

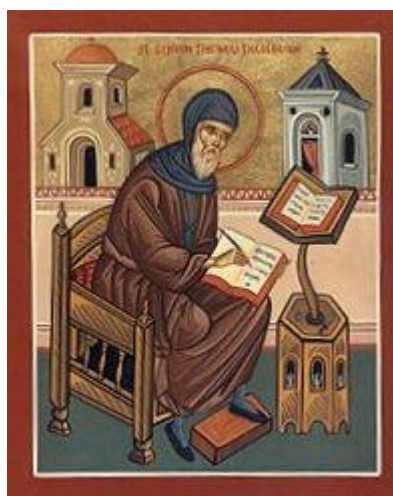
THE MYSTERY OF DEIFICATION AND THE FLAME OF PRAYER IN THE VISION OF SAINT SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN *

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ABSTRACT

Symeon the New Theologian, a “pneumatophore” experienced up to the sublime, lives around the great schism between the Eastern and Western Churches, ordained as if by God to be “a pillar of fire at this tragic crossroad of history to illuminate the future meaning of Orthodoxy”. What stands out in Saint Symeon's thinking is the theology of light, most of his texts containing the leitmotif of “light” or “illumination”. However, from his doctrine it is not to be understood that by contemplating the light the final goal is exhausted, but, on the contrary, that it consists in meeting Christ. Another characteristic teaching of Symeonian theology is that of understanding the love of God. Prayer is also another defining component in the construction of the great Symeonian doctrinal edifice, invariably found in his texts. The purpose of prayer for the New Theologian is both enlightenment and union with God. Mystical experience, inseparable from the path to union, can only be acquired in prayer, by request. In the most general sense of the word, any presence of man before God is a prayer. The fruit of prayer is divine love, which is nothing, but the grace acquired within the being of the soul. Symeon remains a unique case of personal mysticism, but also as an

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important testimony regarding the inescapable tension between all forms of “encystation” and the freedom of the Holy Spirit. By deification or union with God in love is meant the total transfiguration of the human person, through divine grace, without the man becoming God in the literal sense, that is by essence and nature. A mystic of outstanding spiritual states, Symeon believes that the state and quality of a Christian is given by the acquisition of perfection, by the “passion/suffering of deification”. We cannot truly be Christians, the Holy Father teaches, without having had the experience of light, a conscious communion in God. His mysticism is one of sacramental kind, permeated however by the personal event, a mysticism in which personal experiences are integrated into ecclesial, communitarian life.

Keywords: love; enlightenment; grace; mysticism; Holy Spirit; Christ; perfection; deification;

INTRODUCTION

At the threshold where the first Christian millennium faded into the second, when the Eastern Church wrestled to recover the purity of her countenance and to breathe anew the breath of the Spirit, there arose, like an unconsumed bush of fire, a figure both dazzling and troubling, both luminous and burning – the one whom history would remember as St. Symeon the New Theologian, the mystic of fire and light.

He stands, alone yet not solitary, as the third – and indeed the last – to be named Theologian in the undivided Orthodoxy, the Abbot of Constantinople whose voice still reverberates in the trembling chambers of the Eastern soul. A towering witness to the ineffable, St. Symeon is unique among the ascetics and seers of his age, daring to lay bare the sacred wounds of his own visions, to give tongue to the unspeakable, and to confront the ossified forms of institutional religion with the raw immediacy of the Spirit's touch.¹

Born of Paphlagonian stock, he journeyed early to the Queen of Cities, where he wandered among the cloisters of the capital, radiating the hidden wisdom of theology, engraving his epoch with disciples anointed by the fragrance of grace².

Symeon the New Theologian, bearer of the Spirit (“pneumatophorus”) unto the heights of the sublime, found himself poised upon the eve of the tragic sundering of East and West, set by divine providence as a pillar of fire amidst the gathering shadows, that by his life and word he might illumine the secret destiny of Orthodoxy, unveiling its inner heart for the generations to come.³

1. THE THEOLOGY OF SAINT SYMEON: PRAYER

In the twentieth century, which ended more than two decades ago, several theological schools flourished, producing numerous theologians who were true continuators of the Orthodox theological tradition. Among the most prominent figures of twentieth-century Orthodoxy are John Meyendorff, Alexander Schmemmann, Dumitru Stăniloae, George

¹ John MEYENDORFF, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Mysticism*, translated from the French by Angela Pagu; Foreword by Teodor Baconsky (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2007), 54.

