two methods complement each other, helping me to gather a body of information on the basis of which I built my argument.

¹² For a more detailed discussion on writing field notes see DeWalt and DeWalt (2002: 141). During my field work I followed their recommendations when taking notes.

2.2. Where? Who?

Fieldwork was carried out over a period of three weeks, in the spring of 2009, in two different Orthodox monasteries located close to a large city from Romania. The two research sites represent two out of three types of monastic life existent in the contemporary Orthodox tradition: life based on community support (*mănăstire de obște*)¹³ and solitary life (*mănăstire de sine*) (The Romanian Patriarchy, The Office of the Holy Synod 2003: 19). The third type of monastic life that will not be discussed here is the anchorite way of life (*pustnicie*), for those who retire to a solitary place in order to lead a secluded life grounded on religious principles.

The type of monastic life based on community support is characteristic of small monasteries and has some distinctive features: all the members are engaged in the same type of activity at a certain time—they all eat and participate to the sermons together; they share belongings—food, clothes, goods; and the abbess (mother superior) is the authoritative figure (along with the confessor) and has decision making power, meaning that nothing can be done without her blessing. The solitary type of monastic life can be found only in large monasteries with many members. Here the nuns are housed in separate buildings and in each house there are one to six nuns. The mother superior does not play such an important role in nuns' everyday lives: she has an administrative role, making the necessary decisions regarding the monastery's properties and representing the monastery in relations with the Romanian Orthodox Church. Thus, in each house there is an older nun who makes all the decisions concerning that house, being obeyed by the others. The manner in which monastic life carries on in this kind of setting is problematic from a spiritual point of view because every house has more “worldly” concerns: they have to earn their own money, so they have to be trained to be able to find jobs in the monastery's workshops in order to survive. Nuns

¹³ “Obstea (< Slavic, *togetherness*) is the generic name for the community, when people come together they are an obstea, and the name for the community's common property” (Mantescu 2007).

have to work in order to cover their costs of living (provide for themselves food and clothes, pay the monthly bills for electricity, water etc.) and also take care of the church (pay the bills, for church paintings, their restoration or buy other indispensable religious items). Working for money comes in stark contradiction with the religious and spiritual activities that should be their main concern. Considering the vow of poverty they have undertaken and the fact that they have to work for money, nuns are put at a hard test: they have to always differentiate between gaining money for their existence and remaining poor, having only the strict necessary.

Due to the short period of time allocated for the research, it was easier for me to gain entry to the hermitage (*schit*) in order to conduct participant observation and interviews because I have been there before and the mother superior already knew of my intentions to study monastic life in their community. When I was there in the winter there were six nuns, but in the meantime two of them left the monastery (one of them moved to another monastery and the other one, after sixteen years spent in monasteries, chose to return to a “worldly” existence). Hence, at the hermitage I interacted only with four nuns and their confessor. But I asked them if they know other women who would like to talk with me. This is how I came to conduct interviews at a large monastery with approximately one hundred and sixty members near their hermitage. So, the respondents from the second monastery were recruited through the snowball technique: one of the nuns from the hermitage, sister Tatiana, asked her nun friends if they want to help me or if they knew other women willing to share their experiences with me. Establishing a close relation based on mutual trust even from the start with this nun, she acted as my key informant. Sister Tatiana was a longtime resident in that community (she has been there for five years), knew the nuns from both monasteries very well and provided me with information about past events and monastic practices that I did not have the chance to observe.

I conducted in total interviews with seven nuns and two of their confessors who are also monks¹⁴. Additionally, I conducted one interview with a woman who, after ten years spent in the monastery, came to the conclusion that the monastic way of life does not suit her for reasons that I will come back to later in the thesis. Having a detached and somehow critical vision of monastic life but being at the same time knowledgeable about how women lead their lives in monasteries, the information I received from her enriched my study and made it more balanced. In the hermitage I interviewed one nun (the mother superior), two novices (dressed sisters) and the confessor. The second nun living there was at work most of the time and we did not get to have a formal conversation, but I had the chance to talk to her during meals and observe her behavior during sermons. In the large monastery I interviewed four nuns and one confessor, all the interviews taking place in the houses where they live. Even though I spent most of my research time at the hermitage and did most of the participant observation there, having access to some private spaces in the large monastery gave me the opportunity to observe the environment in which they lead their daily lives.

The people I interviewed are extremely varied in terms of age, education and skills. The respondents ranged in age from 25 to 100 years old at the time of the interview; they had different levels of education—some of them had graduated from secondary school or college and the rest of them were in the process of completing their studies; in addition, one of the nuns is going to earn her MA degree in theology this summer. In terms of skills, they have different “gifts”—they can cook, sew, or paint icons—and according to these skills they are given their weekly assignments.

¹⁴ After becoming a priest, a monk can be ordained as a confessor. His role in a nunnery is to absolve nuns of their sins. He is “invested with great power and responsibility, combining two contradictory roles: that of judge, standing in for God, and that of scapegoat who took upon himself all the sins of those he absolved” (Forbess forthcoming: 53).

2.3. Conducting Field Research

I first visited the hermitage in the summer of 2008 and came back during the winter holidays. Then I talked with the mother superior, telling her about the research that I was planning to do. Being an educated woman (she has earned three college degrees and an MA in theology), she understood the importance of studying monastic life in contemporary society and gave me her consent to conduct my research there. She talked with the rest of the nuns and they all received me very well in their community.

Although I was an outsider, the fact that I was also Orthodox by family background helped me to establish more quickly a relation with them. At the same time, they expected me to have some knowledge about the religious practices and teachings. Even so, they understood that I am a lay person and this gave me the chance to openly ask questions about anything related to monastic life and their everyday routines. They let me in, accepted my presence there and tried to make me feel as comfortable as possible. Still, they never saw me as an insider in the true sense of the word as they were constantly reminding me that I cannot fully understand the source of their faith and their inner drives that make them follow the religious path. The fact that I was studying in a foreign country influenced my research in a positive manner because they got to respect me for that, having the impression that my thesis is very important; at the same time the nuns were glad that they can help by just talking about their experiences inside the monastery.

Doing research in a cloistered setting such as a monastery and not discussing the researching process can give rise to a series of questions. Hence, there are two important things that must be addressed: my position as a researcher and my position as a “temptation”. As Myerhoff and Ruby (1982 cited in Wasserfall 1997: 152) state, a researcher cannot dissociate herself from her social background which shapes the ways she “observes, attributes meanings, interprets action and dialogues with her informants.” Thus, I tried not to minimize

the importance of the differences between me and my respondents, but to critically reflect on them and see how they could influence my research. We belong to different social classes, have distinct systems of values and do not share the same opinion on many things. For example, we had contradictory points of view regarding the contemporary woman: they strongly believed that a woman should be family oriented while I asserted that she can have both a good job and a family if she receives some help from her partner. So, the same story can have many interpretations, depending on who analyzes it (Borland 1991: 63). When examining the experience of a respondent the researcher can assign it a different meaning from that of the respondent, giving rise to a conflict of interpretation. In my attempt to overcome this situation, I double checked a piece of information if I was not sure of its accuracy, treated the information I had as text¹⁵ and used my self-reflexivity in the analyzing process. But at the same time I was aware of the fact that reflexivity has its limits and one should use it carefully. In my study I did what Wasserfall (1997) recommended: I tried to present my own perspective on things while striving to understand the respondents' position and their point of view.

The second subject worth discussing here is my position in the monastery as a "temptation". I was one of the many possible representations of what they gave up when they decided to join the monastery. I was an educated middle-class young woman studying abroad while they voluntarily took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. I was coming to and leaving from the monastery whenever I wanted as opposed to them who were supposed to spend most of their time there. I was free to do whatever I wanted while they had to ask for permission even for apparently unimportant things. The fact that I and the interviewees belonged to such different social categories was problematic at first because I was afraid this would have a negative influence on our interactions. I tried to overcome this distance by not

¹⁵ Trying not to take for granted the truthfulness of the answers received during the interviews, I treated the data as text in need of analysis. While using the collected information, my attempt was to offer my own perspective on it rather than just presenting the way monastics interpreted it.

attracting special attention through my appearance and behavior. Even though now all the nuns are poor, most of them come from working class or middle class families (not very poor, but not very rich either). The fact that our social backgrounds were not so different made it easier to establish a relation.

3. Outside the Fence of the Monastery—Connections with the Outside World

Outside the monastery there is a world that in most cases does not know much about what is happening on the inside even though it influences what takes place “behind the fence”. In this chapter I will discuss the connections between the monastic setting and the outside world and the impact of some external factors on convent life. I will bring into question not only the physical borders that divide the monastic space and the outside world but also the spiritual borders that separate people who share two distinct systems of values. Also, I will highlight the tension felt by nuns in the process of spiritual development brought about by the intrusion of the exterior into such an organized place. In order to do all these, I will look at two main aspects. First, I will talk about the geographical location of the monastery, paying attention also to the surrounding areas and their impact on convent life. Second, I will outline the typologies of women who enter the monastery and present the motivations behind their choice. Also, I will discuss the nuns’ perceptions of contemporary women who live outside the monastery. Because of the fact that the two monasteries where I conducted the research are very close to each other and, as a result, nuns’ interactions with the outside world are similar (nuns from both monasteries interact with the same kind of people: villagers and visitors from the city; the monasteries are situated in the same geographical area and thus confront the same problems in their relation with the neighbors), in this chapter I will refer only to the hermitage.

3.1. The Border between Sacred and Profane Space

The fence is constituted as a symbolic object, representing the physical border between the cloistered sacred monastic space and the profane outside world. The hermitage is situated in a village near a big city, at the end of an unpaved road. The surrounding area, which incorporates big villas (some of them still unfinished) and a construction warehouse, is deeply inconsistent with the idea of isolation and silence characteristic for a monastic setting. Even though the neighbors are constantly making loud noises and thus disrupt the quiet ambience necessary for praying and spiritual ascetism, the nuns never complained about this. Yet they recognize the fact that they do not like the noises and tumult because a calm and quiet atmosphere would help them to acquire an inner peace favorable to meditation. Some of the people living next-door were discontent about the sounds made by the church bell in the morning. And so it seems that both the members of the monastery and their neighbors perceive the noise coming from the each other as an inconvenience. But in this case they decided to speak out and after a talk with the abbess they all came to an agreement: the morning sermon was delayed half an hour (from 5:30 to 6:00) in order not to disturb the neighbors' sleep, especially during the weekends. This is the most visible and direct negotiation between the inhabitants of the two spaces and its closure was not positive for the nuns.

When the monastery was founded there was no building near by, but in the last three years approximately six villas were constructed as a result of the intense process of suburbanization typical for the Romanian large cities (Chelcea 2008). Before this, the nuns led their lives quietly at the hermitage and even took long walks on the lake side near by or went rowing. They retired into the monastery in search of silence and meditation, but “the city came over us and it conquered the quiet life we had” (sister Tatiana). And their situation went from bad to worse. After the lake was leased for the next fifty years, the new owners set

up a barrack near the hermitage from where the guards watch over the lake so that nobody can fish without paying a fee. The lake became a profitable business because of the city dwellers that come there during the weekends to fish and relax. The nuns' way of life was deeply affected by the new changes: they are more restricted in their movements and they feel uncomfortable seeing almost naked people getting a sun tan. Having a piece of the outside world right in front of their eyes, the nuns are constantly reminded of the kind of life they gave up when they joined the monastery and their faith is tested almost every day. They try to overcome this temptation by respecting some basic rules: they avoid any contact (even visual) with people from the outside unless it is absolutely necessary. At the same time, nuns try themselves not to appear as a temptation for those outside the fence, especially for the men. Under the long large black skirt they wear a petticoat (*jupa*) so that they are sure that nobody can see the shape of their bodies; they wear only black long-sleeve blouses and always have a kerchief on their head so that their hair cannot be seen.¹⁶ Even if the dress code is very strict and it is difficult to wear these clothes during summer the nuns disciplined themselves to do this and now they perceive it as a normal thing. The care for the exterior aspect is meant to keep their bodies pure, being consistent with the vow of chastity they undertook.

The geographical location of the monastery has a great impact on its internal organization and system of rules because the nuns have to adapt to what is happening in the immediate outside world. Being situated near a big city, the hermitage does not own plots of land which could be cultivated with crops to secure the nuns' daily subsistence. Hence, the nuns have the freedom to leave the monastery in order to go to work or to school. The abbess works in the city and she has to make the trip on a daily basis. In order to be more efficient and, at the same time, not to have contact with too many people as she would have if she had

¹⁶ As it is considered a symbol of femininity used by women to attract and seduce men, nuns say that they should always have their hair covered.

to use public transportation, her parents bought her a car. Even though according to the vow of poverty they undertake monastics are not allowed to own personal goods (Bakic-Hayden 2004: 11) both she and father Vitalie, the confessor from the hermitage, own a car. The nuns talk appreciatively about cars, pinpointing their utility: “A car is very useful because you can travel easily, you do not depend on other people and you can go somewhere even if it is late at night” (sister Tatiana). Even Tatiana who does not own a car has a driving license. She went to driving school while she was in the monastery, thinking that maybe someday she would have her own car and use it when she went to the city; in the meantime she takes the minibus. I met sister Tatiana twice in the city when she was going to the university and, consequently, I had the chance to observe her behavior. It was obvious that she did not feel comfortable in crowded places; while we were travelling by bus she looked down for most of the time, even when we were talking, spoke hardly audibly and avoided eye contact with other people. In addition, Tatiana said that she avoids touching other people because it is not appropriate for a nun to have this kind of contact. Tatiana chose a relaxed place near her school where we could talk and there, being acquainted with it, she felt more comfortable. Her behavior shows that she is humble and shy, acting according to one of the unwritten rules of monastic life: that of not interacting with lay people unless it is necessary. Tatiana’s conduct also discloses the dynamic relation between the interior and the exterior; the act of internalizing a monastic rule which became a bodily practice shows that the nuns who have the inner will to improve their spiritual lives voluntarily reshape their subjectivities and this can be seen in their behavior. Even though the nuns were not constrained in any way to discuss with me, they were not reluctant at any moment; probably this is because they were content that someone was interested in their life stories. They used this opportunity to make known their monastic experiences and their opinion on the outside world as they attributed an important role to my thesis among the current writings on monastic life.

