

HOLY TRINITY UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY
DEPARTMENT OF THEOLOGICAL ETHICS
INTRODUCTION TO ORTHODOXY SPIRITUALTY



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ORTHODOXY SPRITUALTY

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COURSE SYLLABLES

QUALIFICATION OF THE INSTRUCTOR

Fasil Asmamaw Zewdu (MTH IN PRACTICCAL THEOLOGY)

Minimum requirement: M.Th. in practical theology

At most PhD. Practical theology

PREREQUISITE COURSES

- Dogmatic Theology
- Christian Ethics

COURSE TITLE

- Orthodox Spirituality

CREDIT HOURS

- 3 Credit hour

CONTACT HOUR

- 14 hours per month

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course describes the six main chapters that deals about the orthodoxy spirituality meaning, sources, and stages of the orthodoxy spirituality and the patristic fathers thinking.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

At the end of the course the students will be able To understand the terminology of orthodoxy spirituality

To explain about the theosis

To describe about the mystical theology

To classify the stages of orthodoxy spirituality

COURSE CONTENT

CHAPTER ONE

- INTRODUCTION
- WHAT IS ORTHODOXY?
- WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?
- What are Orthodox Spirituality and its Goal?
- Orthodox Spirituality and this world
- The Soul of Orthodox spirituality
- THREE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF ORTHODOXY SPIRITUALITY
- ORTHODOXY SPIRITUALITY BY ST GREGORY
- Difference between Spirituality and religion

CHAPTER TWO

THEOSIS

CHAPTER THREE

MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

CHAPTER FOUR

THE STAGES OF ORTHODOXY SPIRITUALITY BY SAINT JOHN THE LADDER

CHAPTER FIVE

THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF ST GREGORY PALAMAS

CHAPTER SIX

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ST. IRENAEUS OF LYONS

TEACHING AND LEARNING METHODS

INTERACTIVE LEARNING AND TEACHING METHOD

GROUP DISCUSSION

ROLE PLAY METHOD

PANEL DISCUSSION

EVALATION METHOD

MID EXAM 20%

INDIVIDUAL WORK 15%

GROUP WORK 15%

FINAL EXAM 50%

REFERENCE

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- Paul Evdokimov, *The Ages of the Spiritual Life* (SVS Press, 1998).
- John Meyendorff, *St Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (SVS Press, 1974).
- A Monk of the Eastern Church [Fr Lev Gillet], *Orthodox Spirituality* (SVS Press, 1996). John Chrysavgis. Ascent to Heaven. Holy Cross Orthodox Press. Brookline(1989)
- GEH Palmer. Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware. The Philokalia. Faber and Faber. London. 1979
- Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos. Orthodox Spirituality. Birth of the Theotokos Monastery. Levadia, Greece. (1994)
- Paul Evdokimov, *The Ages of the Spiritual Life* (SVS Press, 1998).
- MYSTICAL THEOLIGY the eastern church BY Vladimmir Loskky
- Thinking Orthodoxy understanding and acquiring the orthodox chrstian mind by Egenia Scarvelies constanininou(phd)
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS ORTHODOXY?

The spirituality of the Orthodox Church does not lead to abstract religious life; nor is it the fruits of man's inner strength. Spirituality is not an abstract religious life because the Church is the Body of Christ. It is not simply a religion which believes in a God, theoretically.

The Second Person of the Holy Trinity — the Logos of God — assumed human nature for us. He united it with his hypostasis and became the Head of the Church.

The term Orthodoxy consists of two words: "*orthos*"(true, right) and "*doxa*". "*Doxa*" means, on the one hand, belief, faith, teaching and on the other, praise or doxology. These two meanings are closely connected. The true teaching about God incorporates the true praise of God; for if God is abstract, then prayer to this God is abstract as well. If God is personal then prayer assumes a personal character. God has revealed the true faith, the true teaching. Thus we say that the teaching about God and all matters associated with a person's salvation are the Revelation of God and not man's discovery.

The spiritual person is he who partakes of and participates in the energies of the Most Holy Spirit; he, who has himself become a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. This does not constitute an abstract, emotional or intellectual spirituality. The bearer of Orthodox spirituality par excellence is the Saint who is revealed through his teachings and his relics. The non-spiritual individual, who is deprived of the Holy Spirit, is the psychological and carnal person.

It is precisely the above distinction which points out the difference between Orthodox spirituality and other "spiritualities".

Orthodox spirituality differs markedly from the "spiritualities" of the East and the West. The difference in the dogma generates the difference in ethos as well. The essence of Orthodox spirituality lies in its therapeutic effects. It cures a person's infirmities and renders him and integrated person.

WHAT IS SPIRITUALTY?

Spirituality may be defined as the life in and with the Holy Spirit. It is an ascetic and pious struggle against sin through repentance, prayer, fasting and participation in the sacramental life of the Church.

St. Paul Says: “Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.... Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like..... But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And those who have are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16-25). Orthodoxy has preferred always to use the terms ‘life in Christ’, ‘life in Spirit’, ‘the spiritual life’, and the ‘life in God’ to describe the life of the Christian in union with God, regardless of the level of this life. See Galatians 3:28; 3:20; 2 Corinthians 4: 11; 1 Corinthians 7: 8; Romans 8: 15; Ephesians 3: 16-17; Colossians 3:3; John 14: 23; 1 John 3:24 etc.

What is Orthodox Spirituality and what is its Goal?

Orthodox Spirituality presents the process of a Christian’s progress on the road to perfection in Christ, by the cleansing of passions and the winning of the virtues, a process which takes place in a certain order. Spirituality describes the manner in which the Christians can go forward from the cleansing of one passion, to the cleansing of another and the same to the acquiring of the different virtues. Thus a certain level of perfection is reached and culminates in love. This is a state that represents the cleansing of all passions and the winning of all the virtues. As man/woman climbs toward this peak, he/she simultaneously moves toward union with Christ and the knowledge of Him by experience, which also means his/her deification.

The goal of Orthodox Spirituality is the perfection of the believer by his/her union with God in Christ. But as God is unending, the goal of our union with Him, or our perfection, has no point from which we can no longer progress.

So all the Eastern Fathers say that perfection is unlimited. Thus our perfection is not only the goal but also an unending process. In this process two great steps can be distinguished: first, the moving ahead toward perfection through purification from the passions and the acquiring of the virtues and secondly a life progressively moving ahead in the union with God. At this point, man’s work is replaced by God’s. Man contributes by opening himself up receptively to an ever-greater filling with the life of God.

In short, we may narrate the following features of Orthodox Spirituality:

1. The culminating state of the spiritual life is a union of the soul with God, lived or experienced.
2. This union is realized by the working of the Holy Spirit, but until it is reached, man is involved in a prolonged effort of purification

3. It takes place when man reaches the 'likeness of God'. It is at the same time knowledge and love.
4. Among other things, the effect of this union consists of a considerable intensification of spiritual energies in man, accompanied by all kinds of charisma.

The Orthodox uses the word 'deification' or participation in the divinity to characterize the union with God. It, however, does not mean that here there is a pantheistic identification of man with God. But it asserts with courage the possibility of a 'union' of man with God, of a direct 'vision' of Him, of a 'participation' in Him, through grace.

Orthodox Spirituality and this world

It is very important to note that Orthodox Spirituality does not call for an indifference to life, for a withdrawal from its affairs and for a pre-mature eschatology. The Church Fathers have demonstrated the movement of God's creation (universe) and the need for every person to participate in it, if he/she wants to reach the perfection represented by the mystical union with God. There should be a synergia (co-operation) of human will and the divine grace (human will and divine grace are two unequal but equally needed forces in the movement to attain perfection. The Church denies any kind of teaching that deny either the divine grace or the human will in the process of attaining perfection). This movement is intended in general to elevate a person to the level of the highest good and to perfection.

The road to Christian perfection does not exclude this world and the works in it, but it does require that it contribute to the winning of virtues. No one should imagine that the work he/she does is an end in itself; it has the role of beautifying his nature, with the virtues of patience, of self-control, of love for his neighbor, of faith in God, and in turn of opening his eyes to the wise principles placed by God in all things.

The ultimate purpose of work and the taking part in the life of this world is not so much the development of nature as it is the normal development of the dormant possibilities in man and in his neighbours. Even in the enduring of troubles, which is one of the most important means of Christian striving, we don't have to run away from the life of the world, but persistence in it. The care for one's own formation and that of our neighbours, by beautifying ourselves with virtues, does not mean a non-participation in the life of the world.

The one who has reached the peaks of spiritual living is no longer pre-occupied with external activity, but contemplation. Even so, he/she exerts an influence on the development of the world, by an attraction and a power which touch his neighbours, that they might become as he/she is, by the same fulfillment of the commandments, by the same virtuous works. The person who has reached the peak of perfection exerts an influence and an attraction on his/her neighbours, which makes them strive to reach the ideal goal. Because the very highest of the virtues, which the spiritual man struggles for, is love. In love there is knowledge too and the love of God cannot be separated from the love of the people.

Holy Trinity is the basis and Love is the Hallmark of Orthodox Spirituality

The very basis of Christian life is in the mystery of Holy Trinity and Incarnation. Orthodox spirituality has as a basic conviction on the existence of a personal God, who is incarnated and who is the supreme source of radiating love. God prizes man and does not want to confuse him/her with Himself, but maintains and raises him to an eternal dialogue of love.

But the personal God, the supreme source of love, can't be conceived of as a single person, but as a community of persons in a perfect unity. The God of the New Testament and of the holy Fathers is living and irreducibly three in one the Holy Trinity.

We may describe the Trinitarian basis of our spirituality in the following lines: Only a perfect community of supreme persons (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) can nourish, with its unending and perfect love, our thirst for love in relation to it and between ourselves. The Father wants to extend love in its paternal form. So after the creation of man, He wanted His Son to become man so that His love for His Son, made man, would be a love which is directed toward any human face, like that of His son. In the Son made flesh we are all adopted by the Father. The Father loves all of us in His Son, because the Son was made our brother. God the Son, too, thus shows His love as a supreme brother. But the Son's love for us is not separated from the Father's love for us, but in His love as a brother He makes the Father's love and also His love for the Father, engulf us. In us the Father welcomes other loving and loved sons because His Son was made our beloved brother.

However, this paternal love is poured out on us in the form of the Holy Spirit flooding the Son. By the Incarnate Son the Holy Spirit radiates within humanity and the world, as the love of God for us and of ours for God. The Holy Spirit brings into creation inter-Trinitarian life and love. He raises us to the level of deification.

The invocation of the Holy Spirit in the Holy Qurbana (epiclesis) hasn't only the purpose of changing the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, but of brining divine life into the creation. This is why the Church invokes the Holy Spirit in all her sanctifying services. We are raised up by the Holy Spirit to the divine world or in the other way the divine world penetrates us. This is what really the meaning and goal of our spirituality or spiritual life.

The Soul of Orthodox spirituality

The soul of Orthodox spirituality consists in the practice of virtues and especially in the gift of prayer. There is no spiritual life without prayer and there is no labour greater than praying to God. The Church has got canonical prayer of hours (seven times a day) and the unceasing prayers that can be recited privately even in the time of doing some jobs. Through prayer a faithful will be illumined and prayer is the measuring rode of a person's spiritual life. St. Dionysious the Areopagite divides the spiritual life into three stages: Purification, illumination and deification (union). We may compare these stages with the stages of the practice of virtues, the contemplation of nature and the contemplation of God Himself. Practice of virtues begins with repentance.

The baptised Christian struggles with God's help to escape from enslavement to passionate impulses. By fulfilling the commandments, gradually he/she attains purity of heart and it is this that constitutes the ultimate aim of the first stage. At the second stage, the contemplation of nature, the Christians sharpens his/her perception of the being of the created things, and discovers the Creator present in everything and thus it leads him/her to respect and give honour to fellow creations. This leads him/her to the third stage, the direct vision of God, who is not only in everything but above and beyond everything. The full vision of the divine glory is reserved for the age to come, yet even in the present life, the saints enjoy sure pledge and first fruits of the coming harvest.

The first stage is called 'active life' while the second and third jointly designated the 'contemplative life'. It is to be noted that not only the social worker or family member or the missionary who is following the active life, the hermit or the recluse is likewise doing so, in as much as he/she is still struggling to overcome the passions and to grow in virtue. In the same way the contemplative life is not restricted to the desert or the solitude, but a miner, a clerk, a typist or a house wife may also possess inward silence and prayer of the heart, a may therefore be in the true sense a 'contemplative'.

THREE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF ORTHODOXY SPRITUALITY

1. The Orthodox tradition is intensely conscious of the ecclesial character Christianity. It is of course true that there are many who reject Christ and His Church, or who have never heard of him; Whether they will be saved or not cannot be answered properly by us and let God will do as His will. But, as Church members, we believe that even a solitary in the solitary in the desert is as much a churchmen as the artisan in the city. The ascetic and mystical path is at the same time social and communal. The Christian is the one who has brothers and sisters. He/she belongs to a family and that family is the Church.

2. Spiritual life is not only a life in the Church but also life in the sacraments. It is the sacraments that constitute our life in Christ. Our path is the path of corporate worship, centred around the sacraments and especially the sacrament of Eucharist. That is to say that it is in the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ that the Christian life is based and moved towards perfection.

3. The spiritual life is also evangelical. At each step upon the path, we turn for guidance to the voice of God speaking to us through the Bible. After being inspired by what is written in the Bible, we lead ourselves to be the real witnesses of our Lord to our neighbours. We are asked to preach the Gospel and witness our Lord by practising the virtues of prayer, fasting and alms giving. Prayer unites us to God; fasting sanctifies us and alms giving (Charity) is really an extension of the divine Grace in us to our fellow beings and the rest of the creation. These presuppositions obviously show the Trinitarian Christological, Pneumatological, Sacramental and ecclesiastical character of Orthodox spirituality.

Orthodox spirituality gives enough and equal space for family life and monastic life. That means it gives equal value to those who follow family life and monastic life and no clear marked distinction is given to their goal although their style of life is different. The practice of virtues is highly extolled in both ways of life in the manner that is befitting to each of them.

Orthodox spirituality is not an ecstatic movement like some contemporary so-called spiritual movements. It gives us a lesson for the perpetual and continuing bliss that one can really experience in the Eucharistic worship of the Church. Flight from division, ascetic silence and hospitality are highly extolled in Orthodox spirituality. For the Church Fathers, 'to flee from the world' means to flee from everything that divides. Also, the spirituality must ultimately be understood in terms of paschal mystery. It is an affirmation of the Cross-as the path of resurrection. The ability to bear the cross comes from the joy of being saved. Joy in our Lord is our strength. The aim of the exercise that at times is found painful is a purified love of God, of neighbours, and of the whole creation. But that also means an increase of joy.¹

¹ H.G.Dr. Yuhanon Mar Diascoros Metropolitan

Orthodox spirituality has as its goal the deification of man and his union with God, without being merged with Him. It has as a basic conviction the existence of a personal God, who is the supreme source of radiating love. He prizes man and doesn't want to confuse him with Himself, but maintains and raises him to an eternal dialogue of love. Such a spirituality has no place where an evolutionary progress of man, connected to a divinity conceived as an impersonal essence, is affirmed. This progress can have no result other than man's disappearance in the impersonal divinity. But the personal God, and thus the supreme source of love, can't be conceived of as a single person, but as a community of persons in a perfect unity. You see then why the Christian teaching of a Trinity of Persons in a unity of essence is the only one which can constitute the basis of a perfect spirituality for man, understood as a full communion with God in love, without his being lost in it.²

Orthodox Spirituality It should be remembered, especially in the Western context, that the roots of Christian theology are not only Western, but reach deeply into the theological mind and the living Christian experience of the Orthodox East. Before the medieval political and cultural schism between the Latin and Greek worlds and the subsequent Protestant Reformation, the Christian West was itself, in fact, Orthodox, part and parcel of one united, albeit admittedly bipolar, Byzantine Commonwealth. In our own time, as Western culture once again gradually comes to recognition of the "Eastern" Orthodox Church as being existentially part of its own root tradition, the imperative of discovering common ground and defining a common frame of reference relative to essentials of Christian spiritual life arises as a matter of some urgency.³

ORTHODOXY SPIRITUALTY BY ST GREGORY

St Gregory Palamas, a fourteenth-century Byzantine saint and Church Father, incorporated traditional Eastern monastic spirituality into a comprehensive theological vision. His understanding of hesychasm, the monastic movement centered on solitude and unceasing prayer, is grounded in an incarnational theology: When spiritual joy comes to the body from the mind, it suffers no diminution by this communion with the body, but rather transfigures the body, spiritualizing it rejecting all evil desires of the flesh, it no longer weighs down the soul but rises up with it, the whole man becoming spirit, as it is written: 'He who is born of the Spirit is spirit' (John 3:6-8). Triads 11, 2.9 This richly documented and lavishly illustrated study of Orthodox spirituality traces the development of 'Orthodox mysticism' from the desert fathers through the patristic tradition to Byzantine hesychasm and its heritage in Russian monasticism. It shows how the work of Palamas transcends the limits of one school of spirituality and renews in its deepest essence the life of the Christian Mystery.

Many of us have explored Spirituality in our own ways. Although this quest is very individual (i.e., we all have our own personal definition of Spirituality), it is collective in spirit. This is because Spirituality in people's minds is synonymous with a search for meaning, for purpose and direction in life.

² Dumitru Staniloae,

³ Alexander Golubov, Foreword, Orthodox Spirituality

People get attracted to Spirituality and embark on their spiritual journeys for different reasons. Generically, there are a few main reasons for this.