² Nikolaos A. MATSOUKAS, *The History of Byzantine Philosophy: with an appendix on Scholasticism in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Pr. Prof. Dr. Constantin Coman, Nicusor Deciu, (București: Bizantină, 2003), 125.

³ Nichifor CRAINIC, *Sfințenia, împlinirea umanului* (curs de teologie mistică), Edited by Ierod. Teodosie Paraschiv, (Iași: Trinitas, 1993), 22.

Florovsky, Ioannis Romanidis, and Justin Popović. It can be said that most authentic Orthodox theologians are “Symeonites”, or, above all, they must be intimately acquainted with the teachings of St. Symeon the New Theologian. Thus, the Church recommends that all theologians, before venturing into the sacred mystery of Orthodoxy, familiarize themselves as deeply as possible with the New Theologian and his doctrines.

What immediately stands out – *prima facie* – in St. Symeon’s thought is the theology of *light*, as many of his writings repeatedly use the terms “light” and “illumination.” However, his doctrine does not suggest that the contemplation of light is the final goal; rather, it leads to the ultimate encounter with Christ Himself.⁴

Although the theme of divine light existed long before St. Symeon in the tradition of Eastern Christianity, the great Constantinopolitan theologian transcends all previous theologies of light, whether those of Evagrius Ponticus, Macarius of Egypt, Maximus the Confessor, or Isaac the Syrian.⁵ For St. Symeon, however, divine light is in no way connected to angels or any other created being or phenomenon; rather, it is God Himself revealed to humanity. Consequently, in many of the writings of this Isihast monk, divine light is identified with the Holy Spirit or with Christ the Savior. Yet, it is never associated with the Mother of God, but only with a single saint – Symeon the Pious – whom he describes as surrounded by light in one of his mystical experiences.⁶

The Knowledge of God's Love in the Mystical Theology of Saint Symeon the New Theologian

One of the most distinctive and transformative dimensions of the theology of Saint Symeon the New Theologian is his radical teaching on the experiential knowledge of God's love. For the Byzantine mystic, the love of God is not an abstract notion, nor merely an object of intellectual assent, but a living, personal, and ineffable reality that can only be truly known through direct, existential encounter and participation.

In Symeon's vision, the divine love is mediated not through external discourses or scholastic treatises but through the living presence and guidance of an *authentic spiritual father*, one who, by personal experience of the uncreated grace, becomes himself a vessel through which the love of God is communicated to the spiritual child. This personal mediation transforms spiritual direction into a *sacramental relationship*, wherein the disciple, through obedience and humility, becomes capable of receiving the *ecstatic knowledge* (*gnosis ekstastike*) that transcends the limits of created intellect and ushers the soul into the luminous sphere of the Holy Spirit.

This pedagogical path is understood by Symeon as a *pilgrimage of the heart*, echoing the anthropological archetype of the *homo viator* articulated later by Gabriel Marcel – man as a being-in-journey, an exile ever seeking the absolute. However, for the Byzantine saint, this journey is not a speculative or moral effort alone but an *ontological exodus from the tyranny of the passions*, from the existential reduction of the human being to the level of instincts, biological drives, and psychological desires. It is, above all, a call to the spiritualization of the whole human being, a pneumatic transfiguration that involves the body, the soul, and the spirit in a synergistic ascent toward the divine.

For Symeon, this process of spiritualization culminates in the *contemplation of the uncreated light*, which is none other than Christ Himself, revealed in the luminous energy of the Holy Spirit. The goal of the journey is not the light as phenomenon, but the *communion*

⁴ Arhid. Constantin VOICU, *Patrologia și literatură patristică*. Vol. III, Basilica, București, 2010, p. 239.

