

The Second Triumph of Orthodoxy

St. Gregory Palamas, a fourteenth-century monk of Mount Athos, is commemorated today for his championing of true teaching (Orthodoxy) and the preservation of the Church from heresy. This is called the “Second Triumph of Orthodoxy” because our very salvation was safeguarded by his self-sacrificing teachings. He gave up his way of life, he was imprisoned, and he was nearly killed, all for his insistence that our salvation was secured by participation in the divine nature, and that that divine nature comes to us as God’s energies, his grace, God himself entering our world and sharing his divine nature with us.

St. Gregory was a “hesychast,” one of those who practiced withdrawal from the “noise” of the outside world to achieve inner stillness. He taught the “prayer of the heart” – the Jesus Prayer – that opens us to communion with God. “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me [a sinner].” This prayer, and the communion with God it engenders, is central to our salvation.

First, to clear up a common misunderstanding: the Jesus prayer is not a mantra; in fact, it is the opposite of a mantra. It does not seek dispassion leading to formless absorption of the self into the transcendent consciousness, but rather seeks dispassion and transcendence from the passions and all created things in order to enjoy communion with a concrete person, God in Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Trinity. Unlike a mantra that seeks to clear the mind of all concepts, the Jesus Prayer is the means whereby we humble ourselves before a Person, express faith in that Person, and seek mercy from that Person. It is the antithesis of a mantra.

Unlike modern meditation, the prayer of the heart, the Jesus Prayer, is not just a personal spiritual experience leading to enlightenment; but when practiced along with the divine services, Communion, confession, reading of Scripture, fasting, almsgiving and all the means that our Mother the Church gives us for salvation, it engenders repentance – a change of mind and heart leading to salvation.

It does not violate Jesus’s Matthew 6 proscription of heaping up empty words. Rather, it fulfills his command in Matthew 7: “ask and keep on asking ... seek and keep on seeking ... knock and keep on knocking.” It is like the

persistent widow of Luke 18 whose constant cries for mercy were heard even by the unjust judge. Jesus promises that our Father will hear us when we cry to him “day and night.”

As we “pray without ceasing, as the Apostle Paul commands *all* Christians to do (1 Thessalonians 5:17) [we are] filled from within with the eternal glory, with the divine light [the disciples] beheld at the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor ... it is the duty of all of us Christians to remain always in prayer ... every Christian in general should strive to pray always, and to pray without ceasing ... this very name of our Lord Jesus Christ, constantly invoked by you, will help you to overcome all difficulties, and in the course of time you will become used to this practice and will taste how sweet is the name of the Lord. ... For when we sit down to work with our hands, when we walk, when we eat, when we drink we can always pray mentally and practice this mental prayer—the true prayer pleasing to God.” From <http://ww1.antiochian.org/gregory-palamas>

St. Gregory teaches us that by this prayer, we open our souls to the grace of God, to his uncreate energies in our world. Our communion with God is not participation in his essence, which is transcendent and ineffable, but with his energies. St. Gregory “made a comparison between God and the sun. The sun has its rays, God has His energies (among them, grace and light). By His energies, God creates, sustains, and governs the universe. By His energies, He transforms creation and deifies it, that is, He fills the new creation with His energies as water fills a sponge. These actions or energies of God are the true revelation of God Himself to humanity. So God is incomprehensible and unknowable in His nature or essence, but knowable in His energies. It is through His actions out of His love to the whole creation that God enters into a direct and immediate relationship with mankind, a personal confrontation between creature and Creator.” From <http://ww1.antiochian.org/gregory-palamas>

Barlaam of Calabria, a very learned fourteenth-century Italian scholastic, disputed this hesychastic notion of direct communion with God. All agreed that the essence of God was uncreate and unknowable, but Barlaam claimed that there is no direct human participation in the divine life; the grace by which we apprehend and encounter God is not

God but a created thing. Grace, according to Barlaam, is not God himself, but something created by him and active in the world. When we receive or attain to grace, we do not receive God himself or attain to the divine. In his view, which is the classic view in the West, grace is *from* God and *of* God but is *not* God. We can only know *about* God, and only by logic, study and rational thought. Direct participation in the divine nature, in this view, is impossible.