1. **Curiosity about the spiritual dimension:** This includes seeking answers to the more profound questions in life such as – what is the purpose of life, where did I come from and where do we go after death?
2. **When facing a problem in life:** Insurmountable problems in life are often a catalyst for people to search for an answer to their problems beyond the purview of modern science. This includes approaching an astrologer, a psychic or a holy man.
3. **Interested in spiritual healing:** The ability to heal by channelizing subtle energies is an art that has been pursued for millennia.
4. **Interested in personality improvement:** Wanting to be a better person can lead one to Spirituality and a more spiritual way of life.
5. **Wanting to grow spiritually:** Some of us have an innate need to grow spiritually and do not need a catalyst to push us towards Spirituality.

For those who seek the meaning of Spirituality there is much literature that can be found on the web. However, this presents another problem as one may get confused as to what to choose as an accurate definition. In this article, we provide the definition of Spirituality and provide practical insights about Spirituality.

In Sanskrit, Spirituality is known as *Adhyātma*. It is derived from two words *Adhi* and *Ātman* (*Ātmanahā*). *Adhi* means pertaining to the topic and *Ātmā* means the Soul. The Soul is the God principle within each of us and is our true nature. It is the main component of the subtle body, which is a fractional part of the Supreme God Principle. Its characteristics are Absolute Truth (*Sat*), Absolute Consciousness (*Chit*) and Bliss (*Ānand*). The Soul is unaffected by the ups and downs (and the happiness and unhappiness) one experiences in life as it is perpetually in a blissful state.–

Our natural state is to be blissful (which is the nature of the Soul within us) and we all inherently yearn to be in this state. This is also the reason why we all search for happiness in life and run after various things we think will make us happy. However, as we all know with the stresses and strains of modern-day living, ‘happiness’ is elusive and fleeting.

Spirituality, thus, deals with understanding the nature of the Soul and one’s journey back to identifying with the Soul and experiencing it as one’s true nature. Spirituality is the expansive science about how to be blissful.

The scope of the science of Spirituality is vast and also includes answers to profound questions such as, ‘who am I’, ‘where did I come from’, ‘what is the purpose of life’, ‘where will I go after death’, etc

In Sanskrit, Spirituality or Spiritual science it is called *Paravidya* (Supreme science), while all other sciences are called *Aparāvidyā* meaning inferior science. By ‘science’, we mean modern

science. Rationalists and most people think that science and Spirituality are two separate disciplines. However, Spirituality is the knowledge of infinity, that is, knowledge of all subjects. It covers the whole physical world and the subtle unseen world, all the physical and spiritual regions, all physical and subtle frequencies, energies and vibrations, all positive and negative entities and all living beings and non-living beings in the whole Universe. Spirituality contains all the knowledge and memory of the past, present and future, from the beginning to the end of the Universe.

3. Difference between Spirituality and religion

For many people, religion provides them with their first learnings about spiritual matters and things that are beyond the physical world. However, religions often tend to be sectarian in nature. A 'sect' is a group of people who usually think that their Path to God is the best and the preferable one (if not the only one).

However, one of the fundamental principles of Spirituality is that there are as many paths to God as there are people. Just as a doctor does not advise the same medicine for different ailments which different people may have, similarly the same type of spiritual practice does not necessarily benefit everyone. When spiritual practice is tailor-made as per the temperament and needs of an individual, it leads to faster spiritual progress.

God is expansive, and to experience Him, we too must become expansive in our spiritual outlook. A myopic or ethnocentric outlook about religion or Spirituality often stifles spiritual growth, thus leading to stagnation.

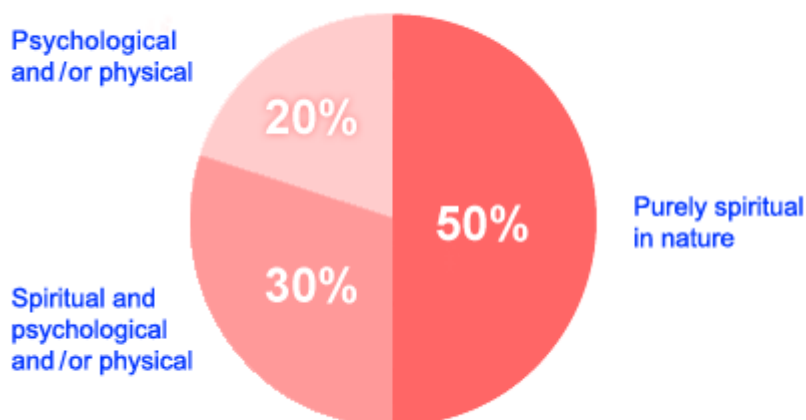
4. Why is Spirituality vital to us?

Regardless of who we are and where we come from – our need to experience happiness in our lives drives all our worldly pursuits. This need is common to all of us regardless of cultural background, religion, gender, social or financial status, etc. However, through spiritual research, we have found that on average people experience happiness only 30% of the time.

One of the main reasons we experience unhappiness is due to problems in life. Everyone knows about the physical and psychological causes of problems in life. However, what many of us do not know is that problems that are physical or psychological in nature can have a spiritual root cause. This means that even though a problem is primarily due to spiritual reasons, it can manifest as a physical or psychological problem.

The main spiritual problems are destiny (karma), problems due to departed ancestors and distress due to negative energies.

Breakdown of the root cause of difficulties in a person's life



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Through spiritual research, we have found that over 50% of the problems that a person faces in life are due to spiritual reasons. All major life events such as marriage, good and bad relationships, serious accidents and major illnesses are mostly due to one's destiny.

Now this is important – **The solution for any problem needs to be provided at that corresponding level.**

When the problem of a patient has a spiritual root cause, it is best to provide spiritual help or employ a spiritual solution to help. Spiritual measures such as practising Spirituality provide relief to the physical and psychological problems as well and this is especially so if the root cause the problem is spiritual in nature.

5. Spirituality and the purpose of life

At some point of time in our lives some of us begin to wonder – Is this it ?

Is this all there is to life – for example – getting a good education, earning money, getting a loan, purchasing a car, getting an even bigger loan, purchasing a house, purchasing a bigger house, achieving success and recognition in some field, raising a family and then ultimately we die ? Some of us may begin to wonder whether life has any higher purpose.

For those of us who have gone through this stage of introspection, it is like something has shifted deep within us. For some of us, such feelings have propelled us to embark on our own spiritual journeys.

According to the science of Spirituality, there are really only 2 reasons for being born :

- The first purpose of life is to complete one's destiny or karma that one is born with.

- The second and more important purpose of life is to grow spiritually.

Practicing Spirituality as per universal principles helps with both these purposes. It helps to burn adverse destiny that causes us unhappiness and it also helps us to grow spiritually.

Note: For more information please refer to the article on – What is the purpose of life ?

6. Spirituality is a practical science

Many of us have read books on Spirituality and spiritual concepts. However mere theory (even if it is correct) apart from providing direction to an individual, unless it is put into practice can never be experienced. It remains as just intellectual spiritual concepts to a person. Only when one puts that knowledge into practice, does one get spiritual experiences or the experience of Spirituality. Spiritual practice truly helps a person understand the importance of Spirituality. This is why it is said that in a person's spiritual journey, theoretical knowledge of Spirituality has only 2% importance, while 98% importance is for practicing.

If a person just reads about Spirituality and does not practice it, he will never understand/experience its importance. As a result, sooner or later he may stop having any interest in it. In fact, he may also end up doubting its usefulness in life.

Another important point to consider is the veracity of a spiritual book that one may be following. As a spiritual book cannot be easily peer reviewed it is not easy to understand if it is correct. In the article – The effect of the author on books on Spirituality, we have shown that all spiritual books are not equal and the level of spiritual truth depends on the author of the book.

7. Importance of a spiritually evolved guide (Guru) in Spirituality

A Guru is a person who is a Saint at the spiritual of 70% or above. According to Spiritual science, a person who is an authority in the field of Spirituality is known as a Guru. SSRF uses a scale between 1 and 100% to describe spiritual level. 1% would refer to the spiritual level of an inanimate object, while 100% would refer to the pinnacle of spiritual growth for a person, which is Self-Realisation or being one with God. The average spiritual level of a person in the present times is 20%.

One cannot overstate the importance of having a spiritually evolved guide (Guru) in one's spiritual journey. In any spiritual quest, a Guru is of paramount importance. This is because Spirituality is the journey about transcending one's 5 senses, mind and intellect and instead experiencing that one's nature is the Soul. Since a Guru has walked the path Himself, He is an authority in the subject and is able to guide us on the journey to God-realisation.

Unfortunately, in the current era, 80% of the Gurus in society are fake or without spiritual authority. They use the garb of Spirituality to earn money and gain importance. They have done a disfavor to society as they mislead people who are interested in Spirituality. Most people in

today's era are around the spiritual level of 20% and are unequipped to discern whether a person is a Saint or not. However, they generally end up following a person who can heal them or perform miracles.

If the desire of a seeker is earnest, then the unmanifest God Principle intervenes and guides the seeker to an actual Guru.

8. Spiritual paths

There are many generic paths to God and the most popular ones are listed below.

- *Bhaktiyoga* – The Path of Devotion
- *Namsankirtanyoga* – The Path of Chanting
- *Karmakand* – The Path of Ritualistic Worship
- *Karmayoga* – The Path of Action (i.e. to have no expectation of fruit from an action which is performed)
- *Dhyanyoga* – The Path of Meditation
- *Dnyanyoga* – The Path of Knowledge (Receiving knowledge pertaining to the Soul through Holy texts or in the subtle)
- *Hathayoga* – The Path of Deliberate Rigor
- *Kundaliniyoga* – The Path of Spiritual Energy

These paths have been designed so as to suit the temperament of the seeker. However, regardless of which Path to God one chooses, it is important that one reduces the intensity of one's personality defects. If one has many personality defects, one cannot sustain on any path.

To help a seeker progress faster in his spiritual journey, His Holiness Dr Athavale founded **Gurukrupayoga** (The Path of the Guru's grace). This path amalgamates the best parts of all the other paths of Spirituality. It recommends 8 steps of spiritual practice with an emphasis on removing defects and reducing one's ego.

9. Obstacles in Spirituality

As a seeker of spiritual growth, one may come across the following obstacles in one's spiritual journey.

- **Incorrect guidance on spiritual practice** : Even if one has a lot of desire to progress spiritually, but the guidance one is following is incorrect, then months if not years can be wasted.

- **Not as per universal laws:** All spiritual practice should be based on universal laws/principles, else it could lead to stagnation.
- **No authority to answer one's doubts:** If doubts about Spirituality are not clarified, a seeker may end up following a wrong path and end up losing faith in Spirituality.
- **Negative energies** from the spiritual dimensions often misguide seekers from the subtle.
- Sometimes what life throws at a seeker can derail his spiritual practice.
- Sometimes one may be stagnating in his spiritual practice and one may not even realize it. This is why having a spiritual guide in one's journey is important.
- The spiritual path to God realization can take years if not decades. Sometimes, along the way seekers can experience a lack of will power, diligence or perseverance in their spiritual practice which will impede their spiritual growth. This is why being associated with other co-seekers or a spiritual organization helps in providing seekers with the necessary impetus and encouragement in their spiritual journeys.

10. Practicing Spirituality

Spiritual practice is something that many start, but there are very few finalists. Few persist with spiritual practice for even a year and even fewer progress to higher spiritual levels.

Why is this the case?

It is not that there is a shortage of genuine seekers who want to progress spiritually. Also, Spirituality is universal and anyone, even a person who has committed many mistakes, can progress spiritually with sincere spiritual practice.

The reason people give up on Spirituality is because in most cases, people do not practice Spirituality as per its universal principles and under the guidance of a proper spiritual guide. Hence, they stagnate in their spiritual journeys and the expected spiritual growth does not occur. SSRF recommends practicing Spirituality as per the 6 basic principles of spiritual practice for faster spiritual growth.

We hope that this paper has helped clarify the meaning of Spirituality for you. If it has helped you, please do share it with others who may be interested in Spirituality. We encourage those of you on a spiritual quest to consider reading our section on spiritual practice.

THE SOURCES OF ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

The sources of Orthodox spirituality are the Holy Scriptures, sacred Tradition, the dogmatic definitions of the Ecumenical Synods, and the spiritual teachings of the Greek Orthodox Fathers. Orthodox spirituality is mainly expressed through prayer, daily Christian living, and worship, which ultimately lead to union with the divine uncreated Light.

Man and His Purpose as Creature of God

Before we enter into a discussion of the spirituality of the Orthodox Church, let us see what is man's purpose as a creature of God. Man is created in the image and likeness of God. The human destiny is not to achieve mystical union with the essence of God, but rather to attain moral and spiritual perfection by participation in the divine uncreated energies. Man, according to the Orthodox Fathers, was not created perfect from the beginning. Rather he was created with the potential to achieve perfection through grace. This, of course, was not realized because of the fall. In the fullness of time, God sent our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to become man, and through his suffering and resurrection from the dead, restored man to his original state of grace and enabled him to attain perfection. Christ says: "Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect." The ultimate purpose of man, therefore, is to become perfect in God, through love. That is, to attain perfect, selfless love of God and one's fellow human beings.

The Christian Commitment

The life of moral perfection, according to our Bible and the Fathers of the Church, is a call to a life in Christ, that is, a Christ-like life. Consequently, the spirituality of the Orthodox Christian is portrayed as a life in Christ, a life of commitment to the Lord, and a complete submission to his will. One lives only to do everything for Christ's sake, as Christ wants it and as Christ would do it.

The Christian commitment to Christ must be made by an inner, free act and is not compelled by any external force, not even by God. "Man is free and able to enter into relations with both kingdoms - the kingdoms of light and that of darkness." These kingdoms, the spiritual and the satanic, are hidden, not in the mind, but much deeper in the soul - "under the mind, beneath the surface of the thoughts," as Saint Makarios asserts. This fourth-century saint already had the notion of "heart," which is strikingly close to the modern psychological concept of the subconscious.

Moral Perfection Is Life in Christ

Orthodox spirituality is described throughout the centuries as life in Christ, striving for moral and spiritual perfection. The mystical union in Orthodox spirituality is not the "devout life" that some sects claim but the communion of the person with God. In sectarian teachings, the "devout life" is a sentimental and emotional relation to "divinity." The Orthodox Church rejects this concept in favor of one, which envisions the meeting of man with the divine Person in a mystical way.

Orthodox spirituality is union with Christ, with God. A spiritual person is one who purifies himself of all worldly and moral defects in order to be united with the love of Christ. The mystical experience takes place in this world, yet the cause, God, is from beyond the material world. Orthodox spirituality, as well as the whole thought of the Church, is based on the revelation found in the Old and New Testaments. Studying the Patristic interpretation of the

Christian truths can see this. In the mystical vision of the divine energies of the advanced Christian, he experiences the divine presence within himself, as vision of the uncreated light and of the energies of God. It is especially through the sacrament of the holy Eucharist that we experience mystical union with our Lord.

Philosophy and Divine Knowledge

The important Orthodox doctrine of the incarnation, that is, the divine Logos who became flesh, rendered philosophy and metaphysics irrelevant to our deeper knowledge of the divine truth. Christianity offers access to divine grace for the salvation of mankind through the resurrection of Christ. We cannot speculate about the Logos after the coming of Christ, who is the divine Logos in the flesh, and who sent the Holy Spirit to the world and "teaches us all things."

The mystical experience spoken of by the classical Greeks is abstract and conceptual. That is, in ancient Greek philosophic contemplation, the soul or spirit goes outside the body to be liberated. Philosophy plays only a linguistic role in Orthodoxy, lending the use of its terminology after the terms have been transformed and purified of their secular meanings, "Christianized" philosophy and culture, as Father Georges Florovsky used to say.

A master of spirituality, a monk of Mount Athos, describes this point in the following manner: "Many of the Greeks tried to philosophize, but only the monks found and learned the true philosophy." The Logos became flesh and revealed to humanity the divine revelation. He is the Truth and through him we can attain knowledge of the divine will. The metaphysical patterns of the philosophic speculation of the Christian revelation distort the divine mission of the incarnate Logos.

Three Ways Upwards of orthodoxy spirituality

The Fathers of our orthodox holy Church suggest three ways to make progress in the spiritual life and attain spiritual perfection:

According To Abune Araegahiw Mentioned About The Three basic orthodoxy spiritual Levels and also the ten steps orthodoxy sprituality.

1. The way of catharsis or purification(አንጽሖ ሥጋ)

The first level of the spiritual life to focus on the defeated of corporal issues and challenges of physical sin. It includes three steps.

1.1. The Life Of Silence:Aba Agaton And

1.2. The Life of Meditation; Aba

1.3. The Life of Sing; St Yared

2. The way of illumination, and(አንጽሖ ነፍስ)

The Second Level Of Spiritual Stages Includes Four steps.

2.1. The Life of Tear;

2.2. The Life of Soul;

2.3. The Life of Love;

2.4. The Life of Hidden Movement;

3. The way of perfection by total union with God.(አንጽሖ መንፈስ)

The Third Level Includes Three steps.

3.1. The Life of Showing the Angels;

3.2. The Life of Enlighten and Light;

3.3. The Life of Spiritual Fire; St Basil and St Efrem

These ways can bring the Christian who cooperates with divine grace to perfection. Synergy of the individual effort with the help of the grace of God brings us to our ultimate destiny of perfection. Our Lord's death and resurrection achieve for us our end in attaining the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

The *Philokalia* speaks of "the increasing knowledge of God decreases knowledge of all else. In other words, the more a man knows God; he knows less of other matters. Not only this, but he begins to realize more and more clearly that neither does he know God." This point is of fundamental importance to Orthodoxy that declares the total mystery and unknowability of the divine essence.

The purpose of man is to achieve moral perfection through the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. In the teachings of Saint Seraphim of Sarov, the Holy Spirit leads the individual through the steps outlined above in order to attain union with the Spirit of Truth.

