

On the Meaning of Life.
A Contemporary Dialogue with Philosophy Starting from the Theological
Reflections of Father Professor Dumitru Stăniloae

Abstract:

The main objective of the doctoral thesis was to decipher a framework for dialogue between Christian teaching and a number of contemporary philosophical reflections on the meaning of life. To achieve this objective, a number of recent philosophical writings on this topic were consulted. With regard to theological literature, I drew in particular on the reflections of the great Orthodox theologian Dumitru Stăniloae, attempting to develop on their basis a contemporary dialogue with some contemporary philosophical ideas on the aforementioned theme.

In the first part of the paper, I addressed the conceptual issue (the notions of "meaning," "life", and the expression "meaning of life"), reaching the provisional conclusion that the meaning of life is life itself. This conclusion was formulated based on the following considerations: the original meaning of the Latin *sensus* (which gave rise to the modern term "meaning"); the interpretation of the first occurrence of the expression identified in Latin (*sensus vitae*); the argument provided by life itself through its desire to be more; and, finally, the connection between the expression *sensus vitae* and the biblical expression *via vitae* ("the way of life," in contrast to *via mortis*, "the way of death") from which emerges both the idea that the meaning of life is life itself and the fact that there is a way (which plays the role of a method, called in patristic literature "the way of the commandments") that leads human life towards Life, namely "the way of life," as is evident even from the Savior's exhortation to the rich young man in the Gospel: "if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments" (Mt 19, 17).

In the second part of the thesis, I focused on the question of the meaning of life, highlighting different ways of understanding it present in contemporary philosophical literature. The objective was to contrast these with a theological understanding of the question of the meaning of life. In light of Christian teaching, I was able to identify another way of formulating the question: instead of asking "*What* is the meaning of life?", it would be more appropriate to ask "*Who* is the meaning of life?". The conclusion of the first part of the paper (the meaning of life is Life) was indirectly added to by the analysis of the question about the meaning of life, namely that the Meaning or Life as the meaning of human life is *Someone*.

In the first section of the third part of the thesis, we did nothing more than verify this hypothesis. Step by step, we formulated the argument, first contrasting what it means to experience the meaning of life with what it means not to have this experience. I found that the experience of the meaning of life is only possible within the horizon of a relationship with a somewhat external reality, with a reality that must necessarily be personal and, ultimately, with a reality that must necessarily be an absolute Person. I have come to the conclusion that Meaning or Life as the meaning of human life cannot be *something*, but must be *Someone*, that Life/Meaning must ultimately be an absolute Person (Jn 14, 6) or, rather, a trinity of absolute and eternal Persons. In the second section of the third part of the thesis, I presented, in relation to this theological understanding of the meaning of life, a recent paradigm of perception of the meaning of life to which modern man is exposed today.

The research resulted in a "map" for understanding certain aspects related to the meaning of life, indicating several points where the two paths (theology and philosophical reflection) intersect and coexist – one making way for the other and vice versa – and where they diverge, each following its own path.