As a sidenote, this has led to countless private revelatory claims in the West as Christians sought to fill their innate hunger for communion with the divine. This notion of “private revelation” never developed in Orthodoxy because it already believes in the possibility, indeed, the necessity, of participation in the divine life for our very salvation. This has also led to so-called “Christian New Age” heresy, as Christians, knowing in the depth of their being that they were created for participation in divinity, are deceived into believing that we are by nature divine. We are in fact *by nature human*, but *by grace divine*. We *are not by nature* but do in fact *become by grace* the God-man that is Christ.

Barlaam’s contention, that grace is a created thing and not the energies of God in the world, makes our salvation impossible. The Orthodox Church teaches that salvation is participation in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). It *includes* remission of sins and Christ’s atonement, but the Church maintains that salvation is not simply or primarily a juridical concept as proclaimed in the West. Rather, salvation is adoption into the family of God as sons of God (Rom. 8:15), having Christ formed in us (Gal. 4:19), partaking of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4), and living the divine life – becoming by grace what Jesus is by nature, a human “filled with all the fulness of God” (Eph. 3:19). But if grace is created and not the very nature of God himself, then we cannot be “filled with all the fulness of God” because God has not come into our world to fill us. Therefore, Christ cannot be formed in us, we cannot attain to the divine nature, and because salvation is participation in the divine nature, we cannot be saved. This is why an otherwise academic-sounding dispute is critically important to the Church – our Mother knows that if grace is not God then we are not saved, and she raised up a champion to defend the truth. If Barlaam had prevailed against St. Gregory Palamas, the gates of Hell would have prevailed against the Church and the Church would have ceased to be the Church.

But because, as St. Gregory held and the Church maintained, we can in fact participate in and partake of the divine nature by receiving grace and allowing Christ to be formed in us, then grace not only flows *to* us from God,

but *from* us to others. Therefore, we and the world can be saved. That’s why today’s commemoration is so important, why it’s the Second Triumph of Orthodoxy.

How do we embrace this? How do we engage in this Triumph?

Receiving grace requires communion with God. Communion with God isn’t something we can do casually, during the half-time break of a football game, for example. For God to fill us with his grace, we need to be a fitting vessel for the divine energy; otherwise, we will be destroyed by that which was meant to save us. This is serious. God in his mercy does not pour his grace into us if we are unprepared to contain it.

By nature we bear the image of God. We are destined to his likeness. We attain his likeness by our synergistic cooperation with his grace. We are fashioned into what we were always meant to be. As we become like Jesus, we are filled with and partake of the divine nature, as a sponge is filled with water – we are still ourselves but are saturated with the divine; or as iron is heated over the forge – we receive and transmit the divine energies and can be shaped and fashioned into an instrument for God’s use.

This requires strenuous effort and sustained attention. It’s not just something we can just add to our already-full schedule. That’s why we talked before Lent began about deciding what we were NOT going to do, in order to take advantage of the opportunity offered by this holy season. The Church offers us additional services, fasting, augmented Scripture readings, attention to almsgiving, among other tools, to help us make ourselves ready to receive grace and “the Great Mercy” at Pascha and beyond. It’s not too late to re-examine our calendars and rededicate ourselves to the task that lies before us.

Certainly, if we want to be “filled with all the fulness of God,” we need to intentionally and aggressively root out all that has grown in us that is not consonant with the divine life. But more than that, more than simply stopping sinning, we need to examine where we spend our spare time, our discretionary cash. If we’re feeling defensive, asking “what’s wrong with ... whatever” then that might be a sign that something needs to change. Repentance isn’t just about stopping doing the bad things – we shouldn’t be doing them in the first place. Repentance is about reorienting our lives toward the “one thing needful,” the “prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” If something isn’t affirmatively moving me toward that goal, I need to decide whether it’s worth it. May God help us all, giving us strength, fortitude and courage, for our own salvation and the salvation of the world.