Monasteries Are Spiritual Centers of Orthodox Spirituality

The spirituality of the Orthodox Church is best exemplified in its spiritual centers, the monasteries. The monk is a "martyr" or "witness" to Christ, the Son of the living God. Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* is an excellent example of this spiritual model in the person of Father Zossima.

This monastic model eloquently portrays the spirituality of the Orthodox Church. Dostoyevsky distinguishes between worldly freedom and the spiritual person. He says that the worldly or secular people "maintain that the world is getting more and more united, more and more bound together in brotherly community, as it overcomes distance and sets thoughts flying through the air." But in reality the opposite is true, as is evident in international conflicts and wars. This famous Orthodox novelist expressed eloquently the Orthodox view that in spiritual subjugation, that is, in absolute obedience to Christ, one finds limitless freedom. This is especially exemplified in monasteries where spirituality is nurtured.

The Divine Energies

One of the most important aspects of Orthodox spirituality is participation in the divine energies. Briefly stated, this is an Orthodox doctrine of fundamental importance and very often ignored. In Orthodox theology, a distinction is made between the "essence" and "energies" of God. Those who attain perfection do so by uniting with the divine uncreated energies, and not with the divine essence.

The Greek Orthodox Fathers, whenever they speak of God, emphasize the unknowability of God's essence and stress the vision of the divine energies, especially the divine uncreated Light. Orthodox spiritual tradition emphasizes the divine Logos indwelling in the world and our ability to attain a spiritual life and mystical union with the Holy Spirit in this world.

Christian contemplation is not "ecstatic," that is, outside ourselves, but it takes place within the Christian person who is the "temple of the Holy Spirit." The divine energies are "within everything and outside everything." All creation is the manifestation of God's energies.

Vladimir Lossky says in the *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*: "These divine rays penetrate the whole created universe and are the cause of its existence." The uncreated Light and the knowledge of God in Orthodox tradition "illuminates every man that cometh into this world." It is the same light that the apostles saw on Mount Tabor that penetrates all of creation and transforms it, creating it anew. A modern ascetic says in the *Undistorted Image*: "Uncreated Light is divine energy."

Contemplation of Uncreated Light begets, first and foremost, an all absorbing feeling of the living God - an immaterial feeling of the immaterial, an intuitive, not a rational perception - which transports man with irresistible force into another world, but so warily that he neither realizes when it happens nor knows whether he is in or out of the body." This is not a sentimental or emotional feeling or romantic fantasy. It is experience of the divine uncreated Light described by the neptic Fathers. Again, in the words of the same ascetic: "This supramental sensation of the Living God (which is experienced in contemplation) is accompanied by a vision of light, of light essentially different from physical light. Man himself abides in light because, assimilated to the Light which he contemplates, and spiritualized by it, he then neither sees nor feels his own material being or the materiality of the world."

2. Illumination

God's act is pure light, and when the Lord appears to us, he always appears as Light. In Holy Scripture we read: "In Your Light we shall see light." Only in the state of illumination does divine grace makes possible the contemplation of the divine light. The hidden truths of Holy Scripture are not revealed to everyone, since illumination comes through the special divine gift of revelation. For this reason in the early Church, the holy Bible was read only in the Church and only by a charismatic person. In the Orthodox Church, we have never experienced "bibliolatry" or "worship of the Book," as in some sects. The Church holds fast to the unadulterated spirit of the Bible as it was delivered to the Saints, and through them, to us.

Spiritual Warfare

We are saved by Christ and in Christ. Yet we are still subject to temptation and to sin. Therefore, it is important to mention the fact that to acquire spirituality or moral perfection, we must wage war against the "enemy," that is, sin and the devil. Saint Makarios said: "I have not yet seen a perfect Christian man, one completely free (from the devil and sin)." And "although one is at rest in grace and enters into mysteries and revelations and into the sweetness of grace, still sin is yet present within." Consequently, as long as we live, we must be ready to fight against the dark powers of the devil. And "Satan is never quiet from warring. As long as ever a man lives in this world and wears the flesh, he has to war." The holy Bible is the most necessary means of spiritual warfare against the devil; it is also the chief means of acquiring knowledge of the divine will.

The Role of the Sacraments

We must further emphasize the role and purpose of the holy sacraments in attaining spirituality. In the sacraments, we receive divine grace, and in the case of the holy Eucharist, Christ himself, who aids us in waging war successfully against the satanic powers. As Fr. Sergius Bulgakov says: "The heart of Orthodoxy lies in its rites." All the Orthodox rites and sacraments are meant to combat the powers of evil. The sacramental life of the Church is the chief means toward the attainment of spirituality and of ultimate salvation.

The Eucharist as Expression of Spirituality

The question is asked: Is it possible without the holy Eucharist to reach the spiritual state of perfection? The answer is no, because Christ says: "Except you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, you shall not have life in you." Frequent participation in the most Blessed Sacrament of the holy Eucharist is the preeminent means for our salvation and spiritual perfection. Jesus said: "for my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed." Thus, Christ's statement makes clear that the "body and blood" of our Lord is necessary for our spiritual perfection. The Eucharist, therefore, is not received merely as an act of obedience to the command of God or of the Church; it is especially an antidote to sin and death. It is a necessary

prerequisite for our perfection in our life in Christ. An important interpretation by Saint John Chrysostom makes this clear.

St. Paul does not say participation, but communion, because he wishes to express a closer union. For, in receiving Holy Communion, we not only participate in Christ, we unite in him. In fact, as this body is united with Christ, so by bread we are united with Christ. But why do I speak of Communion? Paul says that we are identical with this body. For what is this bread? That is, the body of Christ. And what do we become by receiving this bread? The body of Christ: not many bodies, but only one.

The holy Eucharist serves as the bond of unity in love. The holy Eucharist unites us to Christ and to one another. This is the makeup of the mystical body of Christ: the Church. This concept of the Church as the mystical body of Christ is very dear to our Orthodox tradition because it expresses the reality of Christ in the world and the unity of the Church, which is real only when Christ is the central figure. The Orthodox Church rejects the misconception, of sectarian origin, that Christianity is only a system of morals. It strongly emphasizes the fact that mystical union with Christ is a reality in his Church. The whole life of Saint Paul was "a perpetual system of morals in action." Only because of his personal commitment to Christ and his mystical encounter with the divine Lord, did Saint Paul attain spiritual perfection.

Father John of Cronstadt on Teaching Young People the Spiritual Way

In this brief exposition of the vast topic of Orthodox spirituality an introduction was provided only as a beginning to your own investigation of the great truths of our faith. For some this may be regarded as a spiritual discourse not profitable to the ordinary layman. I am convinced, however, that all Orthodox Christians must acquire knowledge of the Orthodox tradition of spirituality, especially those who teach young people as well as the parents. Father John of Cronstadt addressed the teaching priests, the Christian teachers, and leaders in the following penetrating words: Do not neglect to uproot from the hearts of children the tares of sins, impure, evil and blasphemous thoughts, sinful habits, inclinations and passions; the enemy and sinful flesh do not spare even children; the seeds of all sins are to be found in the children, too; show them all the danger of sin on the path of life; do not hide sin from them lest through ignorance and want of comprehension, they should be confirmed in sinful habits and attachments, which grow stronger and stronger and bring forth corresponding fruits when children grow up.

These words set forth the mission and goal of the Christian priest, teacher and leader.

In concluding this presentation, the following suggestions can be made to those responsible for the development of spirituality in the Church:

1. In order to transmit Orthodox spirituality to young people, the teacher first must learn it through personal experience and through study of the spiritual writings of Orthodox authors.
2. Each Christian must acquire Orthodox spirituality in his or her own life by living the sacramental life of the Church and by participating frequently in holy Confession and holy Communion.

3. Responsible Christians ought to communicate to young people the great spiritual riches of Christianity and the importance of adhering to the Orthodox tradition of spirituality.

CHAPTER TWO

THEOSIS

INTRODUCTION

The term *theosis* has two meanings, “the condition or the state of deity” and “the deification of man.” Only God has the condition of deity in and of Himself. No man can ever attain true divinity. There is only one God and we are not Him. However, theosis is also the state of being divinized or God-infused, both in character and in person. Peter describes Christians as being “partakers of the divine nature” in 2 Peter 1:4 (KJV).

The Greek word *koinōnos* translated “partakers,” means “sharers, associates, or companions.” Christians, through the great promises of salvation, sanctification, and the privilege of sonship through faith in Christ, become participants in the divine nature of God.

Through the process of theosis, man exhibits or reveals within himself the presence of God in his life. Theosis is also associated with another term, *perichoresis*, which is a Greek term describing the relationship between each Person of the Trinity. Therefore, theosis is related to man’s ability for perichoresis, or interrelationship, in which God resides within His human creation. As a result of theosis and the indwelling of God, man is made alive, full, and complete.

It is only because God created man with the ability to experience theosis, i.e., God literally dwelling within us, that we become a reflection of Him. Another way to look at the idea of theosis is what Paul tells us in Romans 12:2: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Theosis, that process of becoming like God, is the transformation that takes place within the believer. But it is really more than that. This transformation is made perfect through our partaking in His nature through the Holy Spirit who resides within us. As a result, there comes to the Christian a profound sense of unity with God. Though we know that the full realization of our oneness—our perfection with God—comes after death, this process of theosis or divinization grows in time, by degrees, throughout our lives.

One of the best ways to describe how we can become like God is found in the teachings of Jesus, especially in the Beatitudes, as recorded in Matthew chapter 5. It is here that Jesus culminates His teachings with the command to be “perfect” as God is. Prior to this, Jesus was revealing the true intent of the Law. The goal, to be perfect, to achieve spiritual excellence, is a constant

process. The goal for the Christian is essentially to be different from the world, to be more like God. Having said that, though, it is crucial to understand that we do not experience theosis by any amount of determination or fleshly effort of our own. It is only through the indwelling Holy Spirit, who empowers us and leads us to godly living by His work in our hearts that we can come closer to God and display the divine nature. For example, it is through this process of theosis, displaying God's character and experiencing His absolute, limitless love, that we come to know how to love even our enemies. It is only through His Spirit residing within us that we as believers love and pray for those who seek to do us harm (Romans 12:14–21).

“God became human so that human beings may become God” (St Athanasius)

In the **Orthodox Churches**, only with the patristic revival in the middle of this century has the doctrine of the redemption been linked up with the **Incarnation** of Christ and **deification**.

Today in Orthodox theology, redemption is not seen in juridical terms, whereby one is simply redeemed from the wrath of God and granted an extrinsic justification as a result of the fall. Moreover redemption is not merely understood as forgiveness of sins or humanity's reconciliation to God.

Eastern theology sees **redemption in positive terms** whereby one is actually called to really participate in the personal and divine energies of the Trinity as a result of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. This perspective then is hardly negative. It is this paper's contention that all the above-mentioned models of redemption are biblical, so what is called for is a theological synthesis of the various models. The issue is a difference of emphasis thereby we are not forced to choose between them at the expense of the others. Rather, these models, besides a host of other New Testament redemption models (such as adoption, reconciliation, ransom, sacrifice, forgiveness, propitiation, deliverance) are **complementary** and must be seen all together.

In fact all biblical models are needed so that the wonder of God's salvific act may be upheld. For the theology of redemption to be credibly presented today a revival of the Eastern perspective must be taken seriously as well and it is to this perspective, that this article will concentrate. It is the purpose of this essay to briefly outline the Orthodox understanding of redemption. The importance of the Incarnation and the doctrine of deification are foundational understanding of the theology of redemption.

The Incarnation

In the East, the fact that the **Word** became flesh and died for us has not meant that **humankind** has been simply justified from God's anger, but rather has **assumed** an intimate and **hypostatical unity** with divinity itself. The essence of our redemption lies in the lifting up of human nature into the everlasting communion with the divine life which was realized by Christ's redeeming work. The whole emphasis of the Greek fathers centered around this foundational conception: the Incarnation of the Word as Redemption. The whole destiny and history of humankind was completed in the Incarnation. The Incarnation is not to be seen as a reduction of Christ's divinity but on the contrary, a lifting-up of human persons, the deification or theosis of

human nature. The East has always seen the Incarnation as the **union** of the **divine majesty** with **human frailty** and therefore the ultimate redemptive act of God.

As it has been stated above, the Greek fathers see the Incarnation as that which begins the whole process of our redemption. But more than that, the fathers speak of the original destiny of human nature as one leading to a hypostatic union with the divine Logos in Christ – ie our deification. Christ, who as the perfect union of divine and human opened the way for our human nature to participate in the divine.

For this reason many fathers interpret the **Incarnation** of the Logos not as a simple consequence of the fall, but as the **fulfillment of the original will of God** – namely that in the person of the Logos, human nature is capable of being united with the divine. The deification of Christ's human nature made possible our deification as well. In his book, *Deification in Christ*, Nellas wonderfully sums it up in this way: "Christ is not the result of an act of Satan.

The union of the divine and human natures took place because it fulfilled the eternal will of God..... Prior to the hypostatic union of the divine nature with the human, man even before the fall was anterior to Christ, a fact which means that even then, in spite of not having sinned, man had need of salvation, since he was an imperfect and incomplete "child". This teaching lies at the core of the theology of St Irenaeus. Human nature could not have been completed simply by its tendency; it had to attain union with the Archetype. Since Christ is "the head of the body, the Church" (Col. 1.18), a fact which means in patristic thought that Christ is the head of true humanity, as long as human nature had not received the hypostasis of the Logos it was in some way without real hypostasis – it lacked real substance". Nellas implies that the deification of humanity, even if humanity had not sinned, needed the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures of Christ in the Logos.

The **hypostatic union** of divine and human accomplished in Christ, was the very **foundation** of the **deification** of **humanity**. Since Christ took on human nature and bestowed upon it the fullness of grace, he made humanity capable of ascending to God. Therefore **St Athanasius** could say that "God became human so that humanity may become God". It is the gift of the Incarnation which gives humanity the possibility of deification. Since the first Adam went astray and deprived himself of the gratuitous gift of union with God, the Second Adam, the divine Logos achieved this union of the two natures in his person. Therefore the Incarnation of Christ does not simply redeem humanity from the effects of the fall but **completes the pre-fallen nature of humanity** by deifying it. For the fathers the deification of Christ's human nature becomes the vessel by which our human nature too can be deified. This is the basis of the theology of deification which is found in the fathers. Meyendorff describes it in this way:

"The hypostatic union of divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ is the very foundation of salvation, and therefore of deification: in Christ humanity has already participated in the uncreated life of God because the "flesh" has truly become "the flesh of God".

Such is the fundamental position of the Incarnation of the Word for a credible and contemporary teaching on redemption. The Incarnation of the Logos has opened to all human persons the possibility of restoring their unity with God. And the death of Christ was effective in humanity's

redemption, not because it satisfied a transcendent Justice which required retribution for humanity's sins but because it was the death of the Son of God in the flesh (i.e., in virtue of the hypostatic union). Fr Georges Florovsky writes that

“the death of the Cross was effective, not as a death of an Innocent One, but as the death of the Incarnate Lord”.

The Orthodox notion of redemption is clearly not simply an act to satisfy a legal requirement, but one which destroys death by his death and opens the way for our immortality. For this reason many fathers would view the mystery of the Incarnation independent of the Fall. This hypostatic, complete mingling of created and uncreated natures without division or confusion had as its immediate consequence the deification of the nature created in Christ and by extension human nature in general. And it is to this doctrine of deification that we now turn.

Deification – The Human Destiny

For the Eastern fathers, the formulation of the doctrine of **‘deification’**, affirmed the reality of humanity's innermost hope as **“belonging to God”**. St Gregory Nazianzus argued that the root of a person's true greatness and calling lay in being **“called to be a god”**. Elsewhere, St Basil the Great insists that “the goal of our calling is to become like god”. The ultimate redemptive destiny of humanity is none other than to attain likeness to God and union with Him. Deification denotes a **direct union** and a total transformation of the human person with the living God by divine grace. St Basil the Great says that human beings are nothing less than creatures that have received the order to become gods. The descent (katavasis) of God has offered the created order the capability of ascending (anavasis) to the Divine in the Holy Spirit.

For the Eastern fathers, deification is God's greatest gift to, and the innermost goal of human existence. Although the term does not occur in the Holy Scriptures, the Greek fathers believed that it was a fitting theological term affirming the command of 2 Peter 1:4 – ie **“to become participants of the divine nature”**. Regarding deification, a seventh century father, St Anastasius of Sinai, writes the following:

“Deification is the elevation to what is better, but not the reduction of our nature to something less, nor is it an essential change of our human nature. A divine plan, it is the willing condescension of tremendous dimension by God, which He did for the salvation of others. That which is of God is that which has been lifted up to a greater glory, without its own nature being changed”.

This is an important statement because it rejects all forms of pantheism.

Now, the patristic tradition has always sought to stress the importance of the process of deification in reference to redemption. As a result of the **enhypostasia** of the second Person of the Trinity, Christ's humanity, in virtue of the **communicatio idiomatum** [communication of attributes, divine and human] is a deified humanity, which does not lose its human characteristics in any way. In fact, on the contrary these human attributes become more real since they model the divine according to which they were created. In Christ's deified humanity, humankind is also

called to participate and to share “in the divine nature of God” (2 Peter 1:4). For the Eastern patristic tradition, the basis of humanity’s deification is clearly found in the hypostatic union between the divine and human natures of Christ. These divine energies in Christ, as a result of the communication reach all those who live a life literally in Christ. Ultimately redemption means deification which is the supreme goal for which humankind was created.

Conclusion

All that has been said thus far necessitates a theological synthesis between the Western and Eastern theologies of redemption. Despite the Western understanding of redemption as penal substitution or satisfaction models this article has examined the Eastern understanding of redemption – a redemption which ultimately calls all of the created order to deification by grace. What is called for therefore today is a complementary understanding of redemption so that the fullness of humanity’s true existence might be realized.