⁵ Metropolitan Hilarion of VOLOKOLAMSK, "Mystical Theology of St. Symeon New Theologian", in *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 7/2, 2015, pp. 3-20.

⁶ Metropolitan Hilarion of VOLOKOLAMSK, "Mystical Theology...", pp. 11-12.

with the personal God, the Logos made flesh, who through His self-emptying love, draws the human being into the *mystery of theosis*, of deification by grace. Thus, the human being, though remaining creature, becomes *participant in the divine life*, entering the paradoxical condition of being “god by grace” (*theos kata charin*), according to the patristic tradition of Saint Athanasius the Great and Saint Gregory Palamas⁷.

This mystical anthropology, deeply rooted in the patristic experience, subverts any reduction of Christianity to moralism or intellectualism. It posits, rather, an existential theology of participation and transfiguration, wherein love is the ontological force that transforms the being of man into the likeness of God, not as an external imitation, but as a real participation in the divine energies.⁸

Prayer occupies a central and indispensable place within the grand edifice of Symeonian theology, emerging as a *sine qua non* of the spiritual life and appearing consistently throughout his writings. For Saint Symeon the New Theologian, prayer is not merely a devotional practice, but the very axis of the human soul's ascent toward God, the space in which humility, repentance, and the illumination by the Holy Spirit are engendered and deepened. In his reflections on *ecclesial prayer*, the saint underscores its primary aim as the cultivation of a heart contrite and humble, open to the descent of the Spirit's grace. Particularly significant is his insistence that when prayer is joined with tears – especially within the context of the Divine Liturgy – it becomes a vessel of immense spiritual fruitfulness, purifying the soul and preparing it for divine visitation. Saint Symeon speaks of the diverse expressions of personal prayer, referring to them as “the prayer of Vespers,” “unceasing prayer,” and “pure and immaterial prayer.” Yet for the New Theologian, prayer – regardless of its form – is never an end in itself nor a mere mechanical recitation of formulas. Rather, it is the living path by which the human heart becomes attuned to the radiant overshadowing of the Holy Spirit and opened to the mystery of union with God.

Of particular note is Symeon's advocacy for the *short prayer of the heart*, uttered not so much with the lips as with the nous – the mind purified and gathered in the depths of the heart. This brief, interior invocation, resonant with the tradition of the **Jesus Prayer**, becomes the privileged path through which the person is progressively enlightened and united with the divine energies, tasting even here and now the foretaste of the *Kingdom of Light*. Prayer forms a cornerstone in the towering edifice of Saint Symeon the New Theologian's doctrinal vision, an element that pulses through his writings with unwavering constancy. When speaking of ecclesial prayer, Saint Symeon makes plain its sacred aims: the acquisition of humility, the wellspring of repentance, and the radiant illumination of the Holy Spirit. If such prayer is crowned with tears during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, it becomes fertile ground for spiritual transformation.

Beyond liturgical devotion, Symeon evokes the quiet forms of prayer, the “prayer of Vespers,” the “unceasing supplication,” the “pure and immaterial prayer, each a thread in the soul's tapestry of communion with God. For the saint, the telos of all prayer – whether uttered within the assembly or whispered in the solitude of the cell – is one and the same: enlightenment and union with the divine. It is not length, but depth that matters. Thus, he

⁷ Cf. Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione Verbi*, 54: “God became man that man might become god.” See also Gregory Palamas, *Triads*, II, iii, 8.

⁸ See Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), pp. 67-70. Also, John Anthony MCGUCKIN, “Symeon the New Theologian's Hymns of Divine Eros: A Neglected Masterpiece of the Christian Mystical Tradition,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 5, no. 2 (2005), p. 194.

advocates for a short prayer, one born not of the lips, but of the mind illumined by grace⁹. To Symeon, the direct experience of the Holy Spirit in the heart is a mystery that transcends language, a fire not captured by speech, but sensed by the soul and body with a vividness surpassing reason. This encounter must not remain veiled or abstract; it is something to be fully and consciously perceived by the one in whom the Spirit dwells. In expressing this sacred indwelling, Saint Symeon turns to feminine imagery – rich, evocative, and deeply rooted in the mystical traditions of both Greek and Syriac Christianity. He speaks of the saints as breasts of divine nourishment, pouring forth the righteousness of God to those who hunger and thirst, offering them the bread that sustains even the hosts of heaven.¹⁰

