

**Listening as Hospitality:
Elder Sofian the Apostle of Bucharest**
Ioan Gheorghiu

Early Years

Elder Sofian was born to a family of pious farmers on October 7, 1912, in a village on the shore of the Prut River in Basarabia (formerly part of Romania).¹ His name in the world was Serghei. When he was 14, his mother died, leaving behind seven children. Serghei had enjoyed the quiet, peaceful atmosphere of monasteries from a young age and desired to leave the world. Yet, he faced a dilemma: if he left, there would be no one to care for his youngest brother, the future Hierodeacon Lucian, who was two years old. Serghei listened to his inner calling and knocked on the door of Rughi-Socova Skete with his baby brother on his back.² From the start, Serghei's sacrificial spirit was clear.

After two years in the skete, he went to Dobrușa Monastery for the ecclesial school of chanting and then to seminary at Cernica Monastery. In his final year, on December 25, 1940, he was tonsured a monk at Dobrușa Monastery (Basarabia) with the name Sofian.³ However, six months later, the invading Soviet army forced Sofian to flee Basarabia for Caldarusani

Monastery (where he is buried), and eventually Bucharest, the capital city.

Intellectually and artistically gifted, Sofian began studying both fine art and theology at the University of Bucharest in 1940. Finishing in 1945, he was ordained a priest at Antim Monastery—an urban monastery in the heart of Bucharest. While a student, he began his vocation as an iconographer, which would later lead him abroad to Lebanon and Syria; he continued to deepen his prayer life through his participation in the “Burning Bush” movement at Antim. There he met a celibate Russian priest in exile, Fr. Ivan Kulighin (“the Stranger”), who had acquired the prayer of the heart at Optina Monastery before the Russian Revolution and had preserved it throughout numerous imprisonments.⁴ Fr. Ivan initiated Fr. Sofian into this mystical practice. Like his spiritual father, Elder Sofian would have to assimilate and preserve this gift in the Communist prisons.

God's Personal Presence in Prison

In 1958, Fr. Sofian was imprisoned along with other members of the Burning Bush movement for “conspiring against the state” and spent six years in Aiud and Jilava, as well as the

¹ Pr. Sofian Boghiu, “Marturisirea Monahului Pictor,” in *Părintele Sofian: Duhovnici Români Contemporani* [Father Sofian: Contemporary Romanian Elder] (București: Editura Bizantină, 2007), 13. The publication of the English translation by Ioan Gheorghiu is forthcoming from Saint Herman Press.

² Lucia Turcea, “Părintele Sofian Duhovnicul Bucureștilor,” Trinitas TV. July 5, 2021. Video, 00:03:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrAyI4mLGCo>.

³ Ioan Gheorghiu, “Elder Sofian Boghiu: The Urban Hesychast,” *The Orthodox Word*, vol. 57, no. 3 (338) (May-June, 2021), 106-108.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

Baltile Brailei labor camp. He rarely spoke about his time in prison, saying that we all have our Cross to bear. Like his fellow inmate Fr. Dumitru Staniloae, he experienced heights of prayer that he would not find afterward. As he recounts, “I never felt abandoned in prison. I felt a Presence that kept me alive and in a state of inner peace. *Prayer was much more personal in prison than outside.*”⁵

In addition to God’s presence, danger and terror were ever present in prison as well. As he once described to a spiritual child:

In prison, we could be killed dozens of times in a day. Then I promised the good God that if I could again hear confessions when I was freed from prison, I would not turn anyone away without being guided towards the good, without being helped, and without being listened to, despite all his sins.⁶

These words would define the rest of his life, because God, Who honors every request made from a sincere heart, would hold Fr. Sofian to his word.

The Desert of the Capital

After being released from prison following the Amnesty Decree of 1964, Fr. Sofian returned to Antim Monastery in Bucharest, where he served as the staretz until his death. Silently confessing the faith through unceasing inner prayer, Fr. Sofian lived a hidden life within the tumult of the capital. Even the secret police who followed him were impressed by his upright character and hard work ethic, although they noted that he was sadly “a bit too mystical.”⁷

How difficult this must have been for Fr. Sofian. Bishop Timotei Prahoveanul, Vicar of the Archdiocese of Bucharest, recounts how Fr. Sofian once came to the Metropolis of Iasi’s headquarters, and during a meeting with the metropolitan and a few priests, a novice monk from Putna—one of the largest monasteries in Romania—appeared, expressing his dissatisfaction with life in the community and seeking a blessing to leave for the “stillness of the desert.” Turning to Fr. Sofian, who was sitting silently, the metropolitan asked:

“In what desert do you struggle, Elder Sofian?” “In the desert of the Capital,” answered the Avva, and then became silent once again. The monk from Putna was given the example of Elder Sofian, who had spent a total of more than 40 years in the rush of the capital, serving the Savior Christ with complete self-offering and humility.⁸

⁵ Părintele Sofian Boghiu, *Smerenia și dragostea, însemnele trăirii ortodoxe*, pref. de prof. acad. Virgil Căndea; ed. îngrijită și postf. de protosinghel Teofan Popescu, ed. a 4-a, reviz. și adăug (Iași: Doxologia, 2022), 140. This, and all other proceeding translations, are my own.