3.2. Shifting Worlds, Shifting Meanings—Perceptions about Contemporary Women

A few years ago, in Romania a large mobile phone company launched a strong advertising campaign with the slogan “Reinvent yourself!”. Father Miron, making an association between the message transmitted by the commercial and convent life, said that this is exactly what monastics do when they decide to leave the outside world and join the monastery: “You die as a citizen and rise again as a monk [nun]”. Why do women want to reinvent themselves and join the monastery? What is their perception about what is happening outside the fence of the monastery? What is their opinion about a woman’s role in society? Why do they not identify with the dominant images of the contemporary women? These are some of the questions that I want to address in this section in order to see what kind of women enter the monastery, at what stage in their lives they make this step and what their reasons for choosing this path. Furthermore, I will present how they perceive women in general and especially those who live in outside world (their critical perspective).

Even though the nuns I talked to entered the monastery in different periods of time—after First World War, during the communist era (before or after the Decree 410 on 28 October 1959 was suspended in the late ‘60s) or in the postsocialist period—most of them invoked the same reason for their choice. At some point in their lives, in most cases when they were very young, they discovered God and felt that their true calling was to serve him. Still, there are some differences between their stories depending on the specific moment when they joined the monastery. Mother Ecaterina came to the monastery at the age of 15, after her father was killed during the First World War and her mother died because of an illness. While she was around 10 years old, she saw a group of nuns and from that point on she also wanted to become one. She left her aunt’s house where she lived, worked a while as an embroideress and after two years she took the final step and joined the monastery. Three

of her brothers also became monks and one of them was a confessor until his death at St. Nicholas monastery while she was a nun. For three years Mother Irina regularly attended the sermons at a monastery near her home village and finally joined St. Nicholas monastery when she was 19. Mother Paraschiva's story is very similar: for many years as a child she visited one of her aunts who was a nun and, after her youngest sister joined the monastery, she decided to do the same; their older sister joined them soon after. Most of the women who entered the monastery before the fall of communism came from families with a strong religious background and this is why their parents or relatives did not contest their decision, being even pleased that they chose this path. Some of them came from wealthy families and thus they did not choose this way of life for material reasons. In addition, if the nuns were coming from large families with many children, usually more than one child joined the monastery.

Most of those who entered the monastery after the fall of socialism faced a real problem because their parents disagreed with their decision. The most probable reason for this shift in parents' opinion on monastic life is the lack of religious education and thus faith in God, characteristic of the communist period in which they were brought up. Some of these young women even ran away from home in order to pursue their dream and it took years for them to knot the ties again with their family. For example, the abbess from the hermitage comes from an atheist family (her father was an army officer during communism) and she was also an atheist until the age of 19 when she got really sick and went into a coma. After she recovered she started to think very deeply about the meaning of life and her role in this world and, as a result she radically changed her way of living. She started to have more spiritual interests rather than material ones and began going to church regularly. Very soon she joined the monastery even though her parents disapproved of her choice. They still do not

support or understand her decision, but they got used to the idea and now she is struggling to bring them closer to God.

Still, there are also cases in which the parents of future nuns supported their decision. It seems that these women tend to come from religious families from rural areas with many offspring from which more than one child entered the monastery. None of the nuns I talked to was a single child; in all cases there were one or more brothers and sisters who remained in the outside world to take care of their parents. Mother Anastasia first entered a monastery when she was ten and visited her sister who was already a nun at that time; then she first thought about becoming a nun. Realizing that she did not enjoy “worldly” activities, like spending time with her friends or going out for a movie, but rather preferred to stay by herself and embroider, she decided at the age of 15 to follow her sister; her mother agreed.

The discourse of monastics regarding women outside the monastery is almost the same, no matter of gender and age. They share a common opinion also when they talk about the outside world; they expressed their dissent in regard with what is happening in society. Father Vitalie did not pinpoint specific events that he does not agree with, saying just that we live in troubled times and as a result people are less interested in going to church because of the daily concerns. Monastics depicted women as being sensitive and helpless while men are rational and determined. Drawing an association between Eve (the first woman according to the Bible) and women nowadays, they concluded that women are more wicked than men because Eve was the first one who fell under temptation and made Adam follow her. The abbess added that women should be humble and follow the Virgin Mary’s example and always stay behind men. Even though monastics consider that women and men should enjoy the equal right to get an education and that women should be involved in the paid labor force, they do not believe in gender equality. In their opinion, even if they receive an education and

have a career, women should get married and their main duties should be child rearing and managing the household.

A woman has the most important role in a family as a mother and wife. She is the element that gathers around her the whole family. She offers stability and keeps the family united. (sister Tatiana)

Therefore, women should work a “double day”, both at home and in paid employment. But a woman’s primary concern should be with her family because “the woman holds a family together, not the man” (the abbess). By sustaining this point of view, nuns render women in an inferior position in comparison to men. Women are associated primarily with the private realm; they are encouraged to carry out their maternal duties and be mainly mothers and wives only because the general belief is that maternal ties are stronger than paternal ones. The same idea can be linked with the notion of gender inequality as women are expected to be responsible not only for creating a family by getting married and giving birth, but also for maintaining it. As Devault (1991) argues, in this context caring becomes gendered work. In supporting these ideas, the abbess made reference to Paul the Apostle (*Sfantul Apostol Pavel*) who said that women redeem themselves from Eve’s original sin by giving birth:

I highly appreciate women who have many children because of their capacity for self-sacrifice. If you have the capacity to put others’ interests above yours, it means that you deeply cherish and respect your family.

Father Vitalie blamed the loss of moral values that characterizes our contemporary society and said that women have an important role in this. Young people have sex before marriage and if an unexpected pregnancy appears some women choose to have an abortion. His discourse about the termination of pregnancy is very similar to the official discourse promoted by the Romanian Orthodox Church which presents abortion in terms of guilt and sin. Lay women are advised to sacrifice themselves in the name of family values because these are more important than anything and a family cannot be complete without children.

Regarding the problem of women, nuns are quite conservative. They adopted the ideas present in the Bible and supported by the Orthodox Church which depict women from a

male dominant perspective, according to which women are placed in an inferior position. Women are expected to be the primary care takers for the children and the managers of the household and to dedicate the rest of their time to work outside the house. In spite of this, nuns got used to the idea that they would not have their own children and do not have regrets. For example, Tatiana, even though she recognized the fact that she likes children, said that she abandoned the idea of having her own kids when she came to the monastery. Nuns said that they do not feel the loss of not having children because they gave new meanings to the notion of family once they enter the monastery, leaving behind the “worldly” understanding of it. Hence, the ritual of becoming a nun is the symbol of their eternal union with God—they become “God’s brides”; if they enter the monastery when they are still young and do not have children of their own (this is what happens in most cases) they redirect their maternal feelings towards all of mankind, claiming that, by praying for them, they take care of people like a mother would care of her children.¹⁷

Another indicator of the fact that men and women have distinct positions and roles is the different places they are supposed to stand inside the church: men should stand in front and women behind them. In order to explain why it is like this they again made reference to the Bible: man was created first by God and thus he has a more privileged position, he is closer to God. In addition, inside the church women are more restricted in their movements than men are: they have to cover their heads in order not to tempt men. Their inferior position is attested also by the fact that there is a specific place in the church—the altar—where women are not allowed to enter by virtue of the very fact of being women since they are considered to be sinners more than men are.

In this chapter I tried to capture the connections between the nuns and the world that unfolds outside the fence of the monastery. The fact that the monastery is situated close to a

¹⁷ In nuns’ opinion, all women have maternal instincts, including them.

developing urban area has a great influence on nuns' lives. They cannot avoid contact with their neighbors or the people they work with; as a consequence, nuns have to constantly monitor their behavior and control their desires in order not to fall into temptation. In this situation, because they are not supervised while outside the monastery, they must discipline themselves from the interior towards the exterior; thus, their inner spiritual values should be reflected in their conduct. In the second subchapter I discuss women's reasons for joining the monastery and then present their (critical) perspective on contemporary women; most of the nuns entered the monastery because they did not identify with the lifestyles available in the outside world, while looking for deeper meanings in regard with people's existence on this earth. Moving along different scales in which gender roles are defined (society and monastery) and making references to different time periods (primordial times—important figures of women from the Bible) when they talk about lay women is evident that in the monastics' view all women should follow certain paths, paths that others have followed before them. Nuns do not think about the fact the contexts are so distinct from one another and compare lay women with their ideal image of femininity which is set as an aspiring example: the Virgin Mary (as she was both a virgin and the mother of Jesus). At the same time, they explain women's subordinated position both in society and inside the monastery in terms of sin—Eve made a mistake and now all women are deemed to pay for it. This is why women should bear children and sacrifice themselves for their families while men's role is to lead them. The rationale behind this statement is that women fell into temptation when they had the freedom to act as they wanted and to prevent that now they should be guided by men.

In the next chapter I will give an overview of daily monastic life, focusing on their activities as well as on the relationships they develop inside the monastery.

4. Looking Over the Fence—An Inside View on Monastic Life

After discussing the interactions between the outside world and the monastery and monastics' perspectives on contemporary women, this chapter is dedicated to the depiction and analysis of what is happening inside the monasteries on a regular basis. I will focus here on both discourse and practice, trying to see where practice stops and a discourse which is not grounded in facts but on a desirable reality begins. I will also shed light on the ways in which monastic life is transformed due to the larger changes in contemporary society.

In order to make my point as clear as possible, I divided the chapter into two main sections. First, I touch upon two interrelated aspects in relation to which women's lives are strictly organized and ordered: time and space. Second, using concrete examples, I analyze the relationships built inside the monastery between different types of actors. I pay specific attention not only to the inconsistencies between their discourses regarding this topic and the actual manner in which they act, but also to the explanations they develop in order to make sense of the conflicting relations between them. While discussing all these topics, I will constantly pay attention to the contradictions between practice and discourse and trace their origin in the outside world.

4.1. Time and Space in a Cloistered Monastery

4.1.1. The Daily Schedule

Inside the monastery, nuns divide their time between mandatory physical work and religious responsibilities. The manual labor plays a double role. On the one hand, it is necessary to work in order to ensure the financial autonomy of the monastery. On the other hand, the physical hardship is meant to keep the bodies and minds of nuns busy in order not to fall into temptation and, as a result, to strengthen them spiritually. As sister Tatiana put it:

“Monastics have to take care of their soul, pray ceaselessly and live in poverty”. In order to balance these two deeds (manual labor and praying) and also find time for recreation the nuns need to have a very strict schedule that sets the rhythm of daily life. The rigor of their program is meant “to ensure the proper formation of the sisters” (Lester 2005: 25-6) by educating their will and desires.

Even though the monasteries where I conducted my research do not have a fixed schedule that everybody respects, one of the nuns summed up the usual daily schedule in the following way¹⁸:

5:30—Waking up, taking a shower, getting dressed, praying

6:00-8:00—Morning prayer/sermon

8:00-13:00—Morning chores (task of obedience)¹⁹

13:00-13:30—Lunch time

13:30-15:00—Recreation time

15:00-18:00—Afternoon chores (task of obedience)

18:00-19:00—Evening praying/sermon

19:00-19:30—Dinner time

19:30—Recreation time²⁰

The hermitage, being a very small monastery with only a few members, has a special situation. It is impossible for everybody to respect the schedule because all of them have additional tasks in the outside world which must also be respected: work or school schedules. The mother superior has two jobs—as a music teacher at a theological seminar and as a

¹⁸ In this schedule there is no time allocated for breakfast because it is considered optional. In general, nuns eat only two meals a day as an effect of the fact that they constantly try to break away from the “worldly” desires and focus only on their necessary needs. But of course, if someone is weak and powerless or she needs more energy that day because she is going to do heavy work, she is permitted to have breakfast. Also, in this program is not indicated any specific time for canon; the nuns and novices are free to choose when to do their daily prayers.

¹⁹ Cooking, sewing, taking care of the church or of the garden.

²⁰ This program changes during summer time when the afternoon chores are done after the evening prayer because at 15:00 it is too hot to start working outside especially if we have in mind the clothes they must wear.

librarian—plus some other responsibilities concerning the monastery. Mother Suzana is a housekeeper at a villa near the monastery, going to work every day from Monday to Friday. She also attends evening school, planning to graduate from high school this year. Sister Tatiana and sister Areta are still in school. The first one is going to earn her MA degree at the beginning of this summer and until then she goes to university two days a week, spending the rest of the time at the monastery. Even though she is twenty five, Areta attends evening high school. She is in the tenth grade and plans to continue with her studies after she graduates.

Working and learning in environments in which other people count on their presence, the nuns cannot live according to their own regulations, but they have to stick with the majority. Moreover, it is in their best interest to respect those schedules because they receive certain benefits out of their work: a salary or the opportunity to learn. So, even though nuns are supposed to be cloistered and have little contact with the outside world, in the present context they cannot dissociate their everyday existence in the monastery from the general rules that keep the external world going as long as they are also a part of it. But when these women are in the monastery they try to do their activities in the pre-established order so they can get at the desired outcome: improving their connection with God through discipline and obedience. As I was stating earlier, living under the pressure of a strict routine is among the first and most important bodily disciplines that they have to get accustomed to once they join the monastery. Respecting the timetable involves a discipline meant to show that they are no longer in control of their activities and of their time and that they voluntarily offer their lives to God by obeying their superiors, without questioning their authority. They are always told where and when to be and what activities they should engage in. When they want to do something out of their own initiatives like going to the local store or attending a sermon at a monastery near by they have to ask for permission. By showing obedience and submitting their bodily energies to external authorities, in the process of religious formation novices

reshape their subjectivities and learn how to find a balance between two systems of values: worldly and monastic. After they enter the monastery, nuns redefine their agency in accordance with the spiritual values characteristic of monastic life by a two-fold process: a practical one which involves learning a new way of expressing themselves through language and an immaterial one which implies the step of receiving charisma. As I noticed during my stay there, this trial is slowed down by their repeated connections with the outside world. In addition, the fact that they have constant concerns regarding how they are going to survive does not have a positive effect on their religious developmental path. On the contrary, it rather impedes it.