Only when the Orthodox understanding of redemption is taken seriously can the whole ideal of redemption be credibly presented today. All too often, the West speaks of juridical models at the expense of other models. On the other hand, the East is all too often tempted to speak of redemption solely in Incarnation and deification terms.

Both perspectives are necessary for a complete and holistic understanding of redemption. In a world where our struggles often seem hopeless, where our life seems meaningless because death is ever present, the good news and foundation of our hope is that Christ has overcome death and granted life in the tombs. The Incarnation of the Logos offers us a “life in Christ” empowering us to live as Christ, to love as Christ, to serve as Christ and to be one with Christ.

CHAPTER THREE

Mystical theology

Mystical theology is a topic many people steer away from as they do not know how to talk about it. Should Christians play a part in the spiritual realm? How much should Christians rely on the spiritual realm? Is the spiritual realm or the Bible more important? These questions will be answered from a Biblical basis in this blog post to help give you a better understanding of mystical theology.

What Is Mystical Theology?

Mystical Theology is the branch of theology that seeks to learn about God from spiritual experiences and contemplative prayer and meditation, rather than specifically from sources you would learn from intellectually such as reading the Bible to learn about God. Simply put, it is when people seek to experience God in a spiritual sense only, without Scripture or other knowledge.

Before we look at the three main viewpoints on mystical theology, let's begin with the history and see where the roots come from.

Historical Roots of Mystical Theology

Mysticism in the earliest forms come from the eastern world. It is rooted in Buddhism and Hinduism and seeks to empty yourself and encounter the spiritual world. This was adopted by certain parts of the early church throughout the ages. Specifically, many Monks would spend hours contemplating the things of God and would seek to pray.

There was an earlier form of mysticism that was prominent in the early church and remains prominent today. There are many Christians who believed experiencing God and allowing spiritual experiences that influenced them was most important. There are many varieties of mystical theology and mysticism. Some variations could be considered helpful and some could be considered harmful.

3 Viewpoints on Mystical Theology

These three viewpoints will help you better understand mystical theology and what people from each view believe and why.

1. Viewpoint – Spiritual Experiences

There are some people that would say the primary way to learn about God is experiencing Him in a spiritual way, and that ultimately allowing yourself to experience God is how we learn about

God's character. This group was de-valuing written text like the Bible and would make light the importance of theological education. This group promoted experiences and meditation.

2. Viewpoint – Word of God

Then there is the opposite of the first view. The second view states that we should not engage in the spiritual world. The only way we learn is through the Word of God. The revelation of God's Word should be the sole source. If we are to contemplate anything, it should be the words and concepts in the Bible alone.

3. Both the Word of God & Spiritual Experiences

Spiritual experiences can be helpful as long as they are subordinate to the Word of God. However, rather than just experiencing the spiritual world, the goal would be to experience what we see in the Word of God and to allow God's supernatural power to bring transformation as we meditate upon those things. It is an invitation of the spiritual realm through the Bible into our lives.

Why it Matters

Most mystical theology is all about experiencing God and believing whatever we experience. There is danger in that because as humans, we have the tendency to dramatize, exaggerate, or misunderstand things we experience. For example, there are stories of people having visions of heaven or hell and experiencing elaborate afterlife experiences. They come back and tell stories and people begin to build their theology on these stories. Instead, we should build our theology on what the Word of God says and if these stories contradict the Bible, then we should reject them. In addition, even if these stories don't contradict the Bible, they may not directly support what the Bible says.

Ultimately, mystical theology should be subordinate to quality Bible study. Everything we experience through contemplating prayer or other spiritual experiences must align with the Bible. If your experience teaches you something contrary to the Bible, you ought to reject what you have experienced. This is hard for humans because we want to believe what we have experienced more than what the Bible says.

Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end, it leads to death." A potential danger with mystical theology is that it could lead us to think a certain way is right, but ultimately that way could lead to destruction.

The New Mystic's Group

In recent times, there is a new mystic group of people seeking to put an emphasis on Christians experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit. Most of these new mystics have taught Christians to meditate on concepts and ideas in a way that is contrary to the way of the Bible, and could lead people to put more confidence in their spiritual experience rather than in what the Bible says. Most evangelicals would agree that the new mystics are bordering heretical ideas or they already are teaching heretical ideas, so believers should be very wary.

What is Mystical Prayer?

Mystical prayer seeks to have communication with God, in hopes of bringing the person peace. People who use mystical prayer begin by examining their own hearts and calming themselves. They believe God examines their heart so they are determined to ready their hearts for His peace. Then, they become completely silent before God. They try to not think about anything to be in a place of peace and stillness.

This type of prayer is similar to meditating as you are very quiet during your prayer time and it can be done every day. People who practice mystical prayer believe it brings you closer to God. They believe it helps you calm yourself and let go of difficulties. They say this type of prayer helps because it puts God firsts and you are then able to give Him thanks and praise. They also believe it deepens your faith as you experience God's peace in your heart.

What is Another Word for Mystic?

Synonyms for mystic include *magic, mysterious, magical, weird, religious mystic, undercover, secret, enchanting, marvelous, spellbound, private, deep, unearthly, mystical, astounding, wondrous, imaginary, otherworldly, and visionary*. These are all words related to the word mystic.

St John of the Ladder is honored by the church as a great ascetic and the author of the renowned spiritual book called The Ladder, for which he is named. (St John Klimakos in Greek)

There is almost no information about St John's origins. One tradition suggests he was born in Constantinople around the year 570, and was the son of Ss Xenophon and Maria.

John went to Sinai when he was sixteen, submitting to Abba Martyrios as his instructor and guide. After four years, St John was tonsured as a monk. Abba Strategios, who was present at St John's tonsure, predicted that he would become a great luminary in the Church of Christ.

For nineteen years St John progressed in monasticism in obedience to his spiritual Father. After the death of Abba Martyrios, St John embarked on a solitary life, settling in a wild place called Thola, where he spent forty years laboring in silence, fasting, prayer, and tears of penitence.

It is not by chance that in *The Ladder*, St John speaks about tears of repentance: "Just as fire burns and destroys the wood, so pure tears wash away every impurity, both external and internal." His holy prayer was strong and efficacious, as may be seen from an example from the life of the God-pleasing saint.

St John had a disciple named Moses. Once, the saint ordered his disciple to bring dung to fertilize the vegetable garden. When he had fulfilled the obedience, Moses lay down to rest under the shade of a large rock, because of the scorching heat of summer. St John was in his cell in a light sleep. Suddenly, a man of remarkable appearance appeared to him and awakened the holy ascetic, reproaching him, "John, why do you sleep so heedlessly, when Moses is in danger?"

St John immediately woke up and began to pray for his disciple. When Moses returned in the evening, St John asked whether any sort of misfortune had befallen him.

The monk replied, "A large rock would have fallen on me as I slept beneath it at noon, but I left that place because I thought I heard you calling me." St John did not tell his disciple of his vision, but gave thanks to God.

St John ate the food which is permitted by the monastic rule, but only in moderation. He did not sleep very much, only enough to keep up his strength, so that he would not ruin his mind by unceasing vigil. "I do not fast excessively," he said of himself, "nor do I give myself over to intense all-night vigil, nor lay upon the ground, but I restrain myself..., and the Lord soon saved me."

The following example of St John's humility is noteworthy. Gifted with discernment, and attaining wisdom through spiritual experience, he lovingly received all who came to him and guided them to salvation. One day some envious monks reproached him for being too talkative, and so St John kept silence for a whole year. The monks realized their error, and they went to the ascetic and begged him not to deprive them of the spiritual profit of his conversation.

Concealing his ascetic deeds from others, St John sometimes withdrew into a cave, but reports of his holiness spread far beyond the vicinity. Visitors from all walks of life came to him, desiring to hear his words of edification and salvation. After forty years of solitary asceticism, he was chosen as igumen (abbot) of Sinai's St Catherine's Monastery when he was seventy-five. St John governed the holy monastery for four years.

At the request of the abbot of the Raithu monastery, St John wrote the incomparable Ladder, a book of instruction for monks who wished to attain spiritual perfection.

Knowing his wisdom and spiritual gifts, the abbot requested St John to write down whatever was necessary for the salvation of those in the monastic life. Such a book would be "a ladder fixed on the earth" (Gen. 28:12), leading people to the gates of Heaven.

St John felt that such a task was beyond his ability, yet out of obedience he fulfilled the request. The saint called his work The Ladder, for the book is "a fixed ladder leading from earthly things to the Holy of Holies...." The thirty steps of spiritual perfection correspond to the thirty years of the Lord's age. When we have completed these thirty steps, we will find ourselves with the righteous and will not stumble. The Ladder begins with renunciation of worldliness, and ends with God, who is love (1 Jn 4:8). Although the book was written for monks, any Christian living in the world will find it an unerring guide for ascending to God, and a support in the spiritual life.

The twenty-second step of The Ladder deals with various forms of vainglory. St John writes:

When I fast, I am vainglorious; and when I permit myself food in order to conceal my fasting from others I am again vainglorious about my prudence. When I dress in fine clothing, I am vanquished by vanity, and if I put on drab clothing, again I am overcome by vanity. If I speak, vainglory defeats me. If I wish to keep silence, I am again given over to it. Wherever this thorn comes up, it stands with its points upright.

A vain person seems to honor God, but strives to please men rather than God.

People of lofty spirit bear insult placidly and willingly, but only the holy and righteous may hear praise without harm.

When you hear that your neighbor or friend has slandered you behind your back, or even to your face, praise and love him.

It is not the one who reproaches himself who shows humility, for who will not put up with himself? It is the one who is slandered by another, yet continues to show love for him.

Whoever is proud of his natural gifts, intelligence, learning, skill in reading, clear enunciation, and other similar qualities, which are acquired without much labor, will never obtain supernatural gifts. Whoever is not faithful in small things (Lk 16:10), is also unfaithful in large things, and is vainglorious.

It often happens that God humbles the vainglorious, sending a sudden misfortune. If prayer does not destroy a proud thought, we bring to mind the departure of the soul from this life. And if this does not help, let us fear the shame which follows dishonor. "For whoever humbles himself shall be exalted, and whoever exalts himself shall be humbled" (Lk 14:11). When those who praise us, or rather seduce us, start to praise us, let us recall our many sins, then we shall find that we are not worthy of what they say or do to honor us.

In *The Ladder*, St John describes the ascent toward spiritual perfection, which is essential for anyone who wishes to save his soul. It is a written account of his thoughts, based on the collected wisdom of many wise ascetics, and on his own spiritual experience. The book is a great help on the path to truth and virtue. With the exception of the scriptures themselves and St Athanasius' *Life of Anthony*, it is the most copied and influential book in Christian history.

The steps of *The Ladder* proceed gradually from strength to strength on the path of perfection. The summit is not reached suddenly, but gradually, as the Savior says: "The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force" (Mt 11:12).

St John of the Ladder is commemorated on the fourth Sunday of Great Lent and on March 30th.

CHAPTER FOUR

ORTHODOXY SPIRITUALITY STAGES BY St John of the Ladder

INTRODUCTION

What we need to achieve in this life is to regain our wholeness. Human nature can be seen as existing at two levels: the unfallen nature of the human person created in the image of God- the way we were before the fall of Adam and Eve, and the fallen, sinful nature. Man's struggle on this earth is the search for the state of glory properly belonging to his nature.

In Paradise, before the fall, Adam was in the state of "theoria" (vision) of God. "Original sin" consists in the darkening of the nous and the loss of communion with God. Man becomes unable to encounter God, so reason undertakes the effort.

Man then needs to conquer his fallen nature, but he cannot do this on his own. His condition calls for God's Grace, and thus man is always "in debt" (χρεώστης) to God. What man is meant to do is to lay down humbly before Christ his own weakness, to recognise his nothingness and ask for His Grace. But God does not act as a *deus ex machina*: He acts "synergistically" with man. Man needs to co-operate and respond to Divine Grace.

"Many are the paths of piety and destruction," wrote St John of the Ladder. There exist, not just one, but many ways of salvation, and each person constitutes one unique – though not independent – way which leads to, or away from, salvation.

In general, Orthodox Christians who want to progress spiritually towards salvation strive to be guided by their spiritual father, and the writings of the Fathers of the Church. Many Fathers of the Church describe this spiritual ascent as proceeding through various stages. Living within the Church by Grace, man must first cleanse his heart of the passions; secondly attain the illumination of the nous – Adam's state before the fall – and thirdly ascend to theosis, which constitutes man's communion and union with God.

These are three stages of spiritual perfection- the foundations of Orthodox spirituality.

1) THE BEGINNER STAGE OF CLEANSING THE PASSIONS

The evil within man is not natural to him, but it can become something like second nature to him. Man was created good by God. There are many natural virtues, but no natural vices. Monastic writings describe passions as "alien or superfluous."

Sin is contrary to human nature ("παρά φύσιν"). Some ascetic writers attempted to classify the passions. The order in the Evagrian list has an intrinsic logic.

a) The beginner's stage is marked by the cruder and more materialistic passions, namely gluttony (greediness in eating), lust (uncontrolled and unlawful sexual desire) and avarice (greed for money)

b) The middle stage is identified by more inward passions, namely dejection and anger. Dejection (λύπη), is hard to define. It refers to depression/lowness of spirit. In the Philokalia 3 (page 87, volume 1) we read that it prevents us from praying gladly, from reading Holy Scripture with profit and perseverance, from being gentle and compassionate towards our brethren. It instils a hatred of every kind of work. It persuades us to shun every helpful encounter and stops us accepting advice from true friends or giving them a courteous and peaceful reply. It fills the soul with bitterness and listlessness and despairing thoughts.

c) The advanced stage is recognized by the more subtle and spiritual vices of vainglory (caring about what others think of us) and pride. Pride is described by St John of the Ladder as “the denial of God’s assistance, the extolling of one’s own exertions, demonic in character.” “A proud monk,” St John sums up, “has no need of a demon; he has become a demon and an enemy unto himself.”

St John of the Ladder has added further passions to this list:

- Μνησικακία- the remembrance of the wrongs that others have done to us
- Slander (saying bad things about someone, which arises out of having passed judgment on that person)
- Talkativeness. St John says, “The man who recognises his sins has taken control of his tongue, while the chatterer has yet to discover himself as he should. The lover of silence draws close to God....” Lying
- Insensitivity (hard heartedness, forgetfulness)
- Despondency (ακηδία). This refers to listlessness, which the dictionary defines as, “Having or showing little or no interest in anything; languid; spiritless; indifferent.” Another synonym is torpor, which the dictionary defines as, “Sluggish inactivity or inertia, lethargic indifference; apathy.”

St John of the Ladder’s book also contains descriptions of the various stages of temptation leading to passion.

a) Assault. This is the first stage and signifies the initial presence within us of some alien impulse intervening into consciousness from outside by the will of the adversary. Abba Poimen said that “you cannot prevent thoughts from arising, but you can resist them.” This stage is not the same as sinful activity, it is “guiltless”, since only the surface of the heart is affected.

b) Converse. In this stage we start a conversation with the invading thought. Abba Poimen says: “Take care not to speak, but if you do speak, cut the conversation short.”

c) Consent. In this step one gives approval and sanction to the temptation. This step initiates sin.

d) Captivity. At this stage one’s free will is impaired and undermined, so that one is now forced to consent involuntarily. The heart is “carried away”, yet not irrevocably.

e) Struggle. This stage can be the occasion of crowns or of punishments.

f) Passion. This is the last stage, from which one is rescued in repentance, or for which one is punished.

Even after man has fallen into sin he can attain purity; in fact, ascetic writers such as St John of the Ladder personally prefer those who fall and subsequently mourn.

The Fathers of course do not just focus on sins and passions, they also stress positive attributes and virtues. In his book, “Ladder of Divine Ascent,” St John describes virtues constituting an ascent. As he said, “At the beginning of our spiritual life, we cultivate the virtues, and we do so with toil and difficulty. Progressing a little, we then lose our sense of grief or retain very little of it. But when our mortal intelligence turns to zeal and is mastered by it, then we work with full joy, determination, desire and a holy flame.” (p77). We are warned not to attempt too much too soon, presuming that we can climb the ladder of perfection in one leap. Barsanuphios stressed: “We ought not to put our foot on the first step of the ladder and immediately expect to set foot on the top rung.”

In “Ladder of Divine Ascent”, St John discusses the following virtues that constitute the rungs of the ladder leading to Heaven:

a) Abreakwiththeworld

b) Obedience

c) Repentance

d) Remembrance of Death

e) Simplicity. (“An enduring habit within a soul that has grown impervious to evil thoughts.”)

f) Humility

g) Discernment

h) Stillness

i) Prayer

j) Dispassion.

The Cleansing of the entire person, to the most hidden parts of his subconscious. Through dispassion the heart is cleansed and God can, unhindered, enter “the house.” Christian ascetical writers see dispassion differently to ancient Greek Stoic philosophers: dispassion is more than being detached and unswayed by passions, for the Christian the truly dispassioned keeps his soul continuously in the presence of the Lord. St John of the Ladder and St Isaac the Syrian also stress that dispassion consists not in no longer feeling the passions, but in not accepting them.

k) Love. In the Ladder St John speaks of an intense love for God that he himself has experienced. To describe it he uses words like eros, the language of lovers: “Blessed is he who has obtained such love and yearning for God as a mad lover has for his beloved.” A single vivid experience of eros in all its intensity will advance one much further in the spiritual life; will be more effective than the most arduous struggle against the passions and the severest ascetic exercise.

2) The intermediate stage – Illumination

A characteristic trait of this level is the knowledge of beings, the “theoria” of the causes of beings and the participation in the Holy Spirit. The benefits of illumination are the purification of nous by Divine Grace, which consumes the heart like fire, the noetic revelation of the “eye of the

heart” and the birth of the Word within the nous. In other words, in this state man acquires knowledge of God and unceasing noetic prayer.