⁶ Ibid., 139.

⁷ George Enache, “Un isihast în țara absurdului: părintele Sofian Boghiu,” *Ziarul Lumina*, October 7, 2009. <https://ziarulumina.ro/actualitate-religioasa/documentar/un-isihast-in-tara-absurdului-parintele-sofian-boghiu-38776.html>.

⁸ Timotei Prahoveanul, “Misionarul din ‘Pustiul Capitalei,’” in *Un Iconar de Suflare: Părintele Sofian Boghiu*, ediția a II-a, volum îngrijit de Arhim. Mihail Stanciu, Arhim. Veniamin Goreanu (Basilica: București, 2017), 45-46.

Through this revealing example, we see that Elder Sofian's desert was internal rather than external. Describing this inner state, he says, "This is possibly the greatest benefit of the Prayer of the Heart: you feel that you are no longer in this world, as if in the desert."⁹ In a similar conversation between St. Nikolai Velimirovich and St. Silouan, the Serbian bishop recounts,

One time I asked him: "Father Silouan, doesn't having all these people around bring turmoil to your mind and to your prayer? Wouldn't it be better for you to go to a hermitage in Karoulia and live in peace, like Fr. Artemios, Fr. Dorotheos, and Fr. Kallinikos? Or to live in a remote cave, like Fr. Gorgonios?" "I do live in a cave," Fr. Silouan answered. "My body is the cave of my soul. And my soul is the cave of the Holy Spirit. I love the people of God and serve them without leaving my cave."¹⁰

Like St. Silouan, Fr. Sofian's cave—his desert—was his heart. Like St. Silouan, he loved the people and served them without leaving his cave, without losing the sense of God's presence in his heart.

Listening as Hospitality

When Communism in Romania ended in 1989, the Church's doors opened and countless young men and women—including my parents—came to Fr. Sofian for confession and guidance. As Elder Sofian had promised God, he did not turn anyone away; he received everyone with hospitality, often hearing confessions until two or three in the morning. Elder Cleopa of Sihastria named him the "Apostle of Bucharest" for hearing confessions and teaching the Jesus Prayer to countless around him, regardless of whether they were monastics or laypeople. He had attained the inner peace that St. Seraphim of Sarov describes and now was spreading it to those around.

Yet, the burden of listening to others and receiving all who came to him was a heavy Cross to bear. Fr. Arsenie Muscalu, a spiritual son of Fr. Sofian, sheds light on his inner struggle:

"Father," someone once asked him, "if I have guests over and am tired, do I close my door on them?" And the Elder responded: "How can you close your door? Look, more than 40 people came to me this evening [for confession], each with his own problems, and I could not think about myself. They had time, but I really did not have time. And I endured in this way: I responded to all of their problems; I handled each one in this way. One kept me for almost two hours, and I was extremely tired. But I know that people today need this spiritual unburdening—at least for someone to listen to them. You see that I often hear confessions until late at night, and people here judge me: 'what is this priest doing that he never finishes?' But this is what I do—I listen. And from time to time I also say something; because today there is great suffering in the world, and people in

⁹ Boghiu, *Smerenia și dragostea, însemnele trăirii ortodoxe*, 269.

¹⁰ Saint Nikolai Velimirovich, "All that remains is prayer and love (On Saint Silouan the Athonite)," *Pemptousia*. June 2, 2021, <https://pemptousia.com/2021/06/all-that-remains-is-prayer-and-love-on-saint-silouan-the-athonite/>

fact are very lonely. And to close my door is something demonic; it is the sign of a monstrous egotism.”¹¹

The fruit of Fr. Sofian’s spiritual struggle was his willingness and ability to lay aside his own needs and attend to those of others. He had overcome the “monstrous egotism” that closes a person in on himself.