At St. Nicholas monastery we find a similar story in terms of nuns' activities, even though the facts are a little bit different. The activities that disrupt the daily prayer schedule of nuns and stop them from attending all the sermons are the same—paid employment and education. But here the members communicate less with the outside world because they work inside the monastery. There are workshops in which they paint icons, sew or embroider monastic clothes and covers, work as guides at the museum which is situated in the precincts of the monastery, sell religious objects in the special shop at the entrance of the church (*pangar*), or work in the administrative offices of the monastery. Working close to their houses might seem to be an advantage for their continuous religious training, but it is not like that as long as there are some external competing factors that work against their desire for spiritual perfection. The monastery, being situated approximately 30 kilometers from a large city on a main highway, is visited by many tourists, especially on weekends or during holidays. Even though, as sister Tatiana said, monastics are supposed to speak as little as possible and pray as much as possible, the nuns living here are forced by the circumstances to interact with people because they are the ones who buy the goods that they produce and visit the museum, thus helping the nuns to survive. So, the relation of exchange with the external

world is, on the one hand, an advantageous one for both nuns and tourists, but on the other, it disrupts the “traditional” monastic life which should ideally be carried on in silence. After talking about nuns’ daily schedule and the incongruence between the worldly and monastic programs I will direct my attention towards the inner space of the monastery in order to see how it organizes their behavior. Throughout the thesis I use “tradition” as an emic concept, as it was understood in the monastic community. Thus, I use this term to characterize the monastic dimension of social life.

4.1.2. Monastic Space

In Goffman’s view, monasteries are social establishments “designed as retreats from the world while [...] serving also as training stations for the religious” (1990 [1961]: 5). Here individuals are no longer in control of their own activities and they cannot take even basic decisions concerning their personal care and maintenance because, being under constant surveillance, they have to show deference and obedience to those in power—human beings (the abbess) or representations of divinity (God). As a result, the monastery regulates the placement of individual bodies in space and time in order to produce a certain experience of interiority. Additionally, the presence of individuals in such a place implies a certain improvement for them—talking about convents, Bouyer (1958 cited in Karmel, 1961: 134) states that this setting is meant to bring one closer to God.

Even though the goal of the two monasteries where I conducted the research was to inspire the nuns living there with such a spiritual disposition of interiority, they did not fully succeed. Besides the fact that the social changes and modifications in the monastic statuses “forced” the monastics to be more open towards the outside world, there are also other reasons for this. For example, it is difficult to induce a certain spiritual disposition when the delimitation between public (the spaces where outsiders have access) and private (the spaces where only the members are allowed) spaces inside the monastery is not clearly marked. This

implies that even though nuns are supposed to communicate with outsiders as little as possible it is difficult to do this in practice as long as these spaces are separated by a very fluid line. In this part of the thesis, I discuss the monastic space—geographical location and the architectonics of the space—mainly in the context of the hermitage because there I had access to almost all spaces and had more time to observe how they are used and by whom.

The physical location of the monastery determines the daily activities which nuns engage in. As Bakic-Hayden (2004: 11-2) notes, if a monastery is situated in the countryside nuns are disciplined through a more intense program of manual labor than if it is close to the city. The second case applies to the monasteries I studied. The nuns living there have a wide range of activities, especially because they also work outside the nunnery. At the hermitage, while some nuns go to work or to school, those who remain in the monastery while the abbess is not there are not being supervised, so they do not feel coerced to do all the work that they are assigned. But things are different in the evenings and during the weekends when the abbess is in charge and always keeps an eye on the other members. I noticed a distinct dynamic in her presence: the nuns' work rhythm is more alert, they all try to make themselves useful and they do not disobey any order they receive. This happens because the nuns do not perceive the control over their bodies as an alienation from themselves, but rather as a way to strengthen their relation with God because they internalize and identify with the monastic way of life. Still, when they are not supervised, they have the tendency to forget these things and act a bit "irresponsibly", forgetting about their spiritual mission. Their behavior signifies, in foucauldian terms, a failure of the disciplinary mechanisms enforced on their bodies. This confirms the hypothesis that in nuns' situation the process of subject formation is not only a result of the disciplinary techniques, their past experiences continuing to shape their conduct at a certain level.

Even from a significant distance you can observe the steeple (*turnul bisericii*) of the hermitage situated at the end of an unpaved road. After you pass the barking dogs and you get closer, you can see through the monastery's fence the courtyard and the buildings that are in it. The main gate is almost always open, rarely being locked during the night. As you pass the gate, you leave behind the outside world and enter a realm of silence. This rite de passage, the symbol of experiencing a different type of existence, is physically marked by the discrepancy between the dusty road and the nice pavement that covers the courtyard. Next you observe the belfry, the church, the one-story building which houses the monastic cells, the kitchen, and the two bathrooms, the refectory (*trapeza*), the annexes and the beautiful garden situated near the lake. Upon closer look, you observe one important detail that disrupts the whole picture reminding you of the outside world: the spotlights that illuminate the courtyard and the garden. Constructed less than a decade ago, the monastery was also equipped with a microwave and a lawn mower meant to ease the nuns' work. Even though nobody can deny their utility, the penetration of these devices in the monastic setting might seem incompatible with nuns' way of life which should be led in poverty. In my opinion, the use of these devices is not intervening with their spiritual preoccupations. Nuns have busy schedules and constantly swing between two worlds so they have to be efficient in order to find enough time for their spiritual purposes. Therefore, nuns are somehow forced by external circumstances to borrow faster ways to solve their time problems and cope with the existent technology so they can dedicate more time to their spiritual ends.

In my first day at the hermitage, I sat on a bench in the courtyard for more than half an hour until one of the nuns came out. It was so quiet that the monastery seemed uninhabited. Even starting from then I had access to all rooms, except the monastic cells. While I was there I had the permission to see only one of them, the one in which I lived together with sister Tatiana for five days. I was very glad I had this chance, knowing the

importance of monastic cells in the spatial organization of the monastery. This mechanism of partitioning helps locate every body at almost any time and thus constitutes a manner in which discipline can be enforced on subjects. The assignment of each individual to a well defined space guarantees a certain level of solitude which, in Foucault's view of monastic life, "was necessary to both body and soul, according to a certain asceticism: they must, at certain moments at least, confront temptation and perhaps the severity of God alone" (1995 [1975]: 143).

Before entering the cell for the first time I was expecting to find a modest room decorated in a minimalistic style, in which one can find all the necessary things and nothing more. But when I entered the cell the first thing I noticed was a computer. I found it quite unusual for a novice who employed a rigorous discourse about how monastic life should be to fall into temptation and disrupt the silence and solitude that are characteristic for this setting (Carrette 2002: 120). Later I understood that it was a requisite for sister Tatiana's life outside the fence of the monastery, needing it in order to write her school papers. In the room there were also three beds, a big wardrobe, a china cupboard, a small bookcase, a table, a CD-player and a lamp. The only things that reminded me that I was in a monastic cell were the icons spread all over the walls, on the table and in the bookcase. Her room was a combination of electronic devices and religious symbols, bringing together two apparently very different worlds. Even though at first sight some of these objects might seem inappropriate to be found in a monastic cell they were not used in improper ways: the computer was not hooked up to the internet and on the CD-player Tatiana was listening only to religious music. The nuns, even if they take advantage of the new technology, do not cease to voluntarily discipline themselves in order to respect the monastic rules of conduct. Once again, the way they behave demonstrates that their spiritual values are being put in practice.

During my stay there I had a real privilege because the building of monastic cells which also houses the kitchen and the bathrooms was not open to outsiders, not even to the priests who came to visit the hermitage. Sister Tatiana said that the cell is the symbol of the monastics' solitude and, because she wanted to respect this unwritten rule, she did not invite to her room even the members of her family or friends who came to visit her. In contrast, on one of the days when I was in the courtyard, I saw how the confessor's relatives came and directly went to his cell. So, at the hermitage there is no strict rule according to which outsiders are allowed or not in the monastic cells, this depending on whether the members give their personal consent. In order not to be forced by circumstances to receive guests in the private space of their cells, the monastery has a place especially built for this purpose: the refectory. So, if it is cold outside they welcome their guests in the refectory and when it is sunny they stay outside, talking and enjoying the landscape. The refectory is also the place where they eat together when they celebrate an important religious holiday.

Even though important social theorists such as Foucault and Goffman imagined the monastery as a highly organized space designed to facilitate the monitoring of religious experience—through a pre-arranged strict schedule imposed from above and through a constant surveillance favored by the spatial disposition (Goffman 1990 [1961]: 7)—in practice this is happening only to a certain extent. This setting should also facilitate the infliction of monastic rules of conduct—regulation of activities, respect for customs and habits and routinized deeds, but again in practice things are not quite like this. Having to go to school or to work, most of the nuns do not spend all their time inside the monastery, but they have constant contacts with the outside world. These frequent connections with the world might have negative effects on their spiritual development, as the process of reshaping one's subjectivity is influenced both by a nun's inner will to spiritually improve herself and by the exterior constraints meant to discipline her behavior and, consequently, her spirit. In

this case, the dynamic formation of one's subjectivity could be affected by the fact that the external restraints do not act at all times on their bodies and do not contribute to the spiritual transformation.

4.2. On Relationships and Isolation

In this section of the thesis I will focus on the relationships developed by monastics both inside and outside the monastery. By looking at the relationships established between people who share an enclosed common territory I will investigate what keeps that community together, physical proximity being a necessary factor but not a sufficient one. Also, I will see in what ways the monastics' relationships with people from the outside world influence their spiritual development.

4.2.1. The Monastic Community—Between Acting as a Family and Working Together as a Team

The monastic community is constructed as a “voluntary community” (Keller 2003: 22) whose members are carefully selected by the abbess. While possessing the essential elements of a community—“a group of people who have certain circumstances or interests in common” (Christensen and Levinson 2003: xxxvii)—the monastic community also develops certain specific characteristics. In Keller's view, these distinguishing traits are: “a characteristic spatial pattern with clear-cut physical boundaries, an ethos of mutual aid, shared beliefs and rituals, and the authoritative guidance of the abbot” (2003: 23).

From my interviews, the relations established inside the monastery can be attributed to two main categories: family-type relations and relations based on cooperation. This classification came up from the answers I received when asking them to describe the relationship between themselves and the rest of the community. The two categories are not mutually exclusive, but they rather intersect one with another in some points. I chose to present them like this because I noticed an interesting phenomenon: all the nuns and

confessors I talked to associated the monastic community with a family; the only one who claimed that the relations among monastics were based rather on cooperation was Cristina, the woman who, after ten years spent in the monastery, decided to leave and return to the outside world as a consequence of the misunderstandings she had with the nuns she was residing with. But during the informal conversations I had with a few nuns, they also mentioned that in the monastic setting conflictual relationships can also be found. Because the nuns made a strong connection between this kind of relation and the idea of temptation I will deal with it at length in the section dedicated to the relations with God. Next, I will take a close look at these two different discourses about the relations between monastics. First, I will analyze the different ways in which the nuns define the notion of family and examine their ambivalent position in relation to the idea of home; second, I will examine Cristina's present attitudes towards her past experiences as a sister.

Mother Irina, a 59 year old woman, joined St. Nicholas monastery when she was only 19. Even though she recognized the fact that it is not easy to be a nun, emphasizing especially the hard physical work it implies, she stated that she was on good terms with all the nuns in the house and that they were like family to her. In addition, mother Irina mentioned an important characteristic that lies at the core of monastic life: one has to obey all those who enjoy a higher status—"Here we are like a family, but we respect each other. The more experienced nuns, who spent more years in the monastery, are respected by all the others". Mother Irina stressed once again the significant role that hierarchy holds inside the monastery. The fact that she did not use terms like obedience or hierarchy but chose a softer alternative instead ("respect") is also telling. Mother Irina did not mention anything about the power relations that are at work inside the monastery (even though she is aware of the highly hierarchical structure of the monastery); she minimizes the influence of external factors on nuns' behavior by implying that it is they who decide the course of their actions. According

to mother Irina, the relations developed between the members of a monastic community are similar to family relations, but they are stricter and based on more rigorous rules.

Mother Anastasia (30 years old) began talking about the monastic community in a similar manner as mother Irina, but chose to underline other relevant features of it:

At the monastery we are like a big family. Each nun has her own place here; if we compare the monastery with a body, then we can say that each represents one limb in the economy of this body. When a nun leaves the monastery the limb is cut and we all suffer because of this.

The relations between mother Anastasia and the other nuns living in the house can be easily compared with those established between the members of a family and each nun has her role as a member of a larger entity. Instead of focusing on the actual role that each of them plays, she preferred to stress the loss nuns feel when one of them leaves the monastery. In other words, mother Anastasia stated that after one gets accustomed to another person's presence, it is difficult to go through a separation. If one nun gives up monastic life the ones remaining not only experience the loss of one of their one kind, but they can also fall into the temptation of questioning their reasons for being in the monastery. In order not to have to go through such a test of faith, the nuns both receive constant religious training and discipline themselves.

Another important aspect mother Anastasia touched upon in our conversation is the importance of spiritual relationships in the monastic setting in contrast with the insignificance of kinship liaisons. This idea is present in religious writings on monastic life ever since St. Basil the Great (c. 330-370), "the major mentor and guide of Eastern monasticism" (McGuire 1998: 26). He recommends "complete separation from and forgetfulness of old habits" (St. Basil the Great cited in McGuire 1998: 26) in order to reach spiritual goals. Even though she lives in the same house with her older blood related sister who she describes as being like a "protective mother" for her, mother Anastasia does not speak in favor of blood relations. In her opinion one feels that she is part of a community and identifies herself with that group of

individuals if they share a common system of spiritual beliefs: “The spiritual connection between nuns is more important than the blood relation between a nun and her family from the outside world”. Further, sister Tatiana added to this point:

Once you join the monastery, your family from the outside world is replaced by the members of the monastery. Neither in the outside world, nor in the monastery one does get to choose her family. It is given by God and the most important thing is that you learn to love them all.