In the *Fourth Ethical Discourse*, St. Symeon speaks of Christ Himself appearing as “a breast of light, placed in the mouth of their intellect to suckle them.”¹¹ These are clear echoes of the Pauline idea of the spiritual milk so necessary to “spiritual infants,” suggesting that only when Christians are somewhat more advanced in their spiritual development can they digest the “strong meat” of more difficult teaching. Writing to the Corinthian church, the Apostle Paul said: “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not with meat; for you could not yet eat, and still cannot” (1 Cor 3:1-2).

Saint Symeon has often been regarded as a prominent representative of the hesychast tradition within Byzantium, standing in the lineage of Evagrius Ponticus and Macarius of Egypt, and anticipating the theology of Saint Gregory Palamas. However, this classification must be approached with certain reservations. Symeon makes no explicit reference to the prayer of the intellect (noetic prayer), nor does he elaborate any clearly formulated theological distinction between *ousia* and *energeia*, or between the divine essence and grace. Nevertheless, it is abundantly clear that Symeon upholds the essential understanding of Christianity as a personal communion with God and as a vision of Him, an attitude he shares with hesychasm and, indeed, with the entire patristic tradition.

The mystical experience, which is inseparable from the path to union, can only be acquired in *prayer*, by petition. In the most general sense of the word, any human presence before God is prayer. But this presence must become a constant attitude, always awake; prayer must become permanent, unceasing like the breath, like the beating of the heart. This requires a special mastery, a technique of prayer, a whole spiritual science to which monks devote themselves entirely. The method of interior prayer or prayer of the mind, known as “hesychasm”, belongs to the ascetic tradition of the Eastern Church and undoubtedly dates to ancient times. Transmitted orally from teacher to disciple, by example and spiritual guidance, this teaching of interior prayer was not set down in writing until the beginning of the 11th century, in a treatise attributed to St. Symeon.¹²

The fruit of prayer is divine *love*, which is nothing other than the grace acquired within the being of the soul. Love is not of this world, being the name of God Himself. For this reason, it is undeniable, according to St. John the Poor Clare: “The words of love are known to the angels” – he says – “and they know them by the measure of their enlightenment.” “You have wounded my soul, O love, and my heart cannot suffer your

⁹ Arhiep. Basile KRIVOCHINE, *In the Light of Christ. St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022): Life, Spirituality, Teaching*, EIBMBOR, Bucharest, 1997, pp. 88-89.

¹⁰ Alexander GOLITZIN, *St. Symeon The New Theologian: On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses*. Vol. 1, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995, p. 43.

¹¹ Alexander GOLITZIN, *St Symeon the New Theologian...*, p. 20.

¹² Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Preface by Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Introductory study and translation from the French by Vasile Răducă, Anastasia, Bucharest, 1993, pp. 220-221.

flames. I go forth singing to thee.¹³ Acquired through *asceticism* and *love*, through *repentance* and *tears*, the divine light makes its presence felt in the soul of the Christian, *in a state of pure and uncorrupted, unceasing and ecstatic prayer*. In his famous *Catechesis 22*, the Saint describes his first experience of being caught up in the divine light, in a state of prayer, attributing it to a certain George: “So he stood one day and said more with his mind than with his mouth, ‘God, have mercy on me a sinner.’” (Lk. 18:13), suddenly a divine radiance crowned him from on high and filled the whole place. And when it happened, the young man did not know and forgot whether he was in a house or under a roof. For from everywhere he saw only light, and did not know whether he walked on the earth. There was no longer in him any fear lest he should fall, nor care of the world, none of those things that pervade men who are in the flesh assailed his thoughts, but being altogether with the immaterial light, and seeming to himself that he had become light, and forgetting the whole world, he became full of tears and joy and joy and joy unveiled. Then his mind was lifted up to heaven, and he saw a clearer light than the one that was near him”¹⁴.