Elder Sofian did not *do* anything special; as he says, *I listen. And from time to time I also say something*. He would pray for the person whose confession he was listening to, and “although he gave very good and practical advice, you could feel the effect of his presence and his prayer, even if he did not say anything,” a spiritual son of his testifies.¹² Although he was physically, emotionally, and spiritually drained after hours of listening, having no time or energy left for himself, he nonetheless could give this burden to God and remain in the joy of the Lord. As he had learned in prison, Fr. Sofian effectively transformed every psychological state into a spiritual state by turning everything into prayer. He did this for others as well, acting like a converter that transformed people’s pain and suffering into hope and joy, unburdening them by bringing God’s presence into their midst and offering God their psychological energy so that they could receive His uncreated energy in its place.¹³

Elder Sofian’s listening was pure because his heart was pure, that is, devoid of egotism and its offspring, codependency. He was dependent on God. The majority, if not all, of us are codependent, that is, we seek to have our needs met by others, or to meet others’ needs instead of taking care of our own. We live unconsciously, unaware that we are acting on subconscious patterns of maladaptive behavior. As Schema-nun Siluana Vlad—who herself was a spiritual daughter of Fr. Sofian for some time—says, the saints, by contrast, do not have an unconscious; they become fully illumined, made transparent by God’s light; that is, their unconscious content becomes conscious.¹⁴

Fr. Sofian was illumined—one could see this on his face—having been purified of subconscious impulses and patterns of behavior. As Fr. Symeon Kragiopoulos describes the saints, by “surrendering their whole self to God...slowly their whole subconscious, their whole unconscious, i.e. their whole soul, became conscious. That is the reason a saint has complete control over himself.”¹⁵ Fr. Sofian names this self-control “wisdom—to know how to weigh every word, and every thought, to be a master of yourself, to always be able to control what you say and what you think.”¹⁶

When we live unconsciously according to our fallen self, we lose our conscious connection with God—with His joy that is deep within us; we are unable to control ourselves; we

¹¹ Arsenie Muscalu, “Nevoința duhovnicească a liniștirii în viața și învățăturile Pr. Sofian.” *Doxologia.ro*. November 23, 2018. Video, 0:15:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kc7Vr_MO_44&t=757s.

¹² Personal testimony by Grig Gheorghiu.

¹³ Based on the teachings of Schemanun Siluana Vlad, herself a spiritual daughter of Elder Sofian for a time.

¹⁴ Schemanun Siluana Vlad, *God Where is the Wound*, trans. Grig Gheorghiu (Alhambra: Sebastian Press, 2021).

¹⁵ Archimandrite Symeon Kragiopoulos, *Timeless Truths: The Annual Liturgical Cycle for Every Year* (Thessaloniki: Nativity of the Theotokos Hesychasterion: 2022), 360.

¹⁶ Arsenie Muscalu, “Conferința ‘Calea vieții duhovnicești – de la minte la inimă’ Ierom. Arsenie Muscalu - Partea I.” *Doxologia.ro*. Dec 7, 2018. Video, 00:24:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4prXffAgGGo>.

react rather than respond; we see others through the prism of our unhealthy needs and attachments;¹⁷ we become weighed down, burnt out, full of stress and anxiety. Elder Sofian, by contrast, was an image of a true human being, healed of the passions, wholly and freely dependent on God. Permanently in God's presence, he was able to be permanently present for others—in season or out of season (2 Tim 4:2).

Final Years

Elder Sofian's health eventually deteriorated. He would listen to confessions bent over, with his ear close to the penitent's mouth in order for others in church not to overhear, remaining in this position for hours. Late one night, when he got up from his confessional chair, he suffered a herniated disk, and because of his advanced age, being 90 years old, he could not be operated on. Already afflicted with diabetes and eye problems, his health rapidly declined from this.¹⁸

On September 14, 2002, during the Divine Liturgy for the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross, Elder Sofian fell asleep in the Lord. His life had been a Cross upon which he was lifted from a young age, and from which he did not come down. Like Christ on the Cross, he transformed his pain and suffering into prayer for the world,¹⁹ emptying himself of himself by not turning anyone away without being listened to, as he had promised God in prison.

His life, beginning with caring for his baby brother, then caring for others in prison, and finally caring for those who came to him for confession, had been a continuous act of hospitality. He had decreased so that others could increase (cf. Jn 3:30). He is now buried at Caldarusani Monastery where many miracles have already taken place at his grave. He was recently placed on a list by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church to be canonized in 2025 along with other contemporary Romanian Elders, such as Elder Justin Parvu and Fr. Dumitru Staniloae.

Conclusion

So, how can we too find inner peace and spread it to those around us? As Fr. Arsenie Muscalu says:

Elder Sofian's spiritual stability, his peace, as well as the spiritual force and firmness that emanated from his being, I believe came from a very powerful, a very deep faith...from the fact that he had built the house of his soul on the unshakeable, unmovable rock of Christ the Savior's commandments.²⁰

Elder Sofian's inner stillness was not just an exercise in self-control, but discipline rooted in faith. As St John Climacus writes: "Faith is the mother of the solitary; for if he does not

¹⁷ Idea taken from Nun Efrema of the Saint Silouan Convent in Iasi, Romania.