In her view, the shift from being a regular person in the outside world to being a nun and living in a monastery implies a set of renunciations followed by the effort to adjust to the new situation; being the symbol of the connection with the outside world (St. Basil the Great cited in McGuire 1998: 26), one has to give up her family and start a new family inside the monastery. Sister Tatiana makes an analogy between the “outside” and “inside” family in the sense that people do not get to pick their families; they are given from above. She also implies (by using the word “replaced”) that the two types of family cannot coexist and thus the presence of one excludes the other. So, when one enters the monastery a process of replacement and transfer of feelings from one family to the other begins. Sister Tatiana recognizes the difficulty of the task, knowing that it involves a process of learning and disciplining. This story she told me during the interview is inconsistent with both what she told me during some of our informal conversations and with what I observed during the field research. All the nuns I talked to are still in touch with their families and some of them even have close relationships with their relatives. Hence, even though the relations between them and their families are not as strong as they were before joining the monastery, the nuns do not give up their families. As a result, they end up swinging back and forth between two different families (the blood related family from the outside world and the spiritual one from the monastery) belonging to two distinct worlds. Nuns have the same ambivalent position when they address the notion of “home”. Having read Mohanty’s (1998) made me think of the nuanced way in which she describes the idea of “home” in her attempt to explore the way she

constructed her hybrid identity (as a “foreign student”, “student of color”, “Indian”, “Third World woman” and “feminist of color”). For Mohanty home is more than the physical place where you were born or raised or your family lives; it is the imaginative “strategic place” (ibid.: 491) which one identifies with, the emotional space shared by a community—the community formed by feminists of color in her case—based on common ideas and ideals that give you a feeling of belonging. Nuns go through a similar experience of hybridity as they leave their families and join the monastery; they negotiate the meaning of “home” as they leave behind a physical place called home and enter in a spiritual community that shares the same values. Even though they argue that now their home is the monastery, some nuns use the same word when talking about the physical place where they were born and raised or where their families live. This oscillation between homes can be viewed as an effect of the strong connections they still have with people from the outside world (relatives, friends). Thus, the meanings they attach to concepts such as family and home are not defined only in relation to one place, but with two places that hold antagonistic positions in their life. However, being aware of that and trying to overcome these spiritual shortcomings attests to the fact that they are on the good path and that they are evolving from a spiritual perspective. But, in my opinion, the process of religious formation is slowed down by these temptations coming from the outside world which constantly test their faith.

Among the relationships established between the members of the monastic community with people from the “outside world” is that of friendship. For example, sister Tatiana still maintains a very close relation with one of her childhood friends, Ana; they talk on the phone very often, Ana comes to visit her at the monastery or they meet in the city when Tatiana goes to school. I find the friendship between them problematic for Tatiana’s life as a nun because by maintaining this relation she is also familiar with the “worldly” concerns of a person from the outside: they discuss Ana’s love life and job related problems.

Although Tatiana did not seem to perceive this particular relation as a temptation, I think that it can easily be perceived as one (both by me and the other nuns). When talking about temptations she said that one of the most important sources of temptations is represented by the relationships one develops; her relation with Ana, through the nature of the topics discussed, can be thought as a temptation. Thus, this kind of friendship that is possible to make a nun question her current life in the monastery and doubt her choice can have a double outcome. On the one hand, it can destabilize Tatiana's entire system of beliefs grounded in religious teachings, make her desire a life without constraints and fixed rules and lead her to consider leaving the monastery. On the other hand, it can be a good opportunity to get rid of her doubts regarding her life at the monastery or religious vocation; she can thus realize that she does not have regrets for joining the monastery and, consequently, strengthen her faith. The idea of temptation is very closely linked to the notion of discipline. Nuns have to constantly monitor both the way they behave and their thoughts in order to avoid falling into temptation. This is why spending time only with people who share a common concerns and beliefs (other monastics) has a good influence on their spiritual development while a close relationship with a lay person is seen as inappropriate by monastics. Even the relationships between the members of the monastery can become a source of temptation. In any case, nuns have to resist temptations; to do this, they have to self-monitor their bodily attitudes and their expressions (physical or emotional) and to internalize the monastic habits.

Another special relationship is that between the abbess and the nuns. I will look at the way in which the abbess describes her relation with the nuns and see how a person who holds an authority position interacts with her subordinates in order to maintain the cohesion of the group. In addition, I will try to reveal why so many conflicts have her as a principal actor and how they are solved. Being a music teacher, the abbess applies the same principles in her relation with the nuns that guide her teaching approach and thus treats them in the same way

she treats her students; according to her, she tries to have a close relation with the other nuns and be authoritative at the same time.

The relationship between me and the rest of the nuns is like that between a teacher and her students. In my relation with them I use a combination between three didactic styles: intimate, authoritative and permissive according to the age of each nun and her particular characteristics.

This version presented by the abbess comes in contradiction with that of the nuns who claim that in the last period (after two of them left the monastery) the former changed her attitudes towards them—the abbess became stricter and the friendship between them started to dissolve.

The abbess holds a very important position in the monastery. Besides her administrative duties, her behavior should set an example for the other nuns (The Romanian Patriarchy, the Office of the Holy Synod 2003: 9). The fact that the abbess at the hermitage has two jobs complicates the situation because she spends very little time inside the monastery and, consequently, she cannot supervise what the other nuns are doing while she is away. At the same time, working is necessary in her case because she has the responsibility to take care of the monastery and its members. Feeling this pressure on her shoulders and wanting to show that she is still in charge even when she is away, the abbess imposes very strict rules and adopts a dominating position. Also, the fact that she is not at the monastery for most of the time and does not know how the nuns behave makes her feel uncertain and adopt a more authoritative stance, sometimes even apparently for no reason. The abbess is very critical, always finding faults; she is discontent if the nuns disobey her or if they do something without her permission. For example, a very troubled man came to the monastery and said that he wanted to confess. The priest was not there at the time and sister Tatiana decided to take him to a nearby monastery; by doing this, she disobeyed two important rules which are at the core of monastic life: she left the monastery without permission (monastics should not leave the territory of the monastery but they should rather spend their time praying

in isolation) and did not do her part of the chores for that evening. Regardless of the fact that she was well intentioned, the abbess disapproved of Tatiana's behavior and told her that she should have asked for her permission before leaving. This situation is a good example of how nuns might be caught between behaving in accordance with the monastic rules and taking responsibility for their own acts and doing what they think is good.

I will now turn to Cristina's story, a woman who after ten years spent as a sister in a monastery returned to the outside world. I chose to incorporate Cristina's perspective on the relations established among monastics because her way of looking at monastic life brings a more balanced view. But I am nevertheless aware of the fact that her past memories influenced the way she presented her story and of the possibility that in time she slightly modified the original version of it in order to cope with her decision of leaving the monastery. Cristina said that even though she and the nuns she was living with had common goals (to cover the costs of living and keep the house clean), they did not have a very close relation but rather one based on cooperation. During the interview I could feel that Cristina was trying to be honest and present the facts as they happened and at the same time not to be very critical about the relations between the nuns.

In the house where I lived we were like a team; we had a relation based on cooperation, not on affection. Even though I was very young when I joined the monastery, the older nuns did not protect me but rather they assigned me the most difficult tasks.

Being just a child when she joined the monastery (she was only thirteen and a half), she did not know what to expect there. The women from her village who were nuns at the same monastery she entered revealed to her only the positive parts of monastic life (praying, harmony, kindness). But once she got there Cristina was overwhelmed by her new daily schedule: she was expected to do hard physical work and attend many sermons. In addition to that, she really wanted to continue with her studies. From Cristina's point of view, the problem was that she did not get any support from the nuns and they did not understand her

situation: they did not encourage her to go to school, thinking that this extra activity might stop her from doing the work she was assigned to do. Cristina blamed the nuns she was living with for their “traditionalist” way of thinking—for example, they believed that if a nun goes into the outside world she might estrange herself from God and give up her faith. She felt very alone while she was at the monastery because nobody was protecting her or showing her any sign of affection; she did not have a close person to whom she could turn. This is why every time she went back to her parents’ house she did not want to leave any more. Even though she had thought before about leaving the monastery because of the endless misunderstandings and the monastic way of life, Cristina seriously considered this option when the nuns proposed to her to take her final vows and become a nun. She was not prepared to make this step, but at the same time she could not refuse because the nuns from the monastery would have interpreted this as lack of faith. She felt constrained by the circumstances to make a decision: she chose to leave. What is interesting is the fact that she never thought about going to another monastery; in her view, all the monasteries functioned according to the same “traditional” principles and thus her only alternative was to return to the outside world. In Cristina’s case, the lack of affection and understanding and the disagreements about education she had with the other nuns made her want to leave.

To sum up, monastics develop complex relationships, which affect their spiritual progress, both inside and outside the monastery. The relations that endanger the attainment of their spiritual goals are those with people from the outside world (family, friends and strangers) which might make them question their monastic experiences. But they also establish close relations with other nuns, based on friendship and respect, which help them resist temptation and build up the faith. Of course, even in this space some misunderstandings arise. The nuns treat them as temptations coming from the devil meant to make them doubt their faith and because of that they try to remain humble and forget about them as soon as

possible. Talking about relations, in this subchapter I deliberately ignored one important personage—the confessor. I did this because, given his important role, I want to discuss at length his position inside the monastery both as a man and as a confessor in the next subchapter.

4.2.2. “Better to be a shepherd than to be confessor in a nunnery”

In the Romanian Orthodox tradition only men can become priests. There are two different kinds of priests: lays (*mireni*) and monks. Lay priests live in the outside world, have to get married prior to ordination and cannot further advance in their career (Forbess forthcoming: 41) while monk priests are not allowed to get married, they hold higher positions in the Church’s hierarchical structure and their religious charisma (*har*) is more likely to be acknowledged both in the monastic environment as well as in the outside world.²¹ In a monastery, only monks can become priests and then father confessors. Considering the gender aspect, in the next pages I will examine the priest’s status in a nunnery and their relations with the nuns. Also, I will answer a set of questions: What is his role inside the monastery? What daily activities does a confessor engage in? What are the hierarchical relations between him and the nuns?

A monk priest can be removed from his monastery at the order of a bishop and sent to serve in a nunnery as a father confessor. The two priests I interviewed claim that being a spiritual father in a nunnery is a very difficult task because of the heavy responsibility they carry for offering religious guidance. Father Miron, one of the confessors from St. Nicholas monastery, compared his relation with the nuns with the one between a shepherd and his flock and called them “sheep that have the ability to speak”. This analogy underlines the emotional and psychological dependency of the nuns on their father confessor and places the priest in the position of a “religious patriarch” (Daly 1985: XVI). From the beginning the

²¹Men who were married are allowed to join the monastery. But once a monk enters a monastery, he has to respect the vow of chastity.

relation between nuns and confessors is unequal because women cannot become priests and thus achieve certain “charismatic powers” (Forbess forthcoming: 41). Charisma is a gendered religious concept that represents an ambiguous divine gift received by monastics from God that attests their special and close relation with Him. As I found out from my interviewees, there are two distinct types of charisma: priest charisma (*har preoțesc*) and regular charisma; the first type is achieved on the basis of sex, being available only to priests while the second type is a characteristic of every monastic, regardless of sex. Although from a spiritual point of view nuns enjoy a lower status in comparison to monk priests, one of the confessors acknowledged that he has learned a lot from older nuns about specific religious practices. The inequality cannot be transgressed in the sense that even though the nuns might be acquainted with certain religious practices and have a notable monastic experience, they can never reach a spiritual charisma similar to that of the confessors (priest charisma) for the simple fact that they are women. After being ordained (*hirotonisit*), all priests receive from God this special kind of charisma which cannot be lost, but only multiplied and made transparent through exemplary pious behavior. This is also available for regular charisma.

Besides the responsibility to deliver sermons, another duty of the confessor is to establish a spiritual relation with the nuns based on trust and respect. These types of close relationships are extremely important as nuns, during the confession, should feel comfortable enough to reveal their most intimate secrets and the temptations that make them question their religious vocation. Otherwise, conflicts which would disrupt the daily order of things and endanger the silence and peace that should govern the monastics’ existence might arise. Father Miron said that his role in the monastery is to “remind the nuns what they have to do, even though they already know it.” So, the confessor’s job is to constantly monitor the nuns’ religious experience and assist them in order to avoid and overcome the temptations that test their faith. He listens to their sins, judges the seriousness of their inadequate acts and

thoughts and determines their punishment, guiding the nuns' path towards salvation. Father Miron also said that he should not be very forgiving with the nuns in order to inspire in them the fear of God. At the same time, the monastic priest has his own confessor who supervises his religious development and takes care that he does not fall into temptation. The image of the confessor and the fear of God can be interpreted as two alternatives to Foucault's idea of panopticon. The confessor plays the role of a guardian who punishes the nuns whenever they do not act in an appropriate way; monastics are also aware that they are being watched by God at all times and as a result they feel restrained both in action and thought. The functioning of power which creates "docile bodies" (Foucault 1995 [1975]) is ensured by the presence of an overarching gaze that cannot be located; thus, monastics are supposed to internalize certain ways of behavior in order not to be punished. In this situation, nuns feel a double constraint coming from both a flesh-and-blood person (the confessor), though invested with charisma, and a divine entity. Nuns are always under the scrutinizing supervision of a deity (perceived in terms of sex as being a male); if nuns fall into temptation and confess their sins to the spiritual father he decides on a certain punishment for them (e.g. they have to pray more than usual in order to keep their minds busy). In this equation, the nun actually has a very important role: she is not just a body on which these techniques of discipline are inscribed, but she uses her own agency. She can avoid confessing if she wants to. But if she deliberately chooses to confess all the sins and temptations she remembers it means that she already internalized the main principles that guide monastic life: her will to respect the rules and improve her spirit comes from inside and thus is only corrected when the self-monitoring of her body and desires fails.

For the nuns it is very important to have access to their confessor any time they want to talk to him. Father Miron said that even though his parents live very close to the monastery in one year he only visited them twice. He prefers to receive visits at the monastery, but

sometimes he is forced by external circumstances to leave the monastery—for example, when he has to deliver a sermon at a funeral. This is a way in which priests gain some extra money (in addition to their salaries as priests). It is interesting how father Miron, talking about money and daily life, said that priests live out of people's compassion, not mentioning the monthly salary they receive as Church employees. By mentioning only this source of income, he sets a clear boundary between monk priests and people from the outside world that work for a wage and emphasizes more the spiritual side of their activities. Continuing in the same register, father Miron associated the monastery with a quiet space and said that monastics should live in isolation from the outside world. Only this isolation gives them the opportunity to experience Christian life at a more intense level: "Even though you are a good Christian, if you are in the outside world you get overwhelmed by the daily concerns and do not dedicate enough time to praying".