After several alternations of showings and forsakings, the decisive moment arrives: he discovers that in the light Christ begins to speak to him: “Then for the first time you counted me worthy, the lost one, to hear your voice”¹⁵. Yet the most profound revelation was this: Christ does not speak from outside the soul. “I knew that I possessed You consciously within myself.”¹⁶ The sign of His indwelling presence was the love that stirred at the very core of my being, “the hidden love I bore within me... yes, Love itself. Behold, this is truly who You are, O God!”¹⁷

We reach here one of the most important moments in the mystical development of St. Symeon. He begins to realize with certainty that it is not himself, the “poor lover of the brethren”, but Christ, the true treasure, who loves people in Symeon's heart. It is what is called experiential knowledge of God in ourselves. “And it is not of myself,” St. Symeon continues, “that I speak thus, but the Treasure himself has said: I am the resurrection and the life, I am the grain of wheat buried in the ground, I am the pearl bought by the faithful I am the shining spring of the river of immortal water, in which not after death, but in every hour, those who love Me with all their soul bathe themselves in the water flowing from Me and cleanse their body and soul from every stain, and then they shine like a lamp and a sunbeam”¹⁸

The theological emphasis in St. Symeon's time was more than anything on “living and experiencing God in prayer.” And here we must emphasize a fact that is more than revelatory for Symeonian theology, for the great scholar links authentic knowledge with *light, prayer* and *contemplation*: “And when you hear of the ‘light of knowledge,’ that you may be enlightened in all things, do not suppose that it is only the knowledge of what is said without light. For he did not speak only of the story or of the word of knowledge, but of the “light of knowledge” or of the “knowledge of light”, that is, of the fact that light brings knowledge into us. For otherwise no one can know God except in the sight (contemplation)

¹³ St. John CLIMACUS, *Scala Paradisi*, gr. XXX, P.G., vol. 88, col. 1156 A. Romanian translation: *Scara, in Filocalia sfintelor nevointe ale desăvârșirii*, vol. IX, by Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, EIBMBOR, Bucharest, 1980.

¹⁴ St. SYMEON the New Theologian, *Catechesis 22, Faith Leading to Enlightenment*, in vol. cit., p. 242. From the very beginning of his conversion, St. Symeon sought neither rules of life nor abstract ideas about the Divinity but learned to “listen to the voice of his conscience”, prolonging his nightly prayers with youthful zeal.

¹⁵ Action de Grace, ... Tomáš Špidlík, p. 248.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 248, n. 281.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, n. 282.

¹⁸ *Catechesis 34*, 305-342. T. Špidlík, n. 283.

of the light sent from Him. When one tells a man or a city, he speaks to them of that which he has seen and beheld, and those who listen, because they have not seen the man or the city of whom they hear, cannot know by hearing alone what pertains to that man or that city, as he who has seen and tells. In the same way no one can speak of the Jerusalem which is above, and of the invisible God who dwells in it, and of his glory and person, and of the work and power of the Most Holy Spirit, and therefore of the light, unless he first sees the light itself with the eyes of the soul, and knows exactly his illuminations and works in himself. But even when he hears from the Holy Scriptures those who have seen God speaking through them, it is only by the Holy Spirit that he is taught about them. Therefore, neither can he say that he has known God by this hearing alone. For how can he know who has not seen him? If sight alone produces in us the perfect knowledge of him who is seen by us men, how can hearing alone produce in us the knowledge of God? God is light, and the sight of him is like a light. In the sight of the light, then, is given to us the first knowledge that there is a God, just as with regard to man, first it is the hearing of him, then the sight of him, and in the sight of him is given the knowledge that there is the man of whom we have heard.”¹⁹