3) Perfecting stage – Theosis

In this stage man becomes “deified”, he comes into communion with the angelic powers, he approaches the “uncreated Light,” the depths of God are revealed to him through the Holy Spirit, and thus he beholds the uncreated essential energy of God. Thus man comes to know many mysteries existing in Holy Scripture that are hidden from other people. He ascends to the “third Heaven,” like Apostle Paul, and hears ineffable words and sees what corporal man’s eyes cannot see.⁴

Spiritual Warfare

Thoughts on the Spiritual Warfare: Toward an Orthodox Answer to the Contemporary ‘Soul Searching’

The tradition of the Orthodox Church and its characteristically spiritual dimension are existential par excellence, constituting a dynamic context for any endeavour to becoming personally. As such, our tradition is relevant to this most noble contemporary quest for ‘something spiritual’, in a society deprived of soul and ethically disoriented. This is an aspect reflected, for example, in what we call the spiritual warfare.

When speaking of the spiritual warfare the Orthodox tradition do not envisage crusades or jihads or anything similar, since these represent mostly attempts to change – arbitrarily and violently – the face of the world and not its mind, spirit and heart. Our way of ‘fighting the good fight’ (cf. 2 Timothy 4:7) has nothing to do with the external conquests and exploits. Instead, our notion of warfare refers to the inner struggles of the Christian person and community, on their transformative way towards the newness of life (cf. Romans 6:4), as realised in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Eusebius of Caesarea (Ecclesiastical History, book five, intro, 4), provides us with insights into the original sense of spiritual warfare: our narrative concerning the life according to God will record in the most peaceful wars waged in behalf of the peace of the soul, and will tell of men doing brave deeds for truth rather than country, and for piety rather than dearest friends. It will hand down to imperishable remembrance the discipline and the much-tried fortitude of the athletes of religion [i.e., the martyrs], the trophies won from demons, the victories over invisible enemies, and the crowns placed upon all their heads.

In its essence, this notion of peaceful warfare is genuinely scriptural, building on St Paul’s exhortation in Ephesians 6:11-7, where the portrait of the Christian is depicted in terms of a warrior of light:

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Put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; besides all these, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

The suggestion is clear: fighting the good fight takes the pain of personal transformation in accordance with the canon, or norm, and rhythms of the new creation (cf. Galatians 6:15), illustrated by Christ himself, the incarnate and crucified Word of God. Moreover, it takes the pain of proclaiming ‘the words of this life’ (Acts 5:20) to a society which, notwithstanding its profound ignorance with respect to the message of Orthodoxy, rejects our values.

In light of the above, even when they abandon the warrior-paradigm, the Fathers of the Orthodox Church present the Christian journey as a spiral-like ascending trajectory toward attaining a complex state of perfection, serenity, compassion, joy and sanctity, in the image and likeness of Christ, in him and with him (cf. Galatians 2:20). The final term of this process is the reception of the undeserved and incomprehensible deifying gift of divine participation (cf. 2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 1:1-4), bestowed upon us by ‘the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God [the Father] and the communion of the Holy Spirit’ (2 Corinthians 13:13).

All we experience and accomplish along this process of spiritual becoming – sacramental regeneration, faith initiation, ecclesial participation, prayer, ascetic discipline, contemplation, sheer generosity etc. – cannot be taken as ultimate achievements. More precisely, they do not represent ends in themselves, but means in order to attain the goal. As such, everything we experience in our journey is subsumed to the ultimate purpose of accessing the fullness of life here, now and ever, according to the promise of the Lord (cf. John 10:10). Witnessed by the uninterrupted succession of the saints, the possibility of attaining this goal is the underlaying force of all virtues and yet transcends them all, going beyond all human expectations:

‘The grace of deification is above nature, virtue and knowledge’ (The Declaration of the Holy Mountain 2).

The goal of perfection, however, cannot be achieved without being strenuously pursued, without consistent effort on a personal level and also without proper spiritual guidance. And here the dynamism of our spirituality is brought into the picture: it is precisely this constant endeavour to attain higher nobility what makes the content of the spiritual warfare and ultimately defines our way of living. This aspect is powerfully reflected by our liturgy, which emphatically manifests the existence of a tension between what we already experience and what constitutes the ultimate scope of our journey. Practically, we are granted here to experience liturgically in grace – as God’s people – what truly and properly belongs to the eschatological state of humanity.

Thus, in the liturgical order attributed to St John Chrysostom, we acknowledge God’s mercy which brought us up to heaven and bestowed upon us already the kingdom to come. With this statement, we hear a clear echo of the crucial tenet of Christianity, that the life was made

manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us – that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete (1 John 1:2-4).

In these scriptural words we acknowledge the very nature and message of Orthodoxy. What we are promised, and what we offer to the world, is nothing less than what we have heard from the beginning, with the good news of Christ, that God became human to made people able to ascend to God. We cannot touch the heart of the world if we do not dare to tell the world what we really have to give. This is why we need first to become more and more aware of what the Orthodox tradition actually means. His Eminence Archbishop Stylianos (cf. ‘The place of tradition in the Christian faith’) notes how tradition is not so much a treasury of structures and forms but rather a living current of life, a way of existing, thinking and feeling. Indeed, the Orthodox tradition is nothing less than the actual proclamation of the fullness of life to which we are partakers, a faithful witness to the apostolic way of thinking and living – in a world deceived by scepticism, relativism and hubristic sense of self-sufficiency. There are, however, hopes with this world, as indicated by the contemporary ‘soul searching’, organically related to the quest for ‘something more’ and ‘something spiritual’.

No matter how insufficient such solutions might be, even the massive emergence of ‘alternative spiritualities’ indicates the reality of this fundamental thirst and nostalgia after the fullness of life. Or, since it is a matter of evidence that the world becomes increasingly receptive to our message, it is our turn to answer. Exploring the path of the spiritual warfare can constitute the beginning of such an answer.

Personal Relationship with God

“God became man so that man may become God.” (St Athanasius)

This beautiful quote, used time and time again by the Fathers of the Church sums up the purpose of Christ coming into the world and expresses the love that God has for all humankind. For we humans are the ‘crown of God’s creation’, indeed when God created us, He said “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness, ...” (Gen 1:26).

Although God is mystery and is unknown to us in His essence, He is uniquely close to us and we humans can experience Him through His energies, as He is ‘present everywhere and filling all things’. But we can go even further; we can have a personal relationship with the Almighty. This is because God revealed Himself to us, through the Person of Jesus Christ, the Second Person in the Trinity, who became man and lived amongst us some 2000 years ago.

While Christ’s Incarnation was necessary to fulfil the promise of redemption, He inaugurated the new covenant, the old Israel is superseded by the New Israel, the Body of Christ (the Church) for the entire human race. Christ revealed the ‘coming of the Kingdom’ and with this new covenant

all humans are placed in a right relationship to God through Christ (Heb 8:6 -13). It was for this reason that Christ established His Church, the visible means for all humans to have a relationship with God, for as the Fathers teach, that which was visible in the Redeemer, has now ‘passed into the sacraments’. So, we can see that Orthodoxy is a way of life; it is a way of life through the Sacraments, as our Holy Church becomes the ‘Ark of Salvation’.

But first we must have faith, as our eminent Primate, Archbishop Stylianos said, “Faith is the key to understanding every relationship between God and mankind” . The Patristic tradition sees faith as the beginning and foundation of our salvation and “that without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb 11:6). Faith must be lived and it expresses itself through love, as St Paul teaches in his treatise on love, “if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (1Cor. 13:2). The result of faith in God forms a relationship between God and man and from that relationship we begin to understand true love, which Paul alludes to when he says, “faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1Cor. 13:13).

The Incarnation is an act of God’s philanthropia, revealing His loving kindness towards mankind, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that whoever believes in Him, should not perish, but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). But for Orthodoxy, this philanthropy is not just to correct our mistakes, rather it is to uplift humans to deification, that is, He came not just as a ransom for our freedom but to transfigure us into Theosis as St Peter says, “we must become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) or as St Athanasius and the Fathers put it, “God became man so that man could become god”.

Thus Orthodox theology sees redemption in positive terms in the uplifting of our human nature into the everlasting communion with the divine life, which was realised by Christ’s redeeming work. The whole destiny and history of humankind was completed in the Incarnation. Orthodoxy sees the Incarnation as the union of the divine majesty with human frailty and therefore the ultimate redemptive act of God. Accordingly, an Orthodox Christian approaches God in a mystical way, embarking on a life long spiritual journey aimed to have a mystical union with God (Theosis), which ultimately leads to eternal life. Jesus challenges us to, “Take up your cross and follow me”. So we need to accept Jesus Christ as Our Lord and Saviour and become followers and we can do that by living our life in His Holy Orthodox Church.

We often hear of Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, but we should never neglect the importance of the ‘living spiritual tradition’. St John Climacus wrote the ‘Ladder of Divine Ascent’ whereby each step on the Ladder describes a virtue, and together they describe the progress of a person’s spiritual struggle, which leads to perfection (Theosis). Many of the Saints reach a depth of spirituality whereby they see visions of God. These visions serve as a guiding light to the rest of the world, which is a source of inspiration and guidance to Christians of all ages. These holy people, who are often referred to as ‘earthly angels and Heavenly people’, are not restricted to the long past, for in more recent times St Silouan lived on Mt Athos only some 70 years ago. His

vision serves to show us that even in this modern age, humans have the capacity to rise to visions.

What does all this mean for us? It means that we need to grow spiritually to pursue our Theosis. Even if we knew the Gospels backwards but have no spirituality then our knowledge is meaningless. To grow spiritually our Church has Spiritual Fathers to whom we should go to for confession and guidance. We also need to pray, as St Paul says, “Pray without ceasing” and for this we can meditate with the Jesus Prayer used by the spiritual elders and monks; “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

So we can see how Orthodoxy is a way of life and how we can have a personal relationship with God. By first accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and living our life in the Church through the Sacraments, we can then continue to grow in our faith spiritually by having a Spiritual Father so that we can fulfil our Relationship with God, which ultimately leads us to our Theosis.⁵

Unconditional Love

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God: and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.” 1 John 4:7-8

“God is love.” This is the one and only confession about the nature of God in the Holy Scriptures. It is also clear, from the Scriptures and from simply observing the wonder of creation that the motivation for God behind creation and redemption is Love. God creates everything visible and invisible out of nothing (Rom 4:17; Heb 11:3) and this, so the Holy Fathers taught was out of his love for all things, and not by any provocation or necessity. There was no motivation as to why He created, except love, and precisely love for humankind, ‘for whom he created the world’ (Liturgy of St Basil). And the only condition or expectation that God has from human beings is our love (Deut 6:5). From the very beginning, God reveals his Love as a Communion of Persons (Gen 1:26 Let Us make man in our image, according to Our Likeness...) The human person is also created in the image of God (Gen 1:26), and thus according to the Holy Fathers is the only creature called to be like God by grace, and therefore capable of knowing and sharing the love of God.

After the Fall, humankind lost this love and fell out of communion with God. The Prophet Jeremiah, lamenting the faithlessness of Israel, after experiencing the darkest hour of his people with the destruction of the Holy City, nevertheless hoped for salvation. He was convinced of God’s faithful love, “Thus says the Lord... “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.” (Jer 31:3). This love, spoken of by the prophet

⁵ **Prof. Angelo Karantonis** Editor, Phronema Graduate of St. Andrew’s Greek Orthodox Theological College

culminated and reached its fullest expression through the sending of God's Son to save the world through the Cross on Golgotha:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” (Jn 3:16-17)

This mystery reveals God's love for humankind in a most radical way through the incarnation, death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is a practical, concrete expression of love, through which human beings encounter the mystery of God the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. (cf. Rev 1:4-6)

“Commemorating, the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day.” (Anamnesis of the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom), Christians are called to offer themselves in reasonable worship to God who ‘empties himself’ (Phil 2:5-8) for our salvation, and to offer themselves to their fellow human beings in imitation of this love which bears no expectation on the one who receives this love. To communicate this mystery St Paul, preached the ‘foolishness of the Cross’ (1 Cor 1:18) which reveals God's radical love or man and salvation by Grace, of every human person, through faith (Rm 3:24): this saving faith being lived out and fulfilled through works of love (Gal 5:6)

Of this knowledge of God through this otherworldly love, Elder Porphyrios wrote:

“Love for Christ is something else. It is without end, without satiety. It gives life; it gives strength; it gives health; it gives, gives, gives. And the more it gives, the more the person wishes to fall in love.”

Shortly before his death, the Lord also gave this injunction to His Disciples; “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you, that you also love one another.” (Jn 13:34) Just before his death, Jesus forgave the penitent thief at his dying confession (cf. Lk 23:39-43) thus demonstrating the unconditional love of God for even the worst penitent sinner.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was sent upon the Church to guide her by making the love of the Lord present through the ages. (cf. Jn 16:13-14), and visibly throughout the Holy Sacraments. The same elder Porphyrios said that our relation to Christ is through love, and it is through love that we approach the Sacraments.

One way in which the Church describes this relationship, through her liturgy and spirituality is through the New Testament metaphor of marriage. Christ is the Bridegroom. The Church is His Bride.

With Christ, the Heavenly Bridegroom, at the centre, the life of the Christian changes. He enters into the mystery of death and resurrection of Christ, through Baptism and becomes one spirit with Him (1 Cor 6:17). St Paul said, “It is no longer I who live; Christ lives in me.” (Gal 2:20)

God’s love is revealed to all who are willing to accept it, through His Word, through His Creation, through the Church, as a gift. We are called to imitate this love in our life.⁶

ORTHODOXY SPIRITUALITY AND COMPASSION

The word of God tells us that our role in terms of us and others is one, to love and have compassion: “Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

Faced with the suffering of others, and with the sin of others, the true and genuine Christian needs to first of all have the look of compassion, then words of consolation, and then works of healing, caring and forgiveness. “If anyone,” St John says, “has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” This is echoed in the words of St James: “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?” The first urgency in the presence of suffering and grief is to relieve it.

A modern Orthodox theologian has emphasized that we can only have genuine and effective compassion if we have a genuine relationship with Christ. “In our own lives, Jesus is our living and permanent reference. He is at the same time the giver of the Spirit and the gift of the Spirit. In Him the heart serves the apprenticeship of prayer and, through it, the apprenticeship of love. I learn love when the mysterious transfer of my ‘me’ to the centrality of Christ occurs; when ‘I no longer live, but Christ lives in me’ ; when it is no longer I who pray but the Spirit who prays in me; and when it is no longer I who love, but the Father who loves in me.... When we follow the path of Jesus, we learn how to offer our own hearts to God. It is then that the heart opens and fortifies itself in the spirit of compassion. The human being is able to be filled with the misery of the world, to carry it on his or her shoulders, and to lay it down before the throne of God. But our hearts are weak and inconstant. Giving up, we tend to close up, to protect ourselves from suffering – which is always too great- to ignore or forget it. Nonetheless, this same heart is called to love, to compassion, to mercy. It can only respond to this call by merging into the heart of Jesus. That requires, as a precondition, a purification, an exorcising of the evil that is in us, in all its forms. The evil in the world can be exorcised and burned only to the extent that the roots of evil which lie in our own hearts are exorcised, banished, and burned, consumed in the face-to-face with Jesus, His cross, and His Spirit.”

⁶**Rev. Stavros Karvelas** Parish Priest of **St. Therapon** – Thornleigh (NSW)

Those that love and have compassion do not miss out, they get back a lot more than what they give. St Silouan puts it as follows. “I will not hide from you the things for which the Lord gives His grace. I entreat you – love one another, and you will behold the mercy of the Lord. Let us love our fellow man, and the Lord will love us... Ask the Lord for strength to love your brother, and then you will see that there is peace in your soul. With all your might ask the Lord for humility and brotherly love, for to him who loves his brother the Lord gives freely of His grace. Try yourself: one day ask God for brotherly love, and the next day live without love, and you will see the difference. The spiritual fruits of love are manifest- peace and joy in the soul, all men will be dear to you, and you will shed abundant tears for your fellow-man and for everything that has breath, and all creation. Often a single sympathetic greeting will work a happy change in the soul; and contrariwise one unfriendly look will result in grace and the love of God departing, When that happens, make haste to repent, that the peace of God may return to your soul... If we love our brethren with all our might, and strive to humble our soul, victory will be ours, for the Lord bestows His grace above all for brotherly love.”

Fr Porphyrios would say that “in our life there is one thing worth striving for: love, to worship God and to love our fellow man, for all of us to be one, with Christ our head. Only in this way will we be granted Grace, the kingdom of Heaven, eternal life. Love towards others cultivates love for God. We are happy, when we love all people mystically. No one can reach God if he does not first go through other people. ‘For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.’ Let us love, let us sacrifice ourselves for others, expecting nothing in return. In this way we become well balanced. Love that expects something in return is selfish. Such love is not genuine and pure.... Above all is love. That which needs to concern us, my children, is love for others, for their spirit. Whatever we do, prayer, giving of advice, making suggestions, we need to do with love. Without love prayer does not help, advice hurts feelings, suggestions do more harm. Others can feel it if we love them or not, and they will respond appropriately.”

Even if others have hurt us, or have judged us harshly, or done us an injustice, our role is to love them and be compassionate. If they have done us an injustice, even a huge one, we need to have the faith that God will bring justice, our role is not to revenge or bring justice, our role is to forgive. If they are very critical of us, fairly or unfairly, then we need to remember that we all desperately need to be humble, and if others judge us we should see it as a blessing because it can help us in our struggle to reach humility. Fr Porphyrios would say, “Let us spread our love to all unselfishly, not caring about their stance. When the Grace of God comes inside us, we will no longer care if they love us or not, or if they speak kindly to us. We will feel the need to love all. It is pride when we want others to speak kindly to us. Let us not get upset when they do not speak nicely to us. Let us allow others to speak as they want to us. Let us not be beggars for love. Our desire is to love and to pray with all our heart for them. Then we will realise that they will love us, without us seeking it, without us begging for their love. They will love us sincerely and freely from the depth of their heart and without pressure.”