In addition to the different spiritual development opportunities offered to men and women inside the monastery, the fact that only men can become priests has some practical outcomes which could be interpreted as contributing to women's oppression and their subordination to men. According to monastic rules, both nuns and monks should have as little contact as possible with lay people so they can devote more time to God and, at the same time, not to fall into temptation. In a nunnery this rule does not apply in the case of spiritual fathers as they are more visible for the people from the outside and more involved in the community's problems while the nuns have a more hidden role in the Church's mission. Following the official rationale for this situation, one can say that it is in nuns' spiritual advantage not to interact with people and use their time for praying. But the actual practice contradicts this explanation since the priest already has a salary (from the Church) and the

nuns²² have to work outside the monastery and thus have less time for praying. Even though in the official discourse nuns enjoy the privilege of not having contacts with lay people in reality things are very different. The fact that they work outside the monastery implies also that they have contacts with people; the confessor here is evidently in a more favorable position: although he talks with the visitors he does not have a fixed schedule and gets to spend most of his time inside the monastery. Another gender inequality present in a nunnery is in regard to the disproportionate amount of physical work done by monk priests and nuns: the nuns do most of the manual work while the priests give indications about how it should be done, but do not actually participate.

Usually, after a sermon, people from outside the monastery go and talk with the priest for various reasons: to confess their sins, ask for an advice or just ask his opinion on different matters. Father Miron stated that it is important for a priest to have communication skills in order to attract people to church and be informed about what is happening in the outside world so he can answer people's questions. Alongside problems related to job, family, daily concerns or soul troubles, people are interested to find out priests' opinion on modern topics or current debates on which they want to shed light²³. So, a monk priest has a cell phone, watches television, reads newspapers, religious blogs and websites²⁴. He has access to all the information presented in mass media and this is not perceived as having a negative impact on his spiritual development but it is rather a necessity for achieving his goal to guide people's path towards salvation. Nuns are not encouraged to engage in these kind of activities, being advised not even to talk with strangers unless asked by someone who comes at the monastery (visitors). The explanation for this is that they have to respect the rules of monastic life and avoid temptation. This discrepancy between what a monk priest and a nun are allowed to do

²² Except the abbess who also receives a salary from the Church and one of the sisters who earns a small amount of money as caretaker.

²³ For example, father Miron was asked by various persons about the highly controversial book *The Da Vinci Code*; he finally had to read it even though this was not his initial intention.

²⁴ Examples of religious websites: <http://www.crestinortodox.ro/>, <http://www.patriarhia.ro/>.

inside a monastery can be grounded in their gender differences and the distinct statuses attached to each of them as monks in this way (helping people) become renown for their charismatic powers, an opportunity which is not available to nuns (there are some cases of nuns acknowledged for their charismatic powers, but their number is far smaller than that of monks).

If we look from a gender perspective at what is happening inside the hermitage in terms of who is doing what kind of work we can easily state that the monastery is a locus of women's oppression. The nuns are expected to do all the physical work inside the monastery (cooking, gardening, cleaning) and some of them even have jobs in the outside world while father Vitalie does nothing like this.²⁵ He delivers the sermons inside the monastery and sometimes at funerals; on some occasions he receives guests and talks with them. But he has the rest of the time for himself and, as a result, father Vitalie can dedicate a lot more of his time to praying and achieving his spiritual goals. This can be interpreted more as a gender difference than a difference in the positions held by the confessor and the nuns, as the abbess who is the main authority inside the monastery and also a woman does manual work (less than the other nuns because she does not have enough time).²⁶ To this situation can be applied, with slight differences, Arlie Hochschild's (1989) concept of the double shift: women are working in paid employment and, at the same time, they are responsible for house chores and the upbringing of children, while men focus only on one main activity—providing for the family. In the monastic setting this could be translated in the following manner: both nuns and spiritual fathers from the nunneries are dedicating an important part of their time to

²⁵ While I was doing research at the monastery, I never saw him engaging in any kind of physical activity. He did not even fill his plate with food by himself (as the nuns do), but was served by one of the nuns.

²⁶ In the work of Naumescu (forthcoming), we see that in a male monastery things are quite different. There are monks considered to be sensitive who do not engage in physical work and instead they paint icons. But from this text we do not find out whether the abbot, besides his spiritual concerns, gets involved in manual labor.

praying, but only nuns are engaging in physical work. So, their “work” load²⁷ is double in comparison to confessors (the nuns work both inside—unpaid labor—and outside the monastery—paid labor). In addition, there is an important difference between the kind of work men and women do inside a nunnery: the priests deliver sermons—a highly spiritual activity—while the nuns attend these sermons and carry the burden of doing hard manual labor or working for a wage in the outside world. Moreover, in this case, the priest spends more time inside the monastery and people from the outside world perceive him as having more charismatic powers. The nuns are dividing their existence between the monastery and the outside world, but in the outside world they do not engage in spiritual activities—they rather have traditional women jobs: teacher, librarian or housekeeper²⁸. The nuns never said anything about the inequality regarding the work load between them and the confessor because they perceive it as being natural—this is how things should be. Even though they are physically exhausted after doing all the hard work, the nuns do not complain. They say that God empowers them to finish the job when the body does not listen anymore and the fact that they pray while working helps them not to pay attention to the physical hardship. So, they do not even question the uneven distribution of tasks according to gender and make use of the Orthodox discourse which reinforces the gender differences present in the Bible, from the unequal relationship between Adam and Eve onwards. Thus, the nuns have internalized this order of things and do not contest it. The fact that some nuns work in the outside world while the confessor spends most of his time inside the monastery brings into discussion the gendered notions of public and private. Monastics, in an ideal situation, should spend all their time inside the monastery. Unfortunately for their spiritual development, the practical arrangements did not turn out in nuns’ favor. The confessor should stay in the monastery

²⁷ I do not consider praying as work because both the nuns and the confessor devote their time to this activity (even though not in equal amounts).

²⁸ Susan O’Brian (1988), in her article on Catholic nuns in the nineteenth century, states that even then nuns were working in “traditional and poorly paid areas of women’s employment—embroidery, sewing and laundry work” (ibid.: 116) in order to support their community.

because his presence might be needed any time (in case the nuns or some visitors want to talk with him). In the past (and to a certain extent even today) women were associated with the private realm and men with the public sphere. At the hermitage this order is inverted, but this does not mean that the position of women is improved as nuns do more unimportant work while the confessor has only spiritual concerns.

Here it is also worth discussing the relationship between the abbess and the confessor. They both have important and similar roles inside the monastery: the abbess plays a formative role in the religious development of the other nuns while the confessor guides their spiritual progress. In an ideal situation they should get along very well and do not get into conflicts, but the daily reality is different. They constantly negotiate their positions inside the monastery. At the hermitage, the abbess imposed some strict rules that nuns have to respect and father Vitalie sometimes changes them when the abbess is not there. According to Tatiana, these misunderstandings are solved only if both parts act in a humble manner. Humility is an important monastic value, being indispensable in the relationships established by nuns. Only by showing obedience and controlling her will, a nun gives evidence of humility. Some of the nuns said that it is a great challenge for them to be humble in their relations with those who are in an inferior position (who spend less time in the monastery) as it is so easy to fall into temptation and make a mistake.

To conclude, the spiritual father from a nunnery holds a special position inside the community because he is a priest and this status is available only to men. His role is only to deliver sermons and as a result he has more time for praying than nuns do. They, besides attending the sermons and praying in privacy, also engage in physical or intellectual work both inside and outside the monastery. This unequal and gendered relationship it is not contested by any of the parties, being perceived as natural. In addition, the priest is an authoritative figure in the nunnery along with the abbess and the activities in which he

engages are seen as being more spiritual than those of the nuns. Even though both charisma and physical labor are perceived as important monastic values that form the basis of the spiritual formation, in my opinion they are valued differently (by monastics and lay people). Work is a way of being disciplined and thus of achieving charismatic powers while charisma represents the ultimate goal. The unequal relation stems from the priest having an effortless (spiritual) way to achieve charisma while the nuns are supposed to earn this through physical work.

5. Training the Body, Improving the Spirit

This chapter consists of two parts which draw on the dynamic relationship between body and spirit and the way discipline mediates it. On the one hand, I talk about the relationship established between nuns and their bodies, the disciplining techniques inscribed on their bodies and the effect of these techniques on their spiritual development. On the other hand, I will address the relationship between monastics and God. In the first two subchapters dedicated to body discipline I discuss two daily activities—eating and attending sermons—and examine in what manner a “trained” body influences the spiritual formation. In the last one, I talk about the way in which monastics establish a relationship with God and the way they explain their experiences of feeling God’s presence in order to make sense of their monastic life. In this section I will not address the topic of sex and sexuality. Due to the little time I had for the field research, I did not have the chance to establish such close relationships with the nuns and thus did not feel comfortable to raise such intimate subjects. I also do not discuss here at length chastity (another renunciation through which nuns discipline their bodies) as nuns did not give so much importance to this aspect. In their perspective it is not a challenge for nuns to give up sexual activity and replace it with other spiritual activities.

5.1. Fasting and Eating before and after Easter

*One nun was walking on the street and eating a pretzel.
A man asks her: "How come you are eating on the street?
I thought that nuns are eating small amounts of food and are always fasting."
The nun answers: "Sir, the nuns do not eat...they are made of plastic.
Didn't you know? I am the only one made out of flesh."
(Story told by sister Tatiana)*

The period in which I conducted the research must be taken into consideration in the discussion about food and eating. It was the week before Easter (Holy Week—*Săptămâna Patimilor*) and the two weeks after (Easter Week—*Săptămâna Luminată*—and a regular week). In Orthodox tradition, Easter is the most important religious holiday, symbolizing the resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ, the son of God. The Holy Week is a time of renunciation and sacrifice, being dedicated especially to fasting and praying in solitude. At the hermitage, this week was mainly about “worldly” concerns rather than religious preoccupations because the nuns were extremely busy with the general cleaning and Easter preparations. Still, the sermons occupied an important place in their daily program, these being the reference points in relation to which all the other activities were scheduled—for example, nobody respected the meal time, each nun eating separately when she was hungry, but the sermons delivered by the priest were highly valued²⁹.

Before starting a detailed discussion about food and eating based on concrete examples, I should mention that there are two general rules respected in all monasteries with regard to this issue. Monastics are not supposed to eat meat (but they can eat fish) and they must fast at least three days a week: Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. The abbess explained these habits in terms of the bodily energies they use in order to carry on their daily routines: the manual labor they do is not so difficult in comparison to the physical hardship experienced by the nuns living in the countryside, so they do not need so much energy. She

²⁹ Every evening during the Holy Week are delivered sermons specific for this period: *denii* (from Monday to Thursday) and *Prohodul Domnului* (Friday).

further explained the fact that they eat fish by saying that even the Savior Jesus Christ ate fish and his example should be followed. In her discourse, the abbess made references both to physical and spiritual reasons, stressing the idea that through a strict eating regime one can train her bodily desires. At the same time, she pointed to the important effects that this regime can have at the spiritual level—if one releases herself from the immediate bodily concerns she can further focus on spiritual issues.

Both giving up bodily desires and learning to focus on spiritual activities are important steps in the process of religious formation. One of the main bodily desires that can lead one into temptation is eating. For the members of the monastery, food is “both sustenance and temptation, both a necessity and a luxury” (Lester 2005: 165). Inside the convent, the meal is a routinized activity which takes the form of a ritual because of the pre-established steps it follows: the meal always starts and ends with a prayer; they all have their own seats at the table, the mother superior and the confessor sitting at the two heads of the table. They should not enjoy the act of eating, because it is only a necessary activity (they are not supposed to eat to the point of satiation), meant to give them energy in order to be able to carry on with their daily routines. In this context, sister Tatiana said that the food should not be very tasty because if it is one can fall into the temptation of eating more than necessary; so, monastic food should be cooked in a simple way, using only basic ingredients. For example, she favors food without spices, oil or salt in it, but at the same time she really enjoys eating sweets. Even though in one of our talks about food Tatiana said that monastics should not engage in “worldly” activities (like eating sweets or watching TV), she did not deny the difficulty of doing this. She further affirmed that “monastics draw their inner strength to resist these temptations from their relation with God”. So, using a discourse based on religious explanations, sister Tatiana stated that if one does not fast and pray enough she shows spiritual weakness. If all the strength is coming from God this can be interpreted as a

denial of monastics' own agency and as an exchange between God and them—they renounce their free will, give up bodily desires and receive spiritual satisfaction. Also, the failed attempt to resist eating certain dishes is an example of the fact that Tatiana did not fully internalized the monastic practices or educated her bodily desires.

The process of eating is constituted, through bodily experiences, as a negotiation between needs and desires—in time, through constant exercise, the nuns should learn how to control their physical desires, master their appetite and regulate their eating habits. In order to better illustrate this never ending negotiation I will first depict a regular meal I attended; second, I will focus on the Easter meal. Finally, I will present a very strict eating ritual which sister Tatiana experienced at the first monastery she was in. The discussion about meals is relevant for stressing the close connection between food, discipline, monastic values and charisma. These interrelated aspects of monastic life determine one another like in a chain reaction: if a nun eats only certain food it signifies that she managed to discipline her bodily attitudes. If her body is trained her spirit would improve and, consequently, this means that she has internalized the monastic values. If she has these values (humility, chastity, obedience) her charisma increases. Of course, this is the ideal path that should be followed because in daily life nuns face many difficulties in achieving these developmental stages.