In Symeon's theology, a special place was given to the “Jesus’ prayer”, whose classic content is “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me!” Recalling these exercises of prayer, St. Symeon calls them “silent practices.” Thus, in his autobiographical narrative, St. Symeon speaks of the “little recommendation” that George had received from his spiritual father, and which probably concerned the way of praying, since it is distinct from the spiritual reading guidance that his spiritual father had also recommended to him: “Wherefore also tears flowed from his eyes every evening, and he kneeled still more often and fell on his face to the ground, and having his feet close together and standing still, he would earnestly read his prayers to the Mother of God with sighs and tears, and as the Lord Himself was bodily before Him, so he fell before His most holy feet and asked that the blind man also might be merciful and see with his soul. But as the prayer continued every evening until midnight, in the hour of prayer he did not grow faint or slumber, nor did he move any of the members of his body, not even turning his eyes or looking, but stood still, as a pillar or as one joined to the body.”²⁰

Prayer occupies a central place in Symeon's spirituality. He speaks about it constantly in his writings, although he does not do so in a systematic and theoretical way and does not give us the “scientific method” of how it should be done. On the contrary, he speaks to us in a concrete and vivid way about the different kinds of prayer, their particularities, their content, and shows us how he himself prayed. By his attitude, he did not limit himself to short prayers, but in the numerous prayers he left us, which are particularly eloquent and convincing, he impresses us by his sincerity, by his sudden passages from the deepest repentance to visions in impenetrable fearlessness. And, above all, St. Symeon shows in his prayers that the loving God is ready to respond to the sinner's call and welcome him into his kingdom. Typically, then, St. Symeon teaches us to pray by his own personal example.²¹

¹⁹ Apud Constantin PĂTULEANU, "Ce fel de cunoaștere a lui Dumnezeu promovăm azi?", in *Dialogul religiilor în Europa unită*, Iulia Badea-Guéritée and Alexandru Ojică (cordon.), pref.: Sorin Bocancea, Iași: Adenium, 2015, p. 286

²⁰ St. SYMEON the New Theologian, *Catechesis* 22..., pp. 238-239.

²¹ Pr. Dr. Florin IONICĂ, "Prayer to Saint Symeon the New Theologian", in *Ziarul Lumina*, 23 June 2022. SEE <https://ziarulumina.ro/actualitate-religioasa/an-omagial/rugaciunea-la-sfantul-simeon-noul-teolog-172436.html>

2. MYSTICISM OR THE PROCESS OF HUMAN PERFECTION IN ST. SYMEON

St. Symeon is part of the “pneumatological explosion of Byzantine spirituality”.²² For despite the violent attacks on which he was targeted, monasticism remains at the center of Byzantine spiritual life and civilization. It underwent different trends due to the influence of certain personalities and their writings, but Byzantine spirituality was to be formed around two great monastic trends: that of *Sinai* and that of *Studion* in Constantinople. While the Sinai monks always insisted on the *charismatic* character of the monk, on radical separation from the world, advocating complete spiritual freedom, the transcendence of God, and the personal spontaneity of the monk, Constantinopolitan monasticism would become the cradle of neo-Vasilian monasticism, exclusively cenobitic, active, socially active. Byzantine spirituality will develop in such a spiritual tension and in this effervescence will appear the great charismatic bearer of two traditions, which he integrates and complements Symeon the New Theologian.²³

“You are familiar only with the life of Symeon the New Theologian, which is almost entirely a miracle and was glorified by God through wonders beyond nature. You know his writings, which, if one were to call them writings of life, would not be mistaken,” wrote St. Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) in the spring of 1338, at the end of the second treatise of his *first Triad* in Defense of Those Who Practice Sacred Hesychia (*hyper ton hierōs hēsychazontōn*)²⁴. In this treatise, he offered his first apologia for the Athonite monks’ method of focusing the mind within the body – more precisely, in the heart – through the practice of breath united with the Jesus Prayer. This marked the first mention of St. Symeon the New Theologian’s name after nearly three centuries of public oblivion. For it must be noted that, although fiercely contested even during his earthly life, the person and work of the “New Theologian” were rediscovered and brought back into circulation by Athonite monks, both during the hesychastic flourishing of the 13th-14th centuries and during the Philokalic revival of the late 18th and early 20th centuries.

What forms a more special note in the saint's concern is the particularly strong emphasis on feeling, conscience, light and love. All these are related to one another, but also to the whole teaching of the Fathers on the purgation of the passions, or the virtues which culminate in fearlessness and love of God and in “seeing” him.