God has boundless compassion for all of us, and our calling is to reach the likeness of God, “that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

Even if we have progressed in the spiritual life, if we do not have compassion for our fellow man, and thus move onto selfless, unconditional and unhypocritical works of love, we have not truly progressed. St Paul made this clear: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”⁷

Wisdom from Mt. Athos

Mt Athos is one place on earth where one will see a very much alive Orthodox spiritual faith and where through this spirituality reach to the level of Theosis, that is deification and becoming united with the Almighty God by grace. From the very early Church hermits would go and live in isolation in the desert to dedicate and worship God and from there arose the monastic community. One such place is Mt Athos.

Founded in 963, Mt Athos is the centre of Orthodox spirituality and monasticism. Often referred to by the Orthodox as the ‘Holy Mountain’, the mountain is dedicated to the Theotokos (the garden of the Virgin Mary). Mt Athos is isolated from the rest of Greece, being situated on the north east peninsular of Greece and the only means of reaching it is by boat and it is restricted to males only. Females are even forbidden from visiting. There are twenty established Orthodox monasteries and several outlying sketes, where monks will live in isolation from others.

The life of the monk is one of sacrificing everything for God. The monk lives a life of obedience, fasting and above all, is dedicated to worship and prayer, as in the words of St Paul, the monk will ‘pray without ceasing’. The monk will attend several services during the day starting from pre dawn (around 4.00am) and finishing with the Compline (Απόδειπνον) after dinner and then the monk will retire to his cell, where he will continue his prayers. The monk’s cell becomes like an altar, adopting the practice of hesychasm which is ‘the quiet prayer in solitude’ and in a repetitive manner says the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me, a sinner” using a prayer rope (κουμβοσκήνι) with the prayer. This is the prayer of the mind in the heart. Many of the Saints reach the final step of St John Climacus’ ‘Divine Ascent’, where they ‘rise to visions’.

Mt Athos is a living testimony to Orthodox spirituality and the ascetic way of life. The ascetic life allows us in the world to see, to taste and to understand what spiritual life is all about. It is not something that just happened in the past, it is a living reality; it is the ‘spiritual tradition’. It

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also shows us how we too can reach a beautiful spiritual experience by practicing the ‘Jesus Prayer’ in our own quiet time. To the monk, real prayer is to pray with the mind in the heart, that is the prayer must reach the heart, and then the prayer will become part of the whole person, body, soul and spirit. The essence of prayer is the spiritual lifting of the heart toward God.

Although Mt Athos gives us a ‘glimpse’ of heaven, it is not heaven on earth; heaven on earth is within us. One does not need to live in the monastic community to experience a spiritual life. Mt Athos shows us what we must do to live a spiritual life, but that does not mean one needs us to live in a monastic community. Mt Athos shows us that by dedicating our life to God, we can experience this spirituality.

To do this first and foremost we need to have a Spiritual Father to guide us and with his guidance, follow the fasts of the Church, attend the services as much as our commitments allow us to, and dedicate part of our every day to pray. But above all, practice our faith with humility and love. As an a monk once said, “love and faith are two oars of a boat, if have one without the other, the boat just keeps on going round and round. We need both to go forward”. This spiritual path forward ultimately leads us to find peace with the Almighty God.

To encapsulate this spirituality, there is a collection of writings compiled by St Nikodemos focusing on the virtues of living a spiritual life on the Holy Mountain and contains many saying of the Spiritual Fathers.⁸

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF ST GREGORY PALAMAS

INTRODUCTION

Every year, during the second Sunday of Great Lent (typically during the month of March) the Church commemorates the life and thought of St Gregory Palamas (1269-1359AD) who was canonized a saint only nine years after his death by Patriarch Philotheus at a synod held in Constantinople in 1368AD. This feast day was introduced into the Lenten liturgical calendar of the Church in the fourteenth century when the liturgical structure of this Sunday had already developed along different lines. It is for this reason the neither the epistle nor the gospel of the day have any bearing on the saint. However the Vespers and Mattins of this day outline the life and theology of this great saint. St Gregory Palamas was a monk on Mount Athos and later Archbishop of Thessalonika. He is remembered during Lent since his theology extensively focused on the Christian life, “deification” or union of the human person with God, one’s real knowledge and vision of God and the importance of the body in the Christian life.

St Gregory Palamas was born in 1296 in Constantinople, of noble background enjoying the love and respect of the Emperor. Adopting the monastic life at the age of twenty, he would soon be drawn into the arena of theological and political controversy. The complex story of St Gregory ’ life – that is the intricate theological and political issues – was a major impetus to the development of his theological system. Like other theologians, St Gregory had to seek a balance between the contrasting truth of the transcendence and immanence of God. This antimony, for St Gregory, was sharpened by the context in which it occurred, namely the Hesychastic controversy, which occasioned a response to the question: How can the utterly transcendent God, who is beyond every possibility of being named, and of being experienced, enter into a real and personal relationship with human beings? In fact, how can human beings justly assert they know and live in union with Him? These questions arose out of a dispute concerning the nature of the light in which Christ appeared to the apostles on Mt Tabor at His Transfiguration.

St Gregory’s opponent Barlaam, maintained that no direct knowledge of God and of the relations between the persons of the Trinity was accessible to the human intellect. St Gregory, on the contrary, disputed this ‘theological method’. He took on the position of a realist in defense of humanity’s ability to acquire “real knowledge” of God. Whereas St Gregory argued that there could be a sure and immediate knowledge apart from that provided by the senses, Barlaam insisted on the unknowability and incommunicability of God, except through direct, created means – that is revealed Scripture or induction from creation. Furthermore, St Gregory underlined that “knowledge of God” did not bear on primarily a conceptualization or propositional meaning in the Eastern tradition. Rather it was best comprehended in the more existential sense of union with God. Moreover, while St Gregory maintained a pronounced request for apophatic (or negative) theology, he nonetheless did not understand this

unknowability in the nihilistic sense. Rather the apophatic way led to a vision – in fact a vision of the uncreated light which the apostles had seen on Mt Tabor.

On the issue of the vision of God, St Gregory affirms that the Christian experience is not only symbolic but is a real vision of the glory of God, and granted as a gift by the operation of the Spirit. It is an “hypostatic light” which is “an illumination immaterial and divine, a grace invisibly seen and ignorantly known. What it is they do not pretend to know.” Barlaam in defending his nominalistic position wishes to disparage the experience of the praying monks and therefore maintains that the light from Tabor was a physical meteorological phenomenon:

“So the light which the disciples saw on Tabor would be a light sensible and visible through the intermediary of the air, which then appeared to arouse their astonishment and immediately vanished, and which one calls divine in that it was a symbol of divinity.”

In defending the doctrine of the uncreatedness of the glory of Christ revealed to the apostles on Mt Tabor, St Gregory was arguing that this light is not subject to the senses and to the intellect. In fact it could not be seen by humanity’s natural faculties. The vision of God is a result of the whole of humanity being both deified and divinised. Summarizing St Gregory’s position, Meyendorff, a renowned scholar in Palamite studies, writes: “To see God we must acquire ‘a divine eye’ and let God see himself in us.”

Seeing the created world, through the eyes of God has far reaching ethical consequences. So many contemporary societal problems could be solved if we could but see the world through “divine eyes”. Moreover, the doctrine of the uncreated light safeguarded the possibility of a direct, unmediated communion with God in the present light. St Gregory asserted its reality, affirming that it was a fact of personal experience of the saints of his day. That light which was seen by the Hesychasts in prayer, was in fact uncreated in so far as it was possible to see God ‘face to face’. It was this emphasis on humanity’s unmediated union with God which would lead St Gregory to crystallize his doctrine on the distinction between divine essence and divine energy.

In the history of Eastern spirituality one can speak of two tendencies in the Christian life, namely the Macarian “heart mysticism” and Evagrian “intellectual mysticism”. For Evagrius, prayer is an ascent of the intellect towards God or a dialogue (sunomiliva) of the intellect with God. Macarius, on the other hand, maintained that, in prayer the mind was kept in the heart. For Macarius the aim of prayer is not the disincarnation of the mind, but a transfiguration of the entire person – both body and soul – through the presence of the incarnate God. Barlaam objected to a psychosomatic of prayer with a Platonic view of humanity: any bodily participation in prayer could only be an hindrance to a true “intellectual” encounter. St Gregory was able to integrate various tendencies in the Christian life – i.e. the , Macarian “heart mysticism” and Evagrian “intellectual mysticism” – into a comprehensive theological vision. His insistence on an incarnational theology, where the divine glory could be manifested through the human body, can contribute in a contemporary understanding of the Christian life.

Therefore, for St Gregory, vision of God was not something that concerned the soul alone, but something that involved the body. For St Gregory, the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor implied a transfiguration through the human body. The relevance of St Gregory for contemporary society surely lies in the fact that his spirituality takes seriously the scriptural testimony of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the human body as God's temple. Living in a time Neo-Platonic dualistic society, whereby it was thought that God could only be experienced by the intellect after it had left the body "ecstatically", St Gregory affirmed the importance of the whole human person in the Christian life. The mystical experience put forth by St Gregory rejected the Platonic tendency to disregard and undervalue sensory experience, in favor of the life of the intellect. In fact, St Gregory's spirituality has a lot to offer modern society which has been greatly influenced by Kant's theory of objectivity which argues that the pure knowledge can only be attained when purified from sensual content and emotion. St Gregory, on the other hand affirmed that the human body – a psychosomatic unity – was a natural and necessary condition for knowledge of God. For St Gregory the domains of sense and intellect could not be separated in this way. Even today, many contemporary spiritualities deviate into a kind of "angelicism" where the body is dismissed as little more than a hindrance and an obstruction – something quite irrelevant to the Christian life. It is often believed that humanity's aim is to become as much like the angels as possible. In fact St Gregory went so far as to argue that the fact that human beings, in having a body makes them not lower but higher than the angels. Human nature has greater potentialities than the angelic. St Gregory Palamas is of exceptional significance for a contemporary understanding of the Christian life. He was able to interpret the Dionysian corpus affirming that the unknowability of God led to a personal experience and union with the divine in this life. For St Gregory, God can be known and experienced in this present life through the bodily eyes. His opponents, Platonist in their approach repudiated St Gregory as a materialist. However St Gregory was able to take a positive step forward in liberating the Christian mystery from Neo-Platonic categories offering us a biblical corrective to the Christian life. Moreover, he affirmed the sacredness of the body and creation in general at a time when the Platonic spiritualizing prevailed. Living in a post Christian world which seems to not need God, the Christian life according to St Gregory safeguards the presence of God in history and his real fidelity to the Church and his mysterious unity – both sacramental and mystical – with the community. Moreover, since it integrates the whole human being in the new life, it also affirms the importance and necessity of responding to the needs and concerns of today since matter is good. The Christian life according to St Gregory can act as an insightful critique of a contemporary understanding of the Christian life which tends to be concerned with religious devotions and the private life only. St Gregory Palamas' contribution lies in his proper understanding of the material world where human beings are called to become stewards and caretakers of the environment and the world and must work towards the well being of all human beings. St Gregory gently calls all human beings to make a total commitment, both body and soul, to the Lord of life and to his creation.⁹

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CHAPTER SIX

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ST. IRENAEUS OF LYONS

On 23 August of every year the Church celebrates the memory of an important saint and bishop of the second century Christian Church. St. Irenaeus was bishop of Lyons (Lugdunum) in the second century. Born c.a. 130 A.D. he was to become an outstanding theologian and ecclesiastical leader; a true witness and propagator to the apostolic faith and apostolic tradition. He was an ecumenical man who, even though wrote against Gnosticism and Marcionism always stressed unity. He was most probably born in Smyrna but migrated to Gaul where he spent the mature years of his life and where he eventually died a martyr c.a. 202 A.D.

St. Irenaeus received a liberal education, becoming acquainted with both Holy Scripture and Greek philosophy and literature. He was greatly influenced by St. Polycarp from whom he received the seeds of the true apostolic tradition. Writing to the Roman presbyter Florinus, St. Irenaeus reveals this influence: “For while I was still a boy I knew you [Florinus]...in Polycarp’s house... I remember the events of those days more clearly than those that happened recently... I can speak of the place that St. Polycarp sat and disputed, how he came in and went out... the discourses which he made to the people... how he reported his influence with John and with the others who had seen the Lord.”

It is beyond doubt that Irenaeus was also well acquainted with Greek thought. He was very familiar with the writings of Greek apologists such as Justin Martyr and Athenagoras whose works he sought to explain to the Greek – speaking world.

Irenaeus left Asia Minor and went to Gaul. He probably accompanied St. Polycarp to Rome in 155 A.D. and then continued to Lyons. Lyons was a great commercial city. It was “the country in which the arena was crowded with people... famous and held in higher repute than any in the land.” It was situated on the Rhone River and was the centre of the Roman road system for Gaul. Intimate relations existed from very remote times between the ports of Asia Minor and Marseilles, which had been colonized from Asia Minor approximately six centuries before the rise of Christianity. During the Roman period, Levantine traders were regularly transporting their goods up the Rhone as far as Lyons. It was only natural that many of whom traveled and settled in Lyons were missionaries who brought Christianity to the pagan Gauls thereby founding a dynamic Church. Therefore even though Lyons was the second most important capital of the Western Roman Empire, it was still basically a Greek – speaking community. It was to this Church that Irenaeus came to serve as a presbyter. The first historical mention of Irenaeus is in 177 A.D. where he is a prominent priest in this area. During this time the Montanist controversy was raging in the Church of Phrygia. When this heresy reached Lyons a letter was written on this

matter to Pope Eleutherius and which Irenaeus was delegated and entrusted to take to Rome. The letter, which on this occasion he took to the pope in Rome recommended him excellently;

“We have asked our brother and companion Irenaeus to bring this letter to you and we beg you to hold him in esteem for he is zealous for the covenant of Christ. For had we known that rank can confer righteousness on anyone, we should first of all have recommended him as being a presbyter of the church, for that is his position.”

Many scholars contend that as a result of being sent to Rome he escaped the terrible persecutions which broke out in 177 A.D. by the decree of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Aurelius was a dedicated pagan who vehemently persecuted Christians with “noisy abuse, blows, dragging along the ground, plundering stoning, imprisonment....” On his return from Rome Irenaeus was chosen to succeed Pothinus as bishop who had been previously martyred.

As bishop, Irenaeus saw himself as a successor of the apostles; a link between the historical person of Jesus and the contemporary Church. Like St. Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus saw himself as the centre of the Eucharist however he also saw himself as a teacher. Because of his confrontation with the Gnostics, Irenaeus placed appropriate importance to the continuity of teaching within the Church. Since the Gnostics appealed to a secret tradition handed down by a secret succession of pedagogues, Irenaeus answered by appealing to the tradition openly promulgated in the four canonical gospels and to the unbroken public succession of bishops within a see. He saw himself as the one, par excellence, who taught the truth.

“We should obey those presbyters in the Church who have their succession from the apostles, and who, together with succession in the episcopate, have received the assured charisma of the truth (*certum charisma veritatis*).”

Irenaeus viewed apostolic succession as the true sign of continuity with the apostolic faith. He saw himself as a successor of the apostles, as *alter apostolus* and therefore as someone who preserved the continuity of doctrinal teaching, the fullness of the Catholic faith and life.

When dealing with the heresies Irenaeus not only exposed and overthrew their teaching but also sought the orthodox interpretation and teaching as well. In spite of Irenaeus’ interest in guarding his flock from the many heresies, his main preoccupation was the individual and his salvation. He was concerned with humankind’s progress in order that he may achieve “the vision and enjoyment of God.” Far from being speculative, his theology whilst deep and complex, was certainly concerned with finding ways to help his flock apply it to their lives. Since Irenaeus main interest was soteriological, he worked hard to spread Christianity to the neighboring provinces of Lyons as well.

The next historical mention of Irenaeus is between the years 189 A.D. and 198 A.D., concerning the celebration of Pascha (Easter). The Churches of Asia celebrated Easter on the fourteenth day after the new moon with which the month of Nisan began. The rest of Christendom held that the

day on which the Resurrection could be celebrated was Sunday. The pope most probably sent letters to Asia Minor requesting councils to be convoked in order to discuss the proper day for the celebration of Pascha. Church councils were held in other provinces including Rome. The decisions of the councils were unanimous except for the province of Ephesus. Pope Victor was determined to bring about uniformity to the universal Church and he attempted to do this by suppressing the custom of Asia. He endeavored to excommunicate the Church of Asia as heterodox. To this decree Irenaeus answered and warned Pope Victor. Eusebius the historian relates that Irenaeus lived up to his name as ‘peacemaker.’

“Irenaeus, whose name means ‘peaceable’ and who by temperate was a peacemaker, pleaded and negotiated thus for the peace of the churches. He corresponded by letter not only with Victor but with very many other heads of churches, setting out both sides of the question under discussion.”

This incident is important in understanding how Irenaeus saw the Church of Rome. By his intervention in the Paschal controversy, he did not recognize the primacy of authority in the Church of Rome.