Because it rarely happens for all the members of the hermitage to be at “home” at the same time during the day (except for Sundays) they do not eat together very often. The abbess insists on this when they are in the monastery, this being the only time they spend together and communicate with each other. By doing this she tries to strengthen the relationships between the members and to ensure a positive atmosphere in the monastery. The first meal I had together with all the members of the hermitage began with a small conflict. The abbess was very upset that we had started eating without her and she expressed her disapproval by saying that it is one of the few times when they have the chance to eat

together and nobody valued it. In the end we all came to the conclusion that it was a simple misunderstanding—the confessor thought that the abbess was taking a shower, but in fact she was just washing her hands. Even though we were all sitting down when the abbess entered the kitchen, sister Tatiana instantaneously got up from the table in order to serve her the food. The same thing had happened before with the priest. Being discontent with the portion she received (because it did not have enough fish), the abbess served herself with the amount of food she wanted. This is a good depiction of how nuns cannot resist temptations and overcome their desires; in contradiction with the monastic teachings which argue for moderation, being greedy can be viewed as a failed attempt to internalize them for various reasons (not a strong enough motivation to surpass the bodily desires, too much contact with the outside world). This episode problematizes also the dynamic relation between desire, temptation and sin. The notions of desire and temptation which are perceived as weaknesses in the monastic setting are built upon a theory of sin. As it is inevitable not to have temptations, nuns claim, they try to overcome them through intense praying and confession, being aware that they cannot control their desires and bodily attitudes at all times. If they do not succeed they commit a sin. In order to avoid this they confess very often. This indicates once again the important role of the spiritual father in the monastic community, his spiritual authority and nuns' incapacity to permanently monitor themselves. This is why their subjectivities are educated from inside and disciplined from the exterior.

After this small incident, we started to eat and talk at the same time. The main topic of our discussion was food. The abbess confessed that she really enjoys eating, but has to be careful because fats are assimilated very rapidly by her body. Also, she said that she would love to be thin like sister Tatiana and sister Areta and not have to constantly worry about getting fat. Mother Suzana cut in the discussion and declared that she had put on five kilos in the last five days. Also, she said that she was seriously considering dieting. Sister Tatiana told

me later that day that the abbess had had some weight problems in the past and this was why she is so preoccupied about her body size. In regard with this topic, the nuns living there had some common concerns with the contemporary woman and felt the same pressures of being slender and dieting. But even though nuns worry about similar things as lay women they give them different meanings: while lay women conform to a certain standard of female beauty and make their bodies sexually attractive (Wolf 1992) in order to overcome the social and economic pressures, nuns do this in order to stay healthy and be able to work. What surprised me was the fact that nuns were talking about their desire of losing weight in a very natural manner. Even though all of them spent at least six years inside the monastery, they also grew up as girls in the outside world and maybe they did not give up the “worldly values” they appreciated before joining the nunnery. It is possible that the process of replacing the norms which had guided them before entering the convent with new ones corresponding to their present way of life is not yet complete. These women internalized the disciplinary practices imposed on their bodies by the dominant patriarchal norms that prevail in our society and they started to put even more pressure on their shoulders, forcing themselves to comply with social expectations (Bartky 1998).

The second episode I want to present is the Easter meal. Right after the sermon, at 4 a.m., some of the women present in the church began to dole out traditional Easter food (red eggs, fish, pound cake [*cozonac*]) and some of the people there, including the nuns, started to eat inside the church. Sister Tatiana was the only one who disapproved of this type of behavior, stressing the discrepancy between the designated function of a place and the activities displayed in it: “In the church we should pray and in the kitchen we should eat”. So, the two of us went to eat in the kitchen. After seven weeks of fasting and renunciations, this was the first meal when they could eat whatever they wanted. As an effect, they acted naturally and did not pay attention to the amount of food they ate. Although it might seem

that they exaggerated by eating too much or by actually enjoying the food, if we come back to the epigram, we see that a nun acknowledges her imperfections and does not render invisible her human side. More than that, she is aware of her deficiencies coming from the inability to overcome her inner desires and even mocks them.

The next story about eating habits is very different from the first two if we look at it from the perspective of the strong disciplinary practices enforced on nuns' bodies. Respecting rules and a certain order of things, valuing Christian virtues and fulfilling some obligations (Asad 1993: 135), nuns lead their lives under the sign of discipline. This constant disciplining through physical activities has a great effect on their internal attitudes, helping them in the process of shaping their "religious subjectivities" (Asad 1993: 135). At the first monastery she was in (situated in the countryside, somewhere in Dambovită county), sister Tatiana experienced a very rigorous eating schedule meant to discipline the nuns' appetite, make them control their desires and resist bodily temptations by submitting their own will to higher authorities. At the same time, the strict organization of the meal reflected the religious belief according to which eating is an unimportant activity because it does not have spiritual ends. Sister Tatiana explained the discrepancy between the eating habits at this monastery and the ones at the hermitage (situated near a big city) simply by saying that now there are only four nuns who have different schedules in the outside world that cannot be coordinated. But she did not mention anything about the meals that they eat together and the rather relaxing atmosphere that defines them. The nuns at her first monastery had only two meals a day, one at 12:00 and the second one at 18:00. They had to ask for permission even if they wanted to drink water; it was out of the question to eat anything in between meals. A regular meal involved a number of predetermined steps. After the usual prayer that marked the beginning of the meal, all the nuns took their places. A bell ring announced the first course. Five minutes later the same bell signaled the arrival of the main course, this meaning that one was

not allowed anymore to finish her first dish if she had not done so already. After another five minutes the bell rang again: desert was served. The last bell ring symbolized that the nuns are now allowed to drink water. These strict rules governing the organization of the meal combined with the fact that the served food was not very varied contributed to the religious training underwent by the nuns living there. The extremely strict treatment was reflected in some of the nuns' health condition several developed anemia. For example, sister Tatiana had big problems in adapting to these eating habits and, in her first weeks there, almost every time she left the table she was still hungry. But, out of necessity, after a period she got used to the situation and started to speed up the eating process in order to survive.

In a monastery what happens at the deepest level of interiority (spiritual dispositions) is very closely related to what happens at the level of exteriority (body attitudes, monastic practices, relationships developed by monastics). Hence, a nun's spiritual values and her will of spiritual improvement cannot be dissociated from her experiences of exteriority as there is a strong relationship of dependency between them—the exterior constantly reshapes the interior, improving it or throwing it into despair and, at the same time, the interior dictates to the body how to act. A nun's subjectivity is reshaped inside the monastery by taking into account these two types of transformations; acting together, they create a religious self that is both disciplined and self-disciplined. Next, I present another daily routine in monastic life (the sermon) and see how it influences nuns' religious formation.

5.2. Ritual and Bodily Resistance—"I am Weak, You Give me Strength!"

Praying is at the heart of monastic life and all the other activities are organized around it. While performing this daily routine (during the sermons and individual prayer time), the nuns need to control and constantly regulate their bodies. Although they stay in uncomfortable positions sometimes for hours, in time, some of them learn not to complain

and, furthermore, to detach their inner thoughts from their bodily pains and find ways to communicate with God through prayer. If they succeed in this, they prove once again their humility and their internal coordination between bodily needs and spiritual activities.

Following the same model I used in the previous subchapter, I will describe and analyze two sermons (a regular evening sermon one and the Easter sermon) in order to show the different stages of distancing from one's own bodily pains in which the members of the hermitage can be appointed. All regular sermons follow the same pattern; only holiday sermons are a little bit different, in the sense that they last longer and singing parts are more frequent than usual. In terms of nuns' behavior I did not notice any difference from one sermon to another.

Each sermon implies special preparations: the sister who is taking care of the church must light the icon lamps, select and put in order the religious books from which the priest reads during the sermon. Next, she goes in her monastic cell and changes from her regular day clothes (long black skirt, long sleeve black blouse, white kerchief) into the monastic clothes (*rasa*, *scufia*, *camilafca*, *metania mare*, *mantia*). Right before the sermon starts one sister tolls the bell and another one tinkles the wooden plate which (*toaca*) in order to call the people to church.

The abbess and the two sisters already occupied their usual seats in the lectern (*strana*) situated on the right side of the church when mother Suzana arrived. She had just come from work and she looked very tired. In fact, they were all tired because they had been working all day, preparing for Easter. But in spite of this fact, the nuns were quite animated during the sermon: they talked among them and sang almost all the time. At a closer look, one could notice that they were tired from the fact that some of them kneeled while the others were sitting down in the lectern. What I found very interesting is that the abbess never sat down or leaned upon the lectern. The same thing happened with sister Tatiana during some of

the sermons. From this point of view, they showed their physical resistance and, at the same time, their dedication and concentration when praying because it is not easy to stay on your feet without moving for approximately two hours per day. In addition, they seemed to know how to “unite the organic with the sociomoral order” (Turner 1969: 52 cited in Asad 1993: 128) in order to distance themselves from their “worldly” existence and achieve a spiritual disposition. Although I was also attending the sermon, they did not even look at me; they really seemed preoccupied by and concentrated on what they were doing, like there was nothing or nobody around them.

The Easter sermon is different from all the other ones over the year. Being the most important religious event in the Orthodox tradition, it requires a different display in terms of emotions and preparations. When I arrived at the monastery everybody was very happy and one could feel the joy in the air. Sister Tatiana summed up very well the atmosphere and pinpointed to the idea of regulation of joy (if there comes an important holiday, you must feel an inner joy which also reflects in everything around you): “Tonight you feel that all the bad disappears and an inexplicable and inexpressible joy governs your spirit. This happiness is a gift from God, a way to reveal His love for us”. She told me that she came across this joy right after she confessed her sins in the morning and that it would be absolute after the eucharist (*împărtășanie*). But while experiencing an intense state of happiness they were also engaged in other activities: two nuns were greeting the people who came to attend the sermon; sister Tatiana and sister Areta were doing some last minute preparations; the priest was testing the sound amplifier system and checking the microphone. In this case, being involved in one material activity and at the same time trying to hold on to the spiritual disposition brought about by Jesus’ rising from the dead, the members of the monastery experienced again a break in their quest to overcome temptations.

Also, the fact that the nuns interacted with the people who came to attend the sermon put extra pressure on them. They had to manage their bodies, monitoring the messages they spread around—gaze, speech and physical comportment—and, at the same time, to channel their attention towards spiritual outcomes (Lester 2005: 150). The nuns have to control their gazes and not to direct their eyes towards inappropriate people or objects. There are two main reasons why they do this: first, by not looking insistently at other people the nuns show respect for their privacy; second, the control of the gaze is important with regard to the practice of chastity because “various desires may be aroused through visual means” (Lester 2005: 151). One other important thing that they need to master is the art of speech: they have to know when they can speak, when they should be quiet and why noise should be avoided. In religious traditions, the practice of silence is placed at the center of reshaping one’s identity; being silent in the monastic setting means spiritual meditation, control over one’s own bodily desires and focus on the interior life. A lot of what I observed is similar with what Lester claims in her book on Catholic nuns; she portrays the nuns as isolated women who channel their energies towards spiritual improvement (Lester 2005: 151).

The last aspect I want to touch upon in this section is individual praying. Besides reading, praying is the only activity in which monastics should engage in the private space of their cell (Zavoratul 1996: 20). Individual praying has two main components: the canon and *pravila*. The canon is a combination of physical exercise and praying, incorporating very well the defining coordinates of monastic life: praying (meditation) and work (physical or intellectual) (Teoctist 1989: 5). While doing a certain number of *metanii*, the nun has to continually repeat in her mind the Jesus Prayer, also called the Prayer of the Heart³⁰. The number of *metanii* is established depending on the stage of religious formation. During

³⁰ It is the duty of the monastics to repeat ceaselessly this very short prayer. It is deliberately so short, so that the nuns and monks can also engage in other activities. Tatiana said that *a monastic should always have in her mind, heart, thought and on her lips the name of Jesus Christ*. The text of the prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Bloom, 1966).

pravila the nuns say those prayers assigned individually by the confessor, according to their sins. They kneel and read their prayers in silence. All this praying process takes more than an hour. In a conversation about individual praying with one of the sisters, she told me that it is physically exhausting to do five hundred *metanii* every day, calling the canon her daily gymnastics. This episode illustrates very well the idea that a disciplined body also implies a transformation and improvement of the religious self. Thus, this connection between interiority and exteriority emphasizes the complex way in which a nun's inner will to devote her life to God and the internalization of monastic rules through bodily experiences melt one into each other and form a monastic subject. I will follow the same train of thought in the next subchapter when I discuss the relationship between monastics and God.

5.3. Relations with God—One Gives Faith and She Receives Strength

The future monastics make their first step in establishing a relationship with God even before abandoning the world and joining the monastery. They believe that behind the religious teachings there are deeper meanings waiting to be discovered and thus they start to attend all sermons and “love God more each day” (father Miron). After a period, if they are not spiritually satisfied by this anymore they begin to seriously consider the idea of dedicating their lives to God. As their interest in personal spiritual development increases, their religious calling becomes stronger and stronger. The majority of monastics I talked to could not describe this feeling in too many words, but they referred to it as a fire that would have consumed them if they had not come to the monastery: “You feel that you cannot breathe anymore, that you have a fire inside you” (father Miron); “Something was pushing me from behind to come to the monastery; I had this fire inside me” (mother Anastasia); “I was hearing God’s voice in my heart” (sister Tatiana). Their testimonies attest to the inner character of their first experiences of God’s presence that contributed to their religious formation. Located at the spiritual level, these encounters with a divine power materialized

into an external attitude and pushed them to join the monastery. From this point on, they found only incompatibilities between the world they were living in and their true calling (Bakic-Hayden 2004: 21) and, as a consequence, they entered the monastery, aspiring to a solitary existence devoted to God.