Many have criticized St. Symeon's assertion that any Christian who wants to be saved must attain to sanctification or the consciousness of the grace present in him since Baptism. Catholic theologians, although they became more sympathetic to this affirmation after the first decades of the last century, considering it to be in line with a current of sentimental spirituality represented by Diadoch, Mark Asceticus, Macarius²⁵, nevertheless, at least some of them, have certain reservations about its validity for all Christians.

But if we bear in mind that, according to St. Symeon, the “feeling” or “sight” (contemplation) of God comes to man as he is cleansed from his sins, what Christian is not bound to be in need for the remission of his sins, as a condition for salvation? In any case,

²² J.-P. RENNETEAU, Jean MARCADET, “Byzantine mysticism”, in Marie-Madeleine DAVY, *Encyclopaedia of Mystical Doctrines. Creștinism occidental, ezoterism, Protestantism, Islam*, vol. 2, coord. trans. Adriana Babeți and Eugen Dorcescu, Amacord, Timișoara, 1998, pp. 30 sqq.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 31.

²⁴ *Triads* I, 2, 12; Gregoriou tou Palama *Syngrammata*, Thessaloniki, 1963, p. 404; trans. Prof. D. STĂNILOAE, *Life and Teaching of St. Gregory Palamas*, Sibiu, 1938, p. X.

²⁵ Irinee HAUSHERR, *Les grands courants de la spiritualité orientale*, in: “Orientalia Christiana Periodica”, I, 1935, p. 126.

this is a teaching proper to Orthodoxy, unlike Protestantism, which considers that man is saved by faith alone, without any effort to come out of the state of sin, and unlike, to some extent, even Catholicism, in which the effort of purification is quite unappreciated.²⁶

Like all prophets or charismatics, he gives expression to Christian living, but without any obstinate preoccupation with theorizing or precise terminology. It is therefore not difficult to find him at odds with any fixed tradition or theological system. Symeon remains a unique case of *personal mysticism*, but also as an important witness to the inescapable tension in Christianity between all forms of 'imprisonment' and freedom of the Spirit.²⁷

Deification, or union with God in love, refers to the total transfiguration of the human person through divine grace without implying that the human being becomes God in a literal sense, that is, in essence or nature. This distinction is clearly emphasized by St. Symeon: "And while remaining what we are, we become Your sons by grace, like unto You (1 John 3:2), gods who behold God."²⁸ And elsewhere: "Through communion with God, I too become wholly god in a felt and conscious way (*en aisthesei kai gnōsei*), not by essence (*ousia*), but by participation (*metousia*). For just as God was born as a man in the flesh without change and was seen by all, so also He gives birth to me in an inexpressible and spiritual manner, and while I remain a man, He makes me god."²⁹

For St. Symeon, as indeed for the entire Orthodox patristic tradition, the source and foundation of deification is the Incarnation; in other words, the Incarnation's very purpose is human deification. This marks a pivotal point in the symbolic and comparative evaluation of the two great Christian spiritual traditions: unlike the Orthodox patristic view, Western Christian anthropology holds that "the purpose of Christ's Incarnation is not deification, but rather the reconciliation of man with God through Christ's substitutionary sacrifice on the Cross, which satisfied the infinite majesty and justice of God, offended by sin. The goal of Christian existence is to attain, through morally meritorious deeds, a sanctifying supernatural 'grace' (created!), by which, in the afterlife, the human being will reach the blessedness of the intellectual vision of the divine essence(!)."³⁰

Extraordinarily related to the fabulous Eastern concept of *theosis* is that St. Symeon was not only convinced of the identity between his mystical, mystical experience and that of the saints of all time, but, moreover, without this inner certainty, he could never have written anything and would never have considered it authentic, fully Orthodox. He lived as a living member of the Church, fully convinced of his place within the infinite connections that bind us to one another³¹ and, at the same time, aware of his own powerlessness and personal ignorance.