After his incident with Pope Victor, Irenaeus disappears from history and it is believed that he died approximately 202 A.D. It is not before Gregory of Tours that mention is made of his having died a martyr. There is debate amongst scholars as to his martyrdom since historians such as Eusebius make no mention of this event. What is important is not when or how he died but that through his writings, one has a valuable and authentic link to the apostles. One sees a man who had a depth of knowledge, a depth of faith, a love of scripture and God Himself. He was a “curious explorer of all doctrine” as Tertullian described him. Just like a surgeon, when performing a major operation, Irenaeus too, through his writings lays bare the nerves and sinews so as to take his reader to the very heart of a heresy with the sole purpose of healing the Church from such disease. ‘Orthodoxy’ did not survive by right in the early Church, but because it had people like Irenaeus and to this lies a clue to his grandeur and to his vigor.

SAINT MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR: HIS LIFE AND BASIC FEATURES OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

“THE ONE WHO LOVES CHRIST THOROUGHLY IMITATES HIM AS MUCH AS HE CAN.” ST MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR

St Maximus the Confessor, whose feast day is celebrated every year on the 21st January by the Orthodox Church, has been acclaimed as one of the greatest thinkers in the whole of Christianity – indeed one of the most outstanding fathers of the undivided Church of the first common Christian millennium. Modern theologians consider him to have been the “most universal spirit of the seventh century”, “the real Father of Byzantine society” and “the first great synthesizer and elucidator of earlier Patristic thought”. His works embrace nearly all major themes of

Christian theology: the Trinity, cosmology, the human person as microcosm and mediator, the purpose and centrality of Christ's incarnation for history, the sacraments, the ascetic or Christian life and his affirmation of two natural wills in Christ – thereby affirming both the perfect divinity and perfect humanity in the person of the incarnate Son of God. In particular it was St Maximus who gave the most authentic answer regarding the cause and aim of the entire creation of the world out of nothing in terms of the incarnation when he stated quite emphatically that, had not the Fall or the transgression of humanity taken place, the incarnation would still have occurred so as to fulfill God's pre-eternal plan of salvation for, and intimate communion with, the world.

Born around 580AD, in Constantinople, St Maximus the Confessor was of noble background thereby receiving an excellent education. He was able to study philosophy, rhetoric, logic and grammar. His philosophical studies would have also included arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy along with studies in Plato, Aristotle and the Neo-Platonists. Upon completing his studies, St Maximus entered government service, where he quickly won the love and respect of the Emperor. In fact, he became the first secretary at the Imperial Court of the Emperor Heraclius. Very soon after however, upon realizing that the Emperor had been influenced by the Monothelite teaching (the heretical belief claiming that Jesus Christ had only one will thereby undermining His full humanity), and yearning for a quiet life, he renounced his career within the royal court and opted for a monastic life at the Chrysopolis monastery. His biographer claimed that, within a few years St Maximus had become the abbot of the monastery, persuaded to do so by the monks who had seen in the person of St Maximus a humble, contemplative and devoted man.

Due to political instability (in 626AD the Persians and Avars had reached the walls of Constantinople), he departed Constantinople and went through Crete, Alexandria, where he stayed for quite some time, only to arrive finally in Africa-Carthage, a city which had outrightly rejected Monothelitism. It is said, for example that in 630AD, three out of the four Eastern Patriarchates were occupied by Monothelite bishops (those of Constantinople, Antioch and Alexandria). In particular, in wanting to achieve unity within the Empire, the Emperor Heraclius together with Sergius, the Patriarch of Constantinople issued an edict in 638 entitled the Ekthesis ('Exposition of the Faith') whose purpose it was to minimize the doctrinal differences which had separated the Monophysites (a large Christian group, condemned by the Fourth Ecumenical Council in 451AD who taught that in Jesus Christ there was only one nature – a divine one) from the Christian Church. Even though the Emperor soon died after the promulgation of the Exposition he was succeeded by his grandson Constans II (642-668AD) who was also a staunch advocate of the Monothelite heresy and thus would continue in his late grandfather's footsteps. For this reason, events were not looking positive for St Maximus.

And so, from Carthage, St Maximus began to organize and write an Orthodox refutation to the false teachings of the Monothelites. It was in Carthage that the famous dispute took place with Pyrrhus, the deposed Patriarch of Constantinople who had succeeded Sergius after his death in 638AD. Indeed, this well-known challenge with Pyrrhus, which has been preserved to this day in

manuscripts took place in 645AD. Its importance lies in its clear and coherent elucidation of the Christian faith in the one person of Jesus Christ in two natures, and two natural wills – a divine and human one. Pyrrhus, not being able to refute the ‘intellectual challenge’ of his opponent, soon came to acknowledge his errors, and together with St Maximus journeyed to Rome to visit Pope Theodore, who, upon receiving Pyrrhus acknowledged him as the Patriarch of Constantinople. It was in Rome that St Maximus experienced great influence, where, under his recommendation, several council of bishops were convoked to condemn Monothelitism as a heresy. As a result of a newly published edict, the Typos in 648AD, which had been commissioned by Emperor Constans II and put together by Patriarch Paul of Constantinople, St Maximus went to ask Martin, the newly elected Pope [and successor of Pope Theodore] to convene a council to examine the question of Monothelitism. In 649AD the Lateran Council was convoked where over one hundred and fifty bishops and thirty-seven representatives from the East were present, all of whom condemned Monothelitism and the Typos of Constans II.

However, severe punishment was to befall the defenders of Orthodoxy. Upon receiving the decisions of the Lateran Council, the Emperor immediately ordered the arrest of both Pope Martin and St Maximus. And so in 655AD, the saint was tried, accused of treason and sent to prison. At his trial, St Maximus has been recorded as saying of the Emperor: “It is the business of priests, not Emperors to investigate and define the salutary dogmas of the Catholic Church.”

For his insistence, St Maximus was exiled to Thrace and Perberis where together with two of his disciples underwent the cruelest of torments. At the orders of the Emperor, the tongue of St Maximus was cut out so that he could no longer preach and his right hand was cut off so that he could no longer write. They were then exiled to Skemarum in Scythia where they suffered many difficulties along the way. Eventually on 13th August, 661AD St Maximus died, yet his defense of the faith earned him the title ‘Confessor’ at the Sixth Ecumenical Council twenty years later in 680/681AD.

The Christian Life – from Disintegration to Reintegration

It was in the earlier part of his life, whilst at the monastery in Chrysopolis that St Maximus wrote his first comprehensive expositions of the Christian life. These works are entitled: The Four Hundred Chapters on Love and The Ascetical Life. According to these writings, as a result of the Fall, humanity is described as having become entrapped in three fundamental evils from which all other passions flow: ignorance (agnoia), self-love (philautia) and tyranny (tyrannis) or autonomy.

Generally speaking, ignorance implies a failure to realize all that is truly good, seeking instead for gratification in the corruptive realm. Or to put it another way, ignorance, according to St Maximus is to exclude God from all aspects of your life – that is, making plans without bringing God into the picture. Quite simply put in practical terms, for example, this could mean preparing for any forthcoming event for the day without simply saying ‘God willing’ – ‘God willing, I’ll be going to the city today’. Following on from this, a conscious or sub-conscious rejection of God naturally leads to self-love, which is the root of all evils.

Self-love arises from the many impulses mediated from the realm of the senses by the will, which cannot be overcome because the human person has forgotten God. Since God is ignored, everything is understood wrongly – that is, from the perspective of the self and not from God. For example, instead of eating simply to live, such people would choose to live in order to eat; instead of working in order to live, they would live their life in order to work. In forgetting God, such people inevitably misuse everything in the world since they have become the measure of all things, instead of God.

Self-love radically changes our perception of the world. An example from our life today which could serve to illustrate what St Maximus meant is the following: instead of seeing, for example, the act of eating a meal together with others around a table as a pretext for communion, we see it purely as a means of survival. For this reason we often may choose to eat alone in front of the television since the act of eating has lost its sacred communal purpose. Such a misdirected perception colors all our activities in life. This gives rise to the misdirection of all those gifts or virtues bestowed upon all human persons which necessarily lead to: anger, despondency, gluttony, lust, avarice, vainglory, pride, dejection, rapacity (pleonexia), resentment, (mnesikakia), envy (pthonos) and slander (katalalia).

St Maximus arranged his list of the twelve passions according to his tripartite understanding of the soul – the concupiscible (sexual lust), irascible (anger) and rational. Indeed a life controlled by the vices, in their sum, cause, according to St Maximus a continual disintegration of the soul. Moreover they destroy the unity of the individual human person and they divide human persons from each other and from God.

Finally all this leads, according to St Maximus, to tyranny since we become deluded into thinking that we are self-sufficient and do not need God or other human persons. Indeed others around may become, if not our enemy at least people in whom we are entirely disinterested. This state could be compared to the rich man in Jesus' parable of Lazarus, who passed by Lazarus every day and did even think perhaps to give him some food or water. This was most probably not because he hated Lazarus but because he had become so self-centered that he could not see beyond himself to the needs of those around him. Indeed, the self-sufficient person is one who falsely thinks that he/she can lead a life of self-seeking pleasure rather than love. However created in the image and likeness of God, human persons are called to reflect the life of God who is love (cf 1Jn 4:8). Just like choosing to breathe in carbon dioxide, for example, instead of oxygen, leads to our biological death, so too choosing a egocentric life instead of a life of love inevitably leads to our spiritual death. If God is taken out of the picture, we may be able to survive but we do not truly live a life in all of its abundance, a loving life ultimately free from death itself. This false sense of autonomy leads to our entrapment and tyranny to the passions.

As an antidote to all this the Christian life, according to St Maximus has to do with redirecting or reintegrating our disintegrated mode of existence. Whereas the passions or vices have scattered our mind, the Christian life involves a cleansing process, a death and resurrection in Christ, the

practice of the virtues (praxis) so that we can be led back into contemplation (theoria) of the mystery of God. It is only in overcoming the passions and leading a contemplative life that God can bestow upon us His gracious gift of divine life which is deification or theosis. St Maximus described this entire process in terms of being (einaí), well-being (eu-einaí) and eternal-being (aei-einaí). Whereas the practice of the virtues leads to our being in God, a contemplative life brings us to a state of well-being in beholding God. And finally the last state of eternal-being has an eschatological and mystical character which will be bestowed upon the faithful in the age to come. What is all important in the practice of the Christian life however, according to St Maximus is the virtue of love and it is to this all-important virtue that we now briefly turn.

The Importance of Love

For St Maximus, love is the supreme virtue, which unifies all the other virtues, such as faith, the fear of God, self-mastery, patience, long suffering, hope in God and detachment. Furthermore it is only in the person's practice of love that the following virtues find their aim: humility (tapeinosis), meekness (praotes), gentleness (praupatheia), mercy (eleos) and poverty (aktemosune) along with the Platonic virtues of courage, temperance, and justice. Love, however is the "inclusive summit of all the virtues" and the perfection of the virtuous life. In his evaluation of love, St Maximus differentiated between the love for God and the love for one's neighbor. Yet, even though he distinguished them, he, nevertheless united them and ultimately considered love of neighbor as a prerequisite for the love of God:

"The one who loves God cannot help but love also every human being as himself even though he may be displeased by the passions of those who are not yet purified. However, when he sees their conversion and amendment, he rejoices with an unbounded and unspeakable joy."

And elsewhere he wrote: **"The one who does not love his neighbor is not... able to love the Lord."**

Moreover as a result of the supreme virtue of love, one will not only love God and neighbor alike but the three faculties of the soul of the person (namely the concupiscible, the irascible and the rational) will also be transformed so that final communion with God will be made possible. Therefore the concupiscible part of the soul would ultimately be transformed by love into a holy desire and yearning for God. And as a result of love towards one's neighbor, the virtues of long-suffering and patience would be produced in the irascible faculty. Finally the rational element of the soul would be led, by love to humility, which is a virtue of that faculty. Maximus summarized this point:

"The soul is moved reasonably when its concupiscible element is qualified by self-mastery, its irascible element cleaves to love and turns away from hate and the rational element lives with God through prayer and spiritual contemplation."

Therefore, the Christian life implies a restoration and transformation of the elements of the soul from perversion to its natural function. That is to say, what is called for in the Christian life is not a suppression of the passions but a replacement since evil passions are good passions which have been misdirected.

In this brief article, we saw that the historical context into which St Maximus the Confessor was born, gave rise to harsh and difficult struggles on his part with opponents of the Christian faith who happened to hold key political and even ecclesiastical positions. It was his unwavering resistance against these people, which earned him the title ‘Confessor’ since he was not afraid to speak out against all those who were putting the integrity of the witness of the apostolic faith in Jesus Christ into question, even if they happened to be Patriarchs or Emperors. Indeed, it was these heated disputes, which led to this saint being subjected to the cruelest of torments, namely the cutting off of his tongue and right hand together with his banishment from the city of Constantinople.

However in all this, never did he lose sight of the nature and purpose of all authentic theology, namely a person’s insatiable yearning to know and be in communion with God. This was evidenced in his concern to articulate clearly in all his writings the basic aspects of the Christian life since it was these which led to an intimate vision and a life in God.

The Freedom of Obedience (Part I)

Introductory Remarks

Obedience is normally understood in terms of submission, which presupposes the resignation of one’s will to that of another higher authority. Or it is usually perceived in terms of conforming to some external rules or regulations enforced upon by another more dominant power. Indeed, in today’s society, obedience has become synonymous with subjugation and it is believed to demand the total renunciation of one’s will and ‘blind’ submission to that conglomeration of rules enforced upon that other higher reality.

Accordingly, in most people’s consciousness, obedience, by extension means to submit to a group of regulations or laws set by a superior authority (which incidentally may not always necessarily be religious – for example it could be ideological or political) and not ask any questions. Hence we have the well-established misconception of ‘blind obedience’, which stipulates ‘doing what you are told’ and for this reason it is thought to be enslavement. It follows from this that obedience comes to be seen as a weakness and a contradictory concept for the ‘enlightened’ or emancipated person since their freedom is brought into question.

Understood in such a superficial manner one can perhaps appreciate why people would even go so far as to point out the utter absurdity of obedience. Believing it to be a feature of the psychologically bound, timid and naïve, these people conclude that the practice of obedience is only for the backward and conservative. Indeed in the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic, God is seen as the enemy of freedom since He is perceived as a frightful authority figure who must be obeyed. This inevitably leads to the atheistic syllogism that: ‘since I am a free human being I need not obey. If I obey, then I am not a free human being’. Unfortunately this attitude to obedience has not only made its way into contemporary society but also into the Church where many can no longer discern or even appreciate the spiritual, let alone the practical significance of this virtue.

For this reason a reflection on obedience is required in order to rediscover its organic link with freedom and life-giving communion.

However, before turning out attention to examine the Church's understanding of obedience it must be pointed out that the reality of this virtue in contemporary society is not as foreign and detestable as it might first appear. For example, who would question the importance of the obedience displayed by athletes to their trainers as they set out to prepare for forthcoming events. Surely their carefully regulated practice sessions coupled with other rules (dietary et al.), which permeate all facets of their lives constitutes a kind of 'blind' obedience to the personal judgement of their coach.

One also sees the practice of obedience in those students who have an earnest desire to excel at school. They therefore know that they must put themselves entirely in the hands of their teachers if they want to succeed in their studies. Indeed the conscious or sub-conscious significance of obedience is seen in all facets of human existence right from little children whose faith and trust in their parents help immensely in their psychological growth to that of the elderly who entrust their entire well-being, on a daily basis to their doctors. All these examples serve to illustrate the degree to which all people have surrendered themselves to obedience. Indeed it is the practice of obedience which serves to bring about psychological growth and maturity on the part of the obedient person.

Church's Experience of Obedience

In the Greek language, the term 'obedience' (hyp-akoe or in its verbal form hyp-akouo) is derived from the preposition 'hypo' meaning 'under' and the verb 'to listen'. That is, the preposition 'hypo' shows the vertical direction in obedience – that is, between the heavenly realm and that of the world. And so obedience is to be understood in the context of an encounter between God and the human person where God 'speaks' and the human person actively listens. Consequently, far from implying a passive attitude to life, obedience is an active function since the action of listening requires a level of attentiveness and focused concentration in order to discern what is being said, especially when this relates to the transcendent yet immanent God. Ultimately obedience implies eagerly awaiting upon God so that with 'ears to hear' we may listen (cf Mk 4:23). In this sense, the meaning of obedience, as it is experienced and lived out by the Church is entirely foreign to any forms of 'passiveness' or fatalism since it occurs ultimately within the context of a personal relationship with God. On the contrary, obedience is less concerned with the submission of the conscience to external rules as it is with an inward transformation where life is surrendered to God corresponding to the 'ascent' towards heaven as it is found in the spirituality of the writings of the entire ascetic tradition, an example of which is St John Climacus' Ladder of Divine Ascent.¹ That is to say, it is only when the will of the ego is abandoned that that person can truly begin to unite and share in the eternal life of God.

Indeed in obedience the will (idion thelema) is buried (not destroyed) so that the 'spirit' within every human person can be resurrected and become attuned to the 'voice' of God as it is revealed

in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit. Far from being negative, obedience as absolute trust in God becomes the means to a life infinitely greater than one's mere biological existence. It becomes clear already that obedience essentially is a fact of communion with God and so only those who cling to this communal mode of existence and strive to live it out can claim to have entrusted themselves to, or become obedient disciples of, God. And in so doing, God begins to indwell or be in an intimate communal relationship with them. Not only does God listen to these faithful people (cf Jn 9:31)² but makes His dwelling place in their hearts:

All who obey his commandments abide in him and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us (1 Jn 3:24).³

The significance of God remaining with the obedient ones becomes all the more apparent when we realize, that being the source of life and freedom (primarily freedom from the bounds of death) God calls all out of an isolated existence so that they can enter a relationship with Him. And if communion with God constitutes life, then obedience is that dynamic towards that life. Before further reflecting on the 'freedom of obedience' some brief remarks on the New Testament vision of obedience will be offered, especially as they relate to Christ's filial obedience to God, His Father followed by some examples of obedience from the Patristic ascetical tradition.

