DEMONS VERSUS SAINTS
IN THE EARLY EASTERN ORTHODOX
MONASTIC LITERATURE

Barbara Newman, in her study of devout women, demoniacs, and the apostolic life in thirteenth-century Europe proposed that in her material (thirteenth-century exempla) the demoniacs «played a necessary part on the stage of the evangelical drama — so necessary, indeed, that if they had not existed, clerics would have had to invent them».¹ I believe, this is also true of the importance of demonic presence in Christian literature in times earlier and later than the thirteenth century and in places other than Western Europe.

Demons as the counterparts of saints appear in many contexts in Byzantine and ancient Russian literature. There saints fight demons² that seduce and compromise them, exorcise demons from those possessed by evil spirits, but are also seen as possessed by demons. Some saints, mainly the «fools for Christ sake», were themselves perceived as demoniacs. The hagiographers of the first, Byzantine, holy fools were aware of this popular perception. In the Lives of the Symeon the Fool (⁷th C.) and Andrew the Fool (⁹—¹⁰th C.) it is recorded that the communities not only regarded them as mad, but tended to explain their prophetic abilities by their ties to demons. In the story of Andrew the Fool, when the saint tells the man in a tavern who refused to give him alms, how much money he had spent during that day and where, the wine-dealer explains such a revelation by stating that «demons know all the deeds of men and reveal them to their friends and mad people are, of course, friends of theirs».³ However, the problem of the «popular»

² On the problem of fight between demons and saints see P. Dinzelmacher, Der Kampf der Heiligen mit den Dämonen // Santi e demoni nell’alto medioevo occidentale (secoli V–XI). Settimani di studio del centro Italiani di sudl’alto medioevo 36. T. II (Spoleto, 1989) 647–695. In the saints’ fight with demons he sees three main ways: holy men resisting temptation and exorcising demons during their lifetime; doing the same after their death; and assisting believers in their resistance to the demonic assaults. His examples are very much paralleled in Eastern and Russian saints’ Lives, though he does not mention cases of doubtful outcome for the saints.
³ Житие Св. Андрея, Христа ради юродивого [The Life of St. Andrew, the fool for Christ’s sake] (Киев, 1897) 33.
perception of demonic presence in individuals or the discernment of spirits in a wider sense, is not my subject here, since it does not really belong to the group of questions concerning the actual fight between demonic and saintly powers.

In the early Eastern Orthodox literature the interaction between demons and humans seems to be closely connected to their life-style. While an ordinary man, «living in the world», could be possessed by unclean spirits, an ascetic could only be seduced by them. As far as I can see, a demon could not enter the body of an ascetic. Yet, as it is well known, demons caused plenty of trouble to monks as early as the times of the desert fathers. I intend to select and analyse some episodes from two collections of saints’ lives and monastic stories: the «Lives of the Eastern Saints» by John of Ephesus (6th C.) and the Paterikon of the Kievan Caves monastery (put together in the beginning of the 13th C., but containing texts as early as of the 11th C.). Both contain rich material on the diverse forms of the saints-demons interaction, many of which are well known in other, «Western», sources as well. It seems to me that they, however, emphasise the aspect less widely treated in studies about the struggle against evil spirits as they are addressing the issues of ascetic purity being challenged in different ways and the actors of these challenges are seen as of demonic nature.

The danger coming from demons was one of the serious concerns of John of Ephesus. In his narrative the fight between demons and saints takes various forms. Demons could, for example, scandalise ascetics, compromise them in the eyes of the community. In the «Life of James metropolitan of Edessa», we come across a story in which a fiend goes out of a monk’s cell in the form of a laughing young woman. Surely, this episode would have caused serious harm to the ascetic’s reputation in the eyes of community. James prayed, breathed upon her, made the sign of a cross, and she turned into smoke.6

Another way of demonic assault, also well known in hagiographic sources, was to cause bodily sickness to saints. The blessed monk Habib fell ill some years after he had expelled demons from two possessed women. His disciples convinced him to suspend the inhibitions he laid on demons to save his own life. As soon as Habib released the demons, they went back into the women. The saint was right away healed, and then drove the demons out of their victims again. Unfortunately, John of Ephesus does not

4 On these issues see the Ph.D. dissertation of Nancy Caciola: Discerning Spirits: Sanctity and Possession in the later Middle Ages. UMI, 1994.
5 DINZELBACHER (Der Kampf... 659–660) lists askesis as an actual fight against demons: ascetic life in itself is seen in his material as a weapon against evil spirits.