¹⁸ Arhim. Mihail Stanciu, "Biserica Azi. Părintele Sofian Boghiu - Iconar De Suflete (20 09 2022)." Trinitas TV. September 20, 2022. Video, 0:29:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zc20z-_9pcY.

¹⁹ "Elder Sofian Boghiu: The Urban Hesychast," p. 113

²⁰ Arsenie Muscalu, "Nevoința duhovnicească a liniștirii în viața și învățăturile Pr. Sofian." Doxologia.ro. November 23, 2018. Video, 0:09:29, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kc7Vr_MO_44&t=757s.

believe, how can he practice solitude?"²¹ Without faith, the practice of stillness and silence becomes an impersonal meditation, a subtle delusion of seeking the gifts rather than the Giver.

Fr. Sofian's *isihia*, the peace that he spread to others, was the result of a living, personal relationship with the living, personal God. As he notes, "Prayer was more personal in prison."²²

In prison, he learned:

Faith is the certainty that you are not alone. And you feel this, especially when you are abandoned by people, by any human help, when all roads are closed to you, when you are alone in the world and no one can help you. Then you must be certain that you are not alone. (69-71, *Caut fata domnului*)

His faith, that is, his dependence on God, kept him in constant contact with God. It *leavened the whole lump* of his life (cf. Gal. 5:9), giving him the spiritual strength and stability to listen to others for hours.

Elder Sofian's faith was not rational or psychological.²³ He had a higher form of faith described by Sts. Kallistos and Ignatios Xanthapouloi in their *Direction to Hesychasts in 100 Chapters* as being "ignited in the soul by the light of grace...and revealed by the Spirit to those who feed at the feast of Christ by practicing His laws."²⁴ Elder Sofian's deep faith came from discovering Christ hidden in His commandments.²⁵

Rooted in fulfilling the commandments, Elder Sofian's faith not only opened his heart to God but also to others. Fr. Dumitru Staniloae, commenting on the *Direction to Hesychasts in 100 Chapters* in volume eight of his translation of the *Philokalia*, asks:

Who can define another's persona, infinite in its ever-new manifestations? It cannot be contained in exact definitions based on rational knowledge. All the more, who can define the experience of the presence and action of the supreme Person of God? Faith is the way of understanding the most subtle realities, itself being the most subtle mode of knowledge. Because only faith reveals another's persona, who does not want to be reduced to an object and cannot be reduced to an object.²⁶

Faith gives a person new eyes to perceive realities deeper than the rational mind can comprehend. Faith allows one to see the other as a subject rather than an object, to see his or her personhood—*hypostasis* created in God's image, "resting under" his or her outer layers of sin, wounds, and brokenness.

Elder Sofian saw others through this lens of faith, listening to them "despite all their sins." Like Abraham who gave hospitality to the three visitors by giving them a place to rest (cf.

²¹ St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Lazarus Moore (Harper and Brothers, 1959), 27.69, 117.

²² See note 5.

²³ Arsenie Muscalu, "Nevoința duhovnicească a liniștirii în viața și învățăturile Pr. Sofian."

²⁴ *Filocalia* vol 8, ed. Dumitru Staniloae (București: Editura Institutului Biblic, 1979), 184.

²⁵ See St. Mark the Ascetic, "On the Spiritual Law," Ch. 190 in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text Volume One*, trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware (New York: FSG, 1979), 123: "The Lord is hidden in His own commandments, and He is to be found there in the measure that He is sought."

²⁶ *Filocalia* vol 8, 47n49.

Gen. 18:6-7), Elder Sofian gave hospitality to others by allowing them to rest in his presence imbued by the peace and joy of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, as Fr. Constantin Coman, Professor at the University of Bucharest, emphasizes, “Elder Sofian is a treasure we are discovering more and more only after his falling asleep in the Lord, due to the fact that he was an extremely humble, extremely discreet and delicate presence, very invisible from a human, worldly perspective.”²⁷ Elder Sofian’s quiet, humble, hidden example is an encouraging example for all of us serving inside and outside the church. He shows us that we can put prayer above all else, regardless of the outer circumstances; that we can be perpetually in God’s personal presence; and that the root of attentive listening—the source of hospitality—is to remain in connection with God while being connected to others.

New Confessor Sofian, pray to God for us!

²⁷ Constantin Coman, “Film Documentar. Părintele Sofian Duhovnicul Bucureștilor,” Trinitas TV. July 5, 2021. Video, 00:01:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrAyI4mLGCo>.