The second important encounter with divinity is experienced by monastics after they join the monastery. In this setting they become aware of their divine charisma which has the ability “to transform those it enters in both a physical and spiritual sense” (Forbess forthcoming: 32) and brings them closer to God. Charisma “is the source of ‘true’ knowledge, which by definition is revelatory and intuitive” (Forbess forthcoming: 56), symbolizing among others the capacity to concentrate their inner thoughts on the idea of eternal salvation. Life at the monastery becomes a continuous process of learning to hear God’s voice. Monks and nuns read religious books³¹ and receive guidance from the older ones, but the best way to improve their spirits is the individual experience of God’s presence achieved through prayer, meditation and contemplation. As I stated previously, a father confessor, besides the regular charisma characteristic of every monastic, is also invested with “priest charisma”. Father Miron said that he experienced this type of charisma in a physical manner when he was ordained: “I felt a power coming from God entering my body, I felt a trembling, like lightening hit me”. Getting to know God through an embodied experience, he became aware of his own emotions and feelings regarding the meaning of convent life. As Naumescu, (forthcoming: 13) points out, novices learn inside the monastery how to make sense of their emotions in order to get to know God and experience His presence. In this way, interpreting

³¹ They read both the religious books recommended by the abbess or their spiritual father and the books bought by them. In most of the cases they read about monasticism, the ascetic life of holy fathers and their teachings. Reading these books is very helpful for the nuns in eliminating the doubts they have regarding the path they chose (Forbess: forthcoming: 50). Knowing what others have gone through and how they overcame the temptations they can follow their advice. I will offer some examples of books they read: Paraian, Archimandrite Teofil. (2006). *Gândiți frumos. Cuvântări la ocazii speciale. (Think Beautifully. Speeches on special occasions)* Cluj-Napoca: Teognost; Gheron Iosif. (1992). *Mărturii din viața monahală. (Monastic Life)*. Bucharest: Editura Bizantină.

the trembling as a response from God, father Miron reassured himself of his religious vocation and received confirmation of the fact that he had a religious mission to fulfill. The external manifestation of this emotion proves that he experienced an internal change. Thus, this example of religious experience denotes that the interior (spirit) and exterior (body) are in a close dynamic relation and thus influence one another.

Sister Tatiana also had experiences of intense communion with God. The relation with God is stronger during the sermon or the individual prayer because then monastics are very concentrated and can feel His presence. Sister Tatiana said that during the most important sermons she had experienced an inexplicable feeling of happiness that sometimes made her unable to speak or do anything else. She had lived another ascetic experience two years ago. After a conflict with the abbess, sister Tatiana decided to leave the hermitage for good and move to St. Nicholas monastery. She took all the necessary steps to organize her arrival at the new monastery and packed all her things. She was supposed to leave the next morning, but it did not happen like that. The night before leaving she went to bed as usual but could not sleep, wondering if she had made the right decision. At some point that night, Tatiana felt an almost physical force stopping her from leaving:

I tried to fight this force, but I felt like crying even when I was thinking about leaving. It was something stronger than me. I think that it was God telling me that I should not leave the hermitage and that I should stay here and solve my problems with the abbess.

In her attempt to make sense of her strong emotions, sister Tatiana was convinced that God had sent her a direct message. She considered this event to be a confirmation of her religious vocation. As a result, sister Tatiana decided to respect the message she received from God and not leave the hermitage. According to the Romanian Orthodox Church, if a nun leaves a monastery, no matter the reasons, her monastic experience is not recognized and the training period starts all over again at the new convent. Knowing this, Tatiana probably felt insecure about her decision and had an ambivalent position towards it: she was aware that her life

would have been easier if she had left, but at the same time this step would have been a setback from her spiritual path. In addition, from the beginning Tatiana saw the conflict with the abbess as a temptation meant to make her doubt her religious calling and wish to return in the outside world; and she was aware of that fact that if she overcame this temptation, her relation with God would become stronger and deeper.

Her physical experience can also be interpreted as a bodily response to her intense emotions instead of reading it as a sign from God. Nuns devote their lives to a divine entity that cannot be seen or touched. From this perspective, their relation with God is an ambiguous one. But they present it as a relation of exchange: they give their faith to God and they receive grace. The question is how they materialize this grace in order to make sense of their monastic existence? These kinds of explanations that attest to God's presence and his direct involvement in nuns' lives are necessary for them. It is like they receive an answer to their praying and at the same time a reaffirmation of the fact that they have to continue with their monastic existence without questioning it. As mentioned earlier, Rebecca Lester (2008) also examines a Catholic postulant's experience of intense communion with God, during which she left her body and commuted with God. Lester is interested in analyzing Celeste's path towards understanding her embodied experience of God and in the "competing explanatory models" she develops. In this situation, a future nun reflects on the notion of religious vocation and tries to find the meaning of her personal relationship with God along her religious developmental path while using not only spiritual insights, but also psychological ones. Celeste was acquainted with some of the theories in psychology and maybe this is why she was trying to find, besides the explanation based on God's presence, other reasons for her experiences. As opposed to that, the monastics I interviewed did not try to find alternative explanation of their experiences, but limited to the spiritual one. This might

prove that for them it was easier to embrace this explanations in order to justify to themselves the choice of dedicating their lives to God.

A decisive step in the relation with God is made when a sister takes her final vows and becomes a nun. The abbess and the spiritual father decide when a sister is spiritually ready to follow this path and they ask her if she agrees. When they do this the abbess or the confessor might take into consideration not only the novice's spiritual capacities but also other external factors (money, for example). This is what happened at the hermitage last summer. Father Vitalie discussed with the abbess the possibility of proposing to Tatiana and Areta to take the veil (*călugări*). The abbess rejected the priest's idea invoking the fact that they do not have the necessary resources to prepare for the ritual and for the meal after (where there the bishop and other priests who hold high positions in the Church's hierarchical structure are invited). At that moment, the abbess was worried about how she would pay the monthly bills and the painters who had painted the church. Hence, the ritual of becoming a nun, which signifies the engagement with God, besides its spiritual importance, implies also a "worldly" and material component.

In this chapter, I looked at various practices through which nuns voluntarily discipline their bodies by way of deprivation and the reasons why they sometimes fail. In addition, I discussed their relationship with God pinpointing at the emotional experiences that make them feel God's presence. While addressing the interdependent ways through which they seek spiritual achievement, I argue that a religious self can be constructed only from both the interior (spirit) towards the exterior (embodied experiences) and from exterior towards the interior. This double sided relation accounts for the fact that nuns' subjectivities are modeled in the interplay between their voluntary will of spiritual improvement and the disciplinary practices they are submitted to.

6. Conclusion

The thesis was constructed around two sets of binaries: inside (monastic setting)—outside (external world) and interior (spirit)—exterior (body). Throughout the above pages I examined the dynamic relations between these notions and saw how they are constantly reshaped and transformed in their interactions. Thus, my aim was two-fold. First, I explored the connections between the monastic setting and the outside world and the impact of the latter on the former. Second, I analyzed the ways in which nuns' subjectivities are remodeled inside the monastery. Having these purposes in mind, I conducted ten interviews and had many informal conversations with monastics of various ages coming from different social backgrounds. The main questions that guided my study are: Why do women choose to enter the monastery in the postsocialist context? How do nuns lead their daily lives in the monastery? How does the exterior world influence monastic life? What are the types of relationships established by monastics both with the other members of the monastery and God? In order to answer these questions I situated my study in the larger context of the transformations brought by the shift from socialism and postsocialism in monasticism and women's lives. The conceptual framework I used revolves around Foucault's concept of discipline and Goffman's theory of total institutions; my study was also informed by several studies on monastic life that dealt with modes of religious knowledge and discussed important religious terms such as: charisma, chastity, obedience, poverty, humility, desire, temptation, sin and manual work.

The thesis was structured in three main parts that cover, in my opinion, the main components of monastic life: the ties between the monastic setting and the outside world, daily routines and spiritual preoccupations. Even if the nuns I interviewed joined the monastery in different periods they had similar reasons for doing this: they felt a strong force that drove them to make this step and disapproved of what was happening in society. In

addition, they did not identify with the dominant images of femininity present in the outside world. Nuns had a rather critical perspective on contemporary lay women, claiming that some of them do not dedicate enough time to their families and the others are too dependent on them. In their perception, the ideal lay woman is placed in between these two images: she should be educated and have a paid job and, at the same time, she should be married, give birth to many children and devote all her free time to her family.

In present days, most of the nuns I interviewed work or go to school in the large city situated at less than 50 kilometers from the monasteries. Their contact with the outside world is supplemented by the interactions with their neighbors living in newly constructed villas. On the one hand, the connections with the outside world could work against nuns' spiritual development because nuns see them as potential temptations that could make them question their life inside the monastery. On the other, the relations with the external world could strengthen nuns' belief that they made the right choice joining the monastery and consolidate their faith. But the fact that they swing back and forth between two opposite realms (sacred and profane) slows down the pace of their religious training, especially in the case of younger nuns who did not internalize all the monastic rules of conduct and feeling.

According to nuns' official discourse, life inside the monastery should be based on a strict and intense schedule of work and prayer meant to improve their spirits. But in reality this ideal order of things is disrupted by their repeated contacts with the outside world. The two alternative programs nuns have influence the process of religious training they are subjected to and thus hinder their spiritual progress. The gender aspect also comes into focus here: the confessor, who is the only man inside the nunnery, does not get involved in manual work as nuns do and thus he has more time to pray. The unequal relation between the nuns and the priest and his privileged position in the Church's hierarchy and the public's eye is further informed by the fact that he is the receiver of a very important spiritual gift that is not

available to women: priest charisma. Monks and nuns also have charisma, but they do not have that specific kind. The gender difference is that monks can aspire to priest charisma while nuns cannot. Both types of charisma can be increased but the level they achieve depends on monastics' pious acts.

The relationships among nuns or between nuns and lay people represent another threat to their spiritual achievements. These interactions can trigger temptations if nuns are not humble; this monastic value (humility) is essential for their spiritual improvement and it can be internalized only through intensive exercise and discipline. Obedience, the act of surrendering one's own desires to a higher authority (of human or divine nature) that guides a nun's religious formation, is another monastic value that shapes the religious self. The internalization of these monastic virtues actively contributes to a gradual spiritual improvement. Besides being obedient and disciplined nuns voluntarily submit themselves to monastic bodily practices and spiritual endeavors, this proving that they also have a personal will which influence their behavior. Thus, nuns' subjectivities are formed as a result of the double way relationship between the spirit and the body: their voluntary will of spiritual achievements is imposing a certain behavior while their bodies, as a result of the disciplinary techniques enforced on them, are creating particular spiritual dispositions.

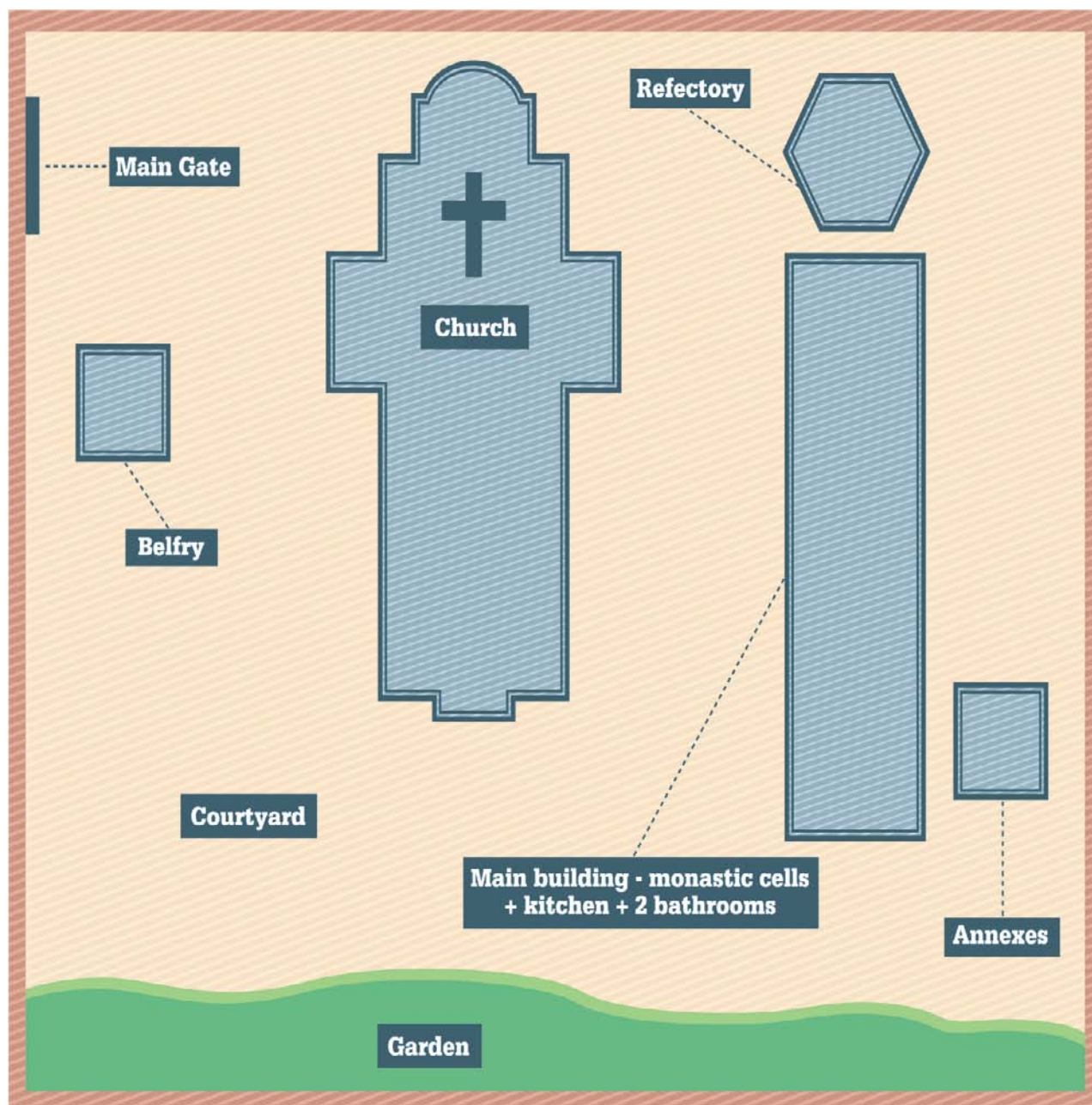
Being constructed as a descriptive and exploratory study, my thesis presents some limitations. Due to the short period of time allocated for the research, the information I gathered might be incomplete and, consequently, my study could depict only a segment of the complex monastic life. My position as an outsider in the community might also be the origin of some limits because of the possibility that nuns might have shared with me only a part of their experiences. But the fact that I also conducted participant observation minimizes the importance of some of these limits as I had informal talks with them and also the chance to observe their daily behavior while working and attending sermons.

There are several issues that I did not address in my thesis that are worth pursuing further. For example, the thesis could be developed further in a study on women's monastic life grounded in a more complex theoretical framework which analyzes from a gender perspective the power relations that are at work inside the monastery with focus on the abbess and the father confessor. Another possibility of further research is to study monastic life in relation to sex and sexuality.