Obedience in the New Testament

Reading the New Testament one can easily discern, throughout the entire life of Jesus, the conscious obedience which He displayed towards God His Father. Indeed Christ's obedience involved the unwavering adherence to His Father's will in all moments of His life. In his letter to the Philippians St Paul urged the community to live their life not out of "selfish ambition or conceit" (Phil 2:3) but primarily in humility taking Christ as their example who was obedient to God even to the point of death:

"Who, though he was in the form of God... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross" (Phil 2:6-8).

Such radical obedience, even to the point of death cannot be explained by any logic but will only be appreciated if it is seen from within the radically intimate relationship of profound love and trust that Jesus had to His Father. Indeed all four gospels emphasize this point as can be seen from Jesus Himself who in the gospel according to St John said:

"For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day" (Jn 6:38-39).

In this case, we see the extent to which St John went in order to emphasize Christ's ministry and teaching in terms of His resolute obedience to all that God His Father had shown Him and given Him to do and say. Indeed what is even more profound is that the Scriptures' insistence of Christ's obedience, not only to God but also to other people, including his earthly parents:

"Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them" (Lk 2:51).

By example during His earthly ministry Jesus showed the significance of obeying the commandments of God even as they are mediated through elders, in this case His earthly parents. As we shall see, this is important especially when it comes to the obedience between two people – that of a disciple to an elder.

Now, the reason for the importance of obedience is clearly stated in the New Testament. It was only in this perfect obedience to God that Christ was able to become the source of the world's salvation. In the letter to the Hebrews we read:

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb. 5:8-9).

Just as Christ's obedience to God was the source of all glory and life, so too, our invitation⁵ to obey the Lord becomes our opportunity not only to show our love for Him (cf Jn 14:21-24), but above all to be graced with the gift of freedom in becoming "the glory of God's children" (Rom 8.21). Already within the writings of the New Testament we see the importance of obedience as the means for our ultimate glorification and freedom as God's children.

The Freedom of Obedience (Part II)

Introductory Remarks

In the November 2005 issue we examined the freedom of obedience by looking at the New Testament witness to this. And so in this issue, this discussion is continued by looking at the desert fathers and then critically reflecting upon the notion of obedience, indeed the freedom of obedience.

The sayings of the Desert Fathers on Obedience

Beyond the New Testament, the entire ascetic tradition emphasizes the importance of obedience for the Christian life. The Gerondikon or The Sayings of the Desert Fathers¹ gives abundant examples of the significance of obedience in the Christian life and is indeed a major theme in the Sayings of the Desert Fathers. A well-known anecdote recounts the story of John the Dwarf, who, upon entering the desert, was told, by his spiritual elder to continue watering a dry stick², which had been planted into the ground, and to keep on doing this until it bore fruit. Indeed, the story is intensified when we are told that the novice had to travel throughout the whole night to collect water, something, which, besides being irrational would have been physically and mentally exhausting. The pinnacle moment of the story is reached when we discover that one morning, in the third year, upon going to water the "dead" stick, John found that it had flowered and produced much fruit. It is said that his spiritual elder took it to the community and told the brothers: "Take and eat the fruit of obedience!"³

Another story relates the perfect obedience of a disciple, who, having been called by his spiritual father, responded immediately, not even completing the letter of the alphabet that he had been writing whilst copying a manuscript.⁴ From this, we can see that all sayings in the Gerondikon seek to emphasize, in the strongest of terms the importance of obedience for a person setting out

to live a monastic life. At this point one may be tempted to ask: "whatever happened to the freedom of that human person?"

All such stories will not only seem to be a stumbling block for "logical" or "rational" persons but also absurd, if not at the very least ambivalent, unless they are seen as the only effective means of disarming pride and one's autonomous self-orientated existence. Indeed the extremities of obedience described are nothing other the powerful antidote or remedy needed for the extremity of the world's fallen state. The Gerondikon is clear in stating that the practice of obedience, even when it may seem at first "irrational" acquires a profound meaning only when it is understood as a means of training the soul of the novice. Just as disobedience was the cause of the fall of the first Adam, so too, obedience becomes the means, by which the human person can be restored to their primordial state of existence. That such a teaching is Scriptural can be seen from the letter of St Paul to the Romans, which relates to Christ's saving obedience as a example for all human persons:

For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous (Rom 5:19).

Just as Christ, through His obedience opened the door to Paradise through to God the Father, so too, will all human persons be led to the glory of God through their obedience (cf 2 Cor 9:13). That is, the self-seeking ego, which entered human history with the fall of Adam can only be transformed to a communal manner of existence – that is, a life in communion with God and the world around – with the daily struggle of the monk to become obedient in all things. And it is precisely for this reason that the practice of obedience is placed over charitable acts which a monk may perform by his own will.⁵ As such, obedience is considered to be "the first of virtues".⁶ In an age of radical individualism, where the human person has become the measure of all things, such stories relating to ascetical obedience become all the more important as inspiring examples which can lead to our freedom from our "crowded solitude" – which is nothing other than a dead existence even before we die.

The Freedom of Obedience

From the above, it has become clear that the issue of obedience is extremely important both in the Scriptures and the Patristic ascetical tradition as a means for life-giving "communion" and freedom. If one were to give some working definition, it could be said that within the life of the Church, obedience is fundamentally both a gift of communion with God and the dynamic realisation of that communion which can only occur in freedom and which leads to freedom. Understood in this way, obedience does not only signify the gift of fellowship bestowed by God on the obedient person, but also that person's striving to make this mode of existence a permanent reality in their life. That is to say, obedience is not only a gift bestowed by God leading to communion with God but also the active response by the person towards God. Ultimately obedience is a gift from above which is bestowed upon humanity as the effective means for beginning the struggle to cease living in isolation, opting instead to allow our life to be governed by the freedom of a life in Christ which leads to life eternal (cf Eph 2:14). Indeed this

can only happen in the first place because Christ has opened the way for it and bestowed upon the world this gift of communion with God. But it also requires our free acceptance in humility and obedience upon recognizing that we no longer wish to isolate ourselves from the fullness of life. Consequently it becomes apparent that the freedom of obedience comes to be seen as both a gift and goal of our Christian life. In this way, our life must be characterised by a daily struggle to receive this gift from God in all humility and increasingly offer our life willingly back to God.

Understood in this dynamic way, it becomes evident that obedience is inseparably linked with the notions of "communion" and "freedom" whereby the absence of one of these elements inevitably leads to a misdirected understanding of this virtue. Accordingly, obedience is in contradistinction to any tendency for a self-centred, self-serving and non-communal existence, which inevitably can only lead to death even though we may be "alive" on a merely biological level. Obedience becomes an attitude to life, which enables the radical transformation from an individually-centred existence to that of a communally focused mode of existence.

That is, in the practice of obedience, it becomes possible for persons to experience, here and now, even by way of foretaste, the existential event of God's communal mode of life. And this cannot happen unless human persons willingly (notice again the will is not destroyed) cease to draw their existence from their individuality, which is corrupt and mortal and can therefore only lead to death, but instead, realize that the source of life is from God. In this way obedience emerges as a power beyond the human, which can destroy the barrier of egotism and isolationism opening up, instead a taste of the fullness of life offered as a communion of love. Obedience therefore implies a communal way of life, which arises from a relationship of co-operation thereby creating real bonds of co-existence.

The life of the person who has freely decided to lead an obedient life – i.e. one in communion with God – does not become diminished but on the contrary is enriched and built up. Indeed, obedience is practiced so that the person can become free, free from simply acting out of instinct. Obedience ultimately says that true freedom is born from the moment that one decides not to be conformed to one's self-seeking will choosing instead to draw the fullness of life from God. It is only within the context of selfless love, which is nothing other than one's commitment to obedience that freedom is borne within.

Far from becoming a slave or leading a docile life, the obedient person is made free in so far as he or she is liberated from a captivated state of an isolated existence by destroying the wall raised between them and God. Paradoxically, true freedom which is liberation even from the confines of death can only take place in precisely the same manner as that of Christ – that is, it is only in surrendering our own self-will, by burying it since it has become alienated from God and has deluded itself into believing that it is self-sufficient and self-regarding, that it will be resurrected by being conformed, by grace to a communal life in God, which is eternally free. Therefore it has been clearly shown to what extent obedience can be truly seen within the context of communion and freedom.

In the next issue we will discuss the context in which this practice of obedience takes place, namely the spiritual elder.

The freedom of obedience (Part III)

Introductory Remarks

In the last issue of the Voice of Orthodoxy, the virtue of obedience was examined by looking at several sayings from the desert fathers. From this we were able to reflect theologically upon the importance of obedience for a life of freedom in Christ. The third part of this study will look briefly at the context in which the freedom of obedience is lived out, namely one's relationship with the spiritual elder.

Obedience to a Spiritual Elder

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition the path to freedom, through obedience takes place within the context of a spiritual elder. That is to say, far from being an acceptance of a set of faceless rules which are to be adhered to, obedience is realised within the communal context of an intimate relationship with one's spiritual elder. That the experience of faith in God takes place within this context of obedience is seen clearly in the letter of Jude:

Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints (Jude 3).

Clearly for St Jude, the experience of faith took place within the context of obedience . namely when each faithful member of the ecclesial community entrusted themselves to specific persons who had gone before them. In the case of the letter of Jude, the integrity of the faith was maintained when it was received by concrete personalities who were responsible for 'taking' the faithful by the hand in order to lead them to God. Clearly therefore, the relevance of this passage for today is that it affirms the fact that since our faith is something delivered to us and not something which is discovered by ourselves then we need to entrust ourselves, that is obey, those consecrated people responsible for upholding the integrity of the faith.

Indeed, the insistence, by the Orthodox tradition, that obedience is not given to any abstract collective . whether they be canons or any other form of ecclesiastical law . but to concrete persons is also stressed in the letter to the Hebrews:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. (Heb 13:7)

In accordance with the letter to the Hebrews, the Church has always taught that the integrity of obedience is expressed decisively through concrete personalities acting of course within the parameters of the true faith. Furthermore, within the ascetic tradition of the Church as a whole, so fundamental was this relationship of obedience between elder and novice that it constituted distinct areas of study for many spiritual writers.

One such example is St John Climacus who in his presentation of the Christian life considered obedience to be a foundational virtue without which one could not advance spiritually in their journey to encounter God. Or to put it another way, according to Climacus it would be delusional to assume that one's endeavour to meet the living God could be realised without the spiritual elder. From both the Biblical and Patristic witness, it becomes clear that since the Church has always had a specific group of people divinely appointed not only to express the full deposit of the fullness of the faith of the Church but also to spiritually 'form' the faithful, it is for this reason that the faithful have to entrust themselves freely to these people with their obedience.

Eastern Orthodox tradition

The Eastern Orthodox tradition would claim that the spiritual elder sacramentally makes present, as a living icon, God Himself and does nothing more than speak the word of God to his children. It is for this reason that even to this day, one hears monks on Mount Athos saying 'give me a word' precisely because in that 'word', from their elder they perceive the very 'Word of God'. And so, the spiritual elder becomes the living voice of God and not simply one from whom one receives valuable private opinions. Bishop Kallistos Ware beautifully described this relationship in the following way:

In reality, this relationship is not two-sided but triangular, for in addition to the abba and his disciple there is also a third partner, God.¹

It is this charismatic dimension of 'spiritual guidance' that has the power to transform the obedient person leading to a freedom in God beyond the confines of this transitory life, riddled with corruption and death. Consequently, far from inhibiting one's freedom, or being reduced to mere submissiveness, obedience is that virtue which occurs within the context of loving trust and personal relationship between two people in Christ, which in itself reveals the presence of Christ. It follows therefore that, as a fellow servant of God, the spiritual elder acts as a guide and a friend along the way. It is precisely for this reason that the spiritual elder is often depicted either as a guide who, like Moses, can lead and direct a person out of servitude and into the promised land of God's kingdom; or as a physician who knows, through the gift of discernment how to remove the ailing wounds of the vices from the faithful thereby restoring them to spiritual wholeness and integrity.

Finally the spiritual elder is compared to a teacher, who takes the disciple by the hand thereby initiating them into the mysteries of God. With these images, the Church has wanted to emphasize the importance of the spiritual elder in liberating the faithful from their spiritual ailments. But for this to occur, the faithful have to freely abide by the teachings of God as expressed through their spiritual directors.

From all that has been said above, a point of clarification is needed so as not to leave room for any misunderstanding. That obedience is important for all faithful Christians and not simply for monks is undeniably evident. This means, those leading a married life are equally called to live a life of obedience. And so, for example, husbands and wives would need to listen to, and obey,

their spouse. A monk once advised the husband of a couple who had just been married to listen and obey his wife when it came to doing tasks that she might happen to suggest around the house – even menial chores like taking out the waste without saying that he would do them later or not at all – as this could not but be one important ingredient for a blessed marriage.

In emphasizing the importance of obedience for all however, it would seem that it would not be entirely mistaken to make a distinction between the obedience of monastics who have formally taken a special vow of obedience and the faithful in general living in the world.⁶ Perhaps it could be said that, just as the responsibility of all within the Church, clergy, laity and monastics is one and the same . that is, to be saved within the communal experience of the ekklesia . even though each person has a varying degree of that same responsibility within the life of the Church, so too the voluntary obedience to the will of God is one and the same for all, even though each member of the Church is called to live this out in a uniquely distinct, and therefore infinitely diverse manner.

Viewed within its communal relationship with God, what must be emphasized is that the obedient person comes under the grace of God and not under the law. Indeed, in this daily struggle to be obedient (each in his/her own unique manner), what is absolutely certain is that the person's free will must not be destroyed. According to St Barsanuphius:

*Do not force people's free will, but sow in hope; for our Lord did not compel anyone, but He preached the good news, and those who wished hearkened unto Him.*⁷

Far from destroying the freedom of the person, the spiritual father (or mother) is there to help his or her disciples to discern the truth for themselves so that they can truly become all that God created them to be. As such obedience becomes the door to freedom and communion.

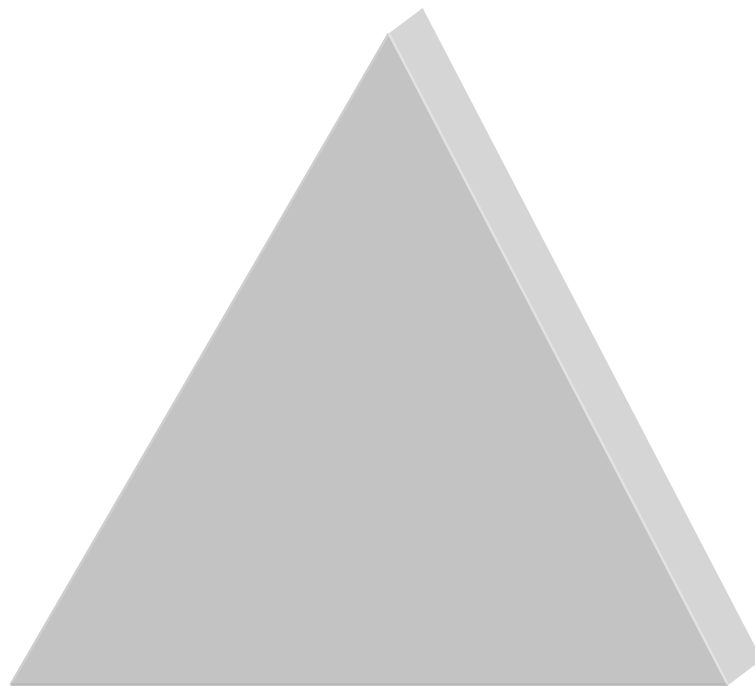
Concluding Remarks

We saw that through obedience the Christian person is able to reverse the movement towards an existentially autonomous mode of existence [which results in death] thereby beginning to restore their human nature as it was originally meant to be . that is, in communion with the grace of divine life. Experienced as such by the Church, it was shown that obedience represented the unique potential for salvation from a lonely alienated existence and a parallel co-existence in which there is no convergence either with the world around or let alone with God. Consequently obedience becomes all the more important in today's society which tends to live in total isolation having a false sense of security in its supposed autonomy. On the contrary obedience liberates the person from becoming enclosed in his/her hardened shell of an individualistic existence (*incurvatio hominis in se*), which can only deprive that person from the fullness of life. Accordingly the divine gift of obedience is a radically new communal reality, which offers that person a participation and share in true freedom . that is, a gift of freedom from God even from death. Yet, in so far as the gift of obedience needs to be fully manifested and lived out in each person, it constitutes a postulate which will be fully realized in the age to come.

However, already in this life, in putting their trust in God, as this is mediated through a spiritual guide, the obedient ones can be assured that their soul will continue to dwell in God. And so, unlike the proud who are not only a law unto themselves but are dictated by their instincts, the obedient ones, in surrendering themselves entirely to God will have been blessed with the eschatological gift of freedom from God, already from this life.

I end with one last example of liberating obedience, this time not from within the ascetical tradition of the Eastern Orthodox tradition but from an incident related of an uneducated yet wise and faithful man living in the twenty-first century here in Sydney, Australia. Profoundly illuminating in its simplicity, the story relates how this man, upon being ‘ordered’ by a child to leave the room that he had entered, because he had ostensibly ‘bothered’ this young boy who was watching television, obeyed and left immediately.

This concrete action taken by this person (as this can obviously not be applied to all), was done not because the man’s pride was wounded or because he had become angry and did not want to express this, deciding instead to withdraw within himself by leaving the room. Rather, it is said that this simple and unassuming man was truly gifted with the virtue of obedience, like those illumined monks of the desert, so that with any given experience, he had honestly led himself to believe that any thought expressed by another .even by a little child . was exceedingly more important than his own. In this way, he had learnt to liberate himself from himself by utterly emptying himself of his ego, and, in this way allowing the grace of God . that is the very presence of God – to reign within.



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