Nevertheless, my thesis offers some important insights. This study on women's monastic life contributes to two fields of research: women and Orthodox spirituality and women and postsocialism. Nuns' position in contemporary Romania is beginning to change, at least for those who live in monasteries situated close to large cities. They lead a continuous struggle to cope with the wider changes in society that restructured their quiet and isolated existence and made them go outside in the world in order to work or go to school so that they can earn a living. Nuns are no longer confined to the enclosed space of the monastery but rather they are actively present in the outside world. This is why scholars' attention should be directed more towards them in order to analyze this group of women and its evolution along the lines of societal developments. Metaphorically, the changes in monastic life can be traced by looking at the physical border between the outside world and the cloistered monastic setting—the stone wall that in medieval times protected the nuns from indiscrete gazes and temptations is replaced in the present with a wired fence through which one can easily see.

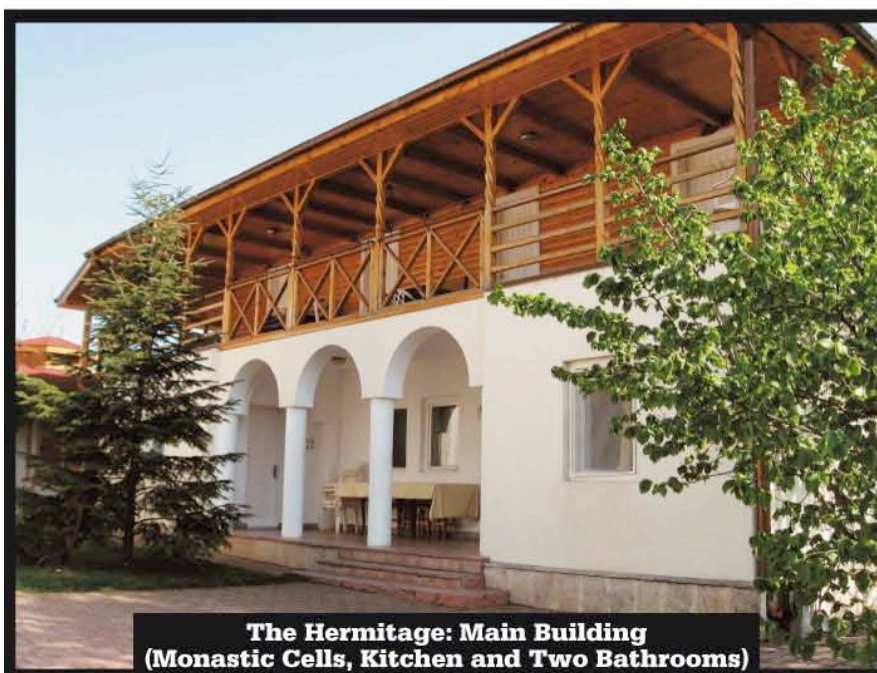
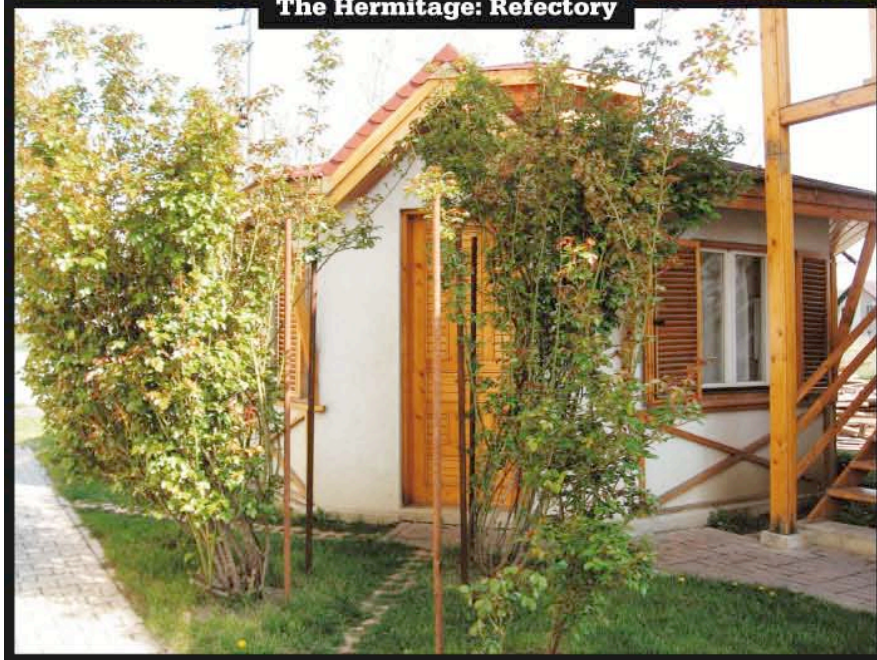
Appendices

The Hermitage.





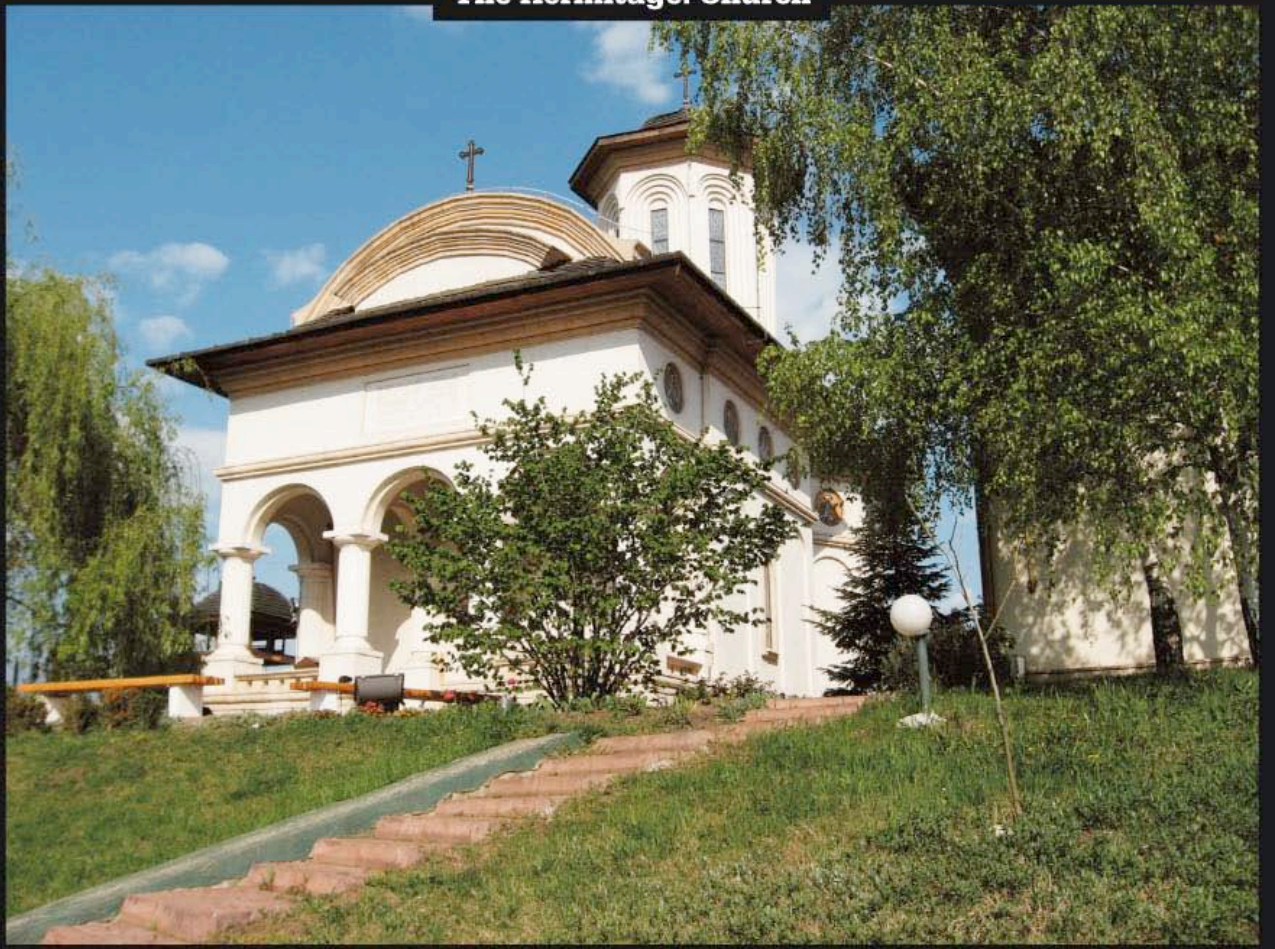
The Hermitage: Refectory



**The Hermitage: Main Building
(Monastic Cells, Kitchen and Two Bathrooms)**



The Hermitage: Church



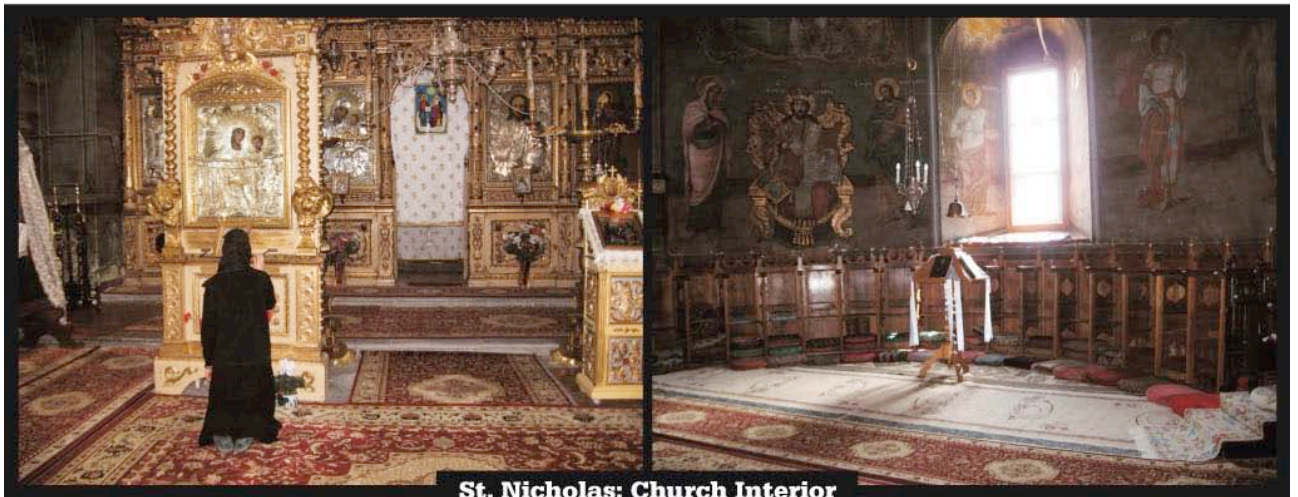
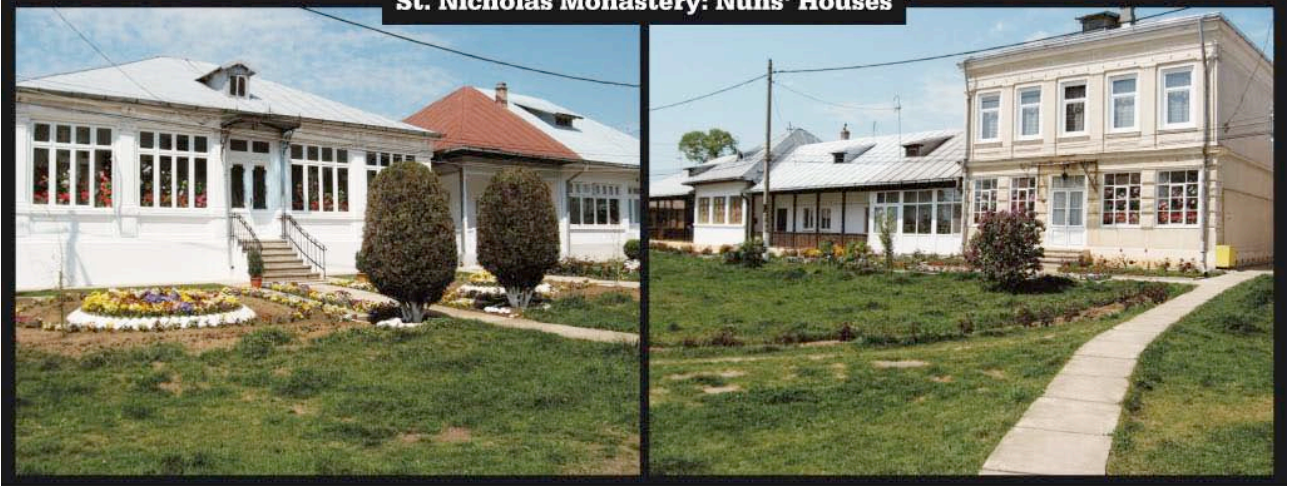


The Hermitage: Surroundings

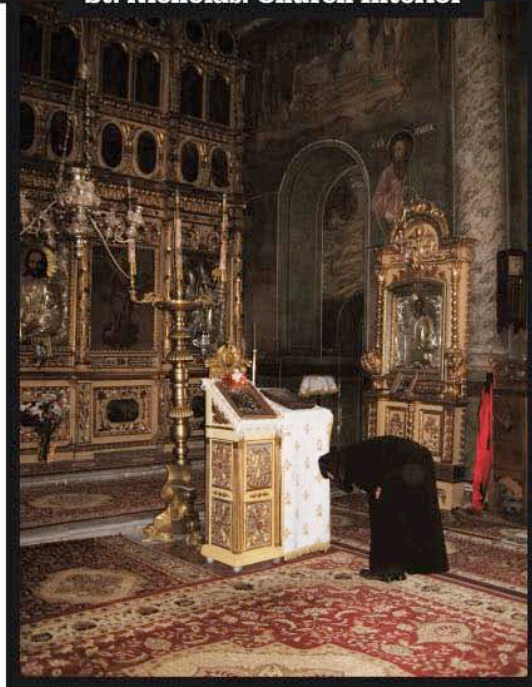


The Hermitage: Garden and Lake view

St. Nicholas Monastery: Nuns' Houses



St. Nicholas: Church Interior



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