²⁶ Pr. Prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, in *Introduction to SYMEON the New Theologian*, pp. 12-13.

²⁷ John MEYENDORFF, *Byzantine Theology. Tendențe istorice și teme doctrinare*, trans. de Preot Conf. Dr. Alexandru Stan, Ed. IBMBOR, Bucharest, 1996, pp. 99-100.

²⁸ St. SYMEON The Theologian, *Hymns, Epistles and Chapters. Scrieri III*, Erosurile imnes hymnes of God, 15, introduction and translation: diac. Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis, Sibiu, 2001, p. 93.

²⁹ *Hymns, Epistles and Chapters...*, The Eros of the Divine Hymns, 50, p. 263.

³⁰ V. Deac. Ioan I. Ică Jr., "The 'Deification' of Man, P. Nellas and the Conflict of Anthropologies," in Panayotis Nellas, *Man – A Deified Animal: Perspectives for an Orthodox Anthropology*, 4th ed., intro. study and trans. by Deac. Ioan I. Ică Jr., Deisis Publishing, Sibiu, 2009, p. 18.

³¹ If Father Professor Dumitru Stăniloae used the image of a "net of knots" (*plasa de ochiuri*) to illustrate the manifold interconnections between human persons (cf. Fr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. I, 2nd ed., EIBMBOR, Bucharest, 1996, p. 202), Father Octavian Picioruș proposes the image of an endless network of computers, with countless, unsuspected connections, all linked to the same source of energy. The members of the Church are all connected to the life of the Holy Trinity, from which divine grace flows. If someone is connected to grace, cabled, so to speak, into the life of the Trinity, then he will feel the

A mystic of exceptional spiritual states, St. Symeon considers that the state and quality of Christianity is given by the acquisition of perfection, by the “suffering of the deification”. “We cannot be truly Christian, teaches the Holy Father, without having had the experience of light, a conscious communion in God”³². In the Christian life, the experience of light is a sign of the high Christian virtues, of the attainment of the fearless state. Accompanied by ecstasy, by the fire and flame of the Spirit, the experience of uncreated light is a sign of the holiness of life.

The experience of light is personal, having the character of an existential communion with Christ.³³ For Symeon the New Theologian, coexistence with the divine light is equivalent to the “suffering of deification” (*pathimata theōseōs*). This ineffable union is realized consciously “in knowledge and in feeling, in experience and in vision.” In those moments, the human being becomes a “created god”, human by nature, but god by the grace of the God who loves humankind³⁴.

Another aspect of mystical living and fulfillment is related to the person of the Holy Spirit. According to St. Symeon, “we say that the Holy Spirit is sent or given, but this does not at all mean that He remains alien to the will of His mission. Indeed, the Holy Spirit, one of the persons of the Holy Trinity, fulfills through the Son what the Father wills, as if this were His will, for the Holy Trinity is undivided in its nature, substance and will”³⁵. The divine Persons do not assert themselves independently, but each bears witness to the other. This is why St. John of Damascus could say that “the Son is the image of the Father, and the Spirit the image of the Son.”³⁶ This implies that the third hypostasis of the Trinity is the only one whose image is not reflected in another Person. The Holy Spirit remains unrevealed as Person – hidden, even in His very manifestation. Precisely for this reason, the New Theologian, in his hymns dedicated to divine love, praises Him through the apophatic traits of a hidden Person who cannot be known:

”Come, true Light.
Come, eternal Life.
Come, hidden Mystery.
Come, nameless Treasure.

same power and the same divine working as his predecessors or his contemporaries who are likewise connected to that grace. For this reason, Symeon feels himself plugged into the very life of God: for God manifests His glory within his being. He senses how grace operates in him, how he is sanctified through his own experiences and thoughts, and he recognizes that his experience is not singular, but shared – it is present in the Saints who came before him and in all the living members of the Church who are conscious of the grace within them. Fr. Dr. Dorin Octavian PICIORUȘ, *The Vision of God in the Theology of Saint Symeon the New Theologian* (doctoral thesis), *Teologie pentru Azi*, Bucharest, 2009, p. 120.

³² Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Sight of God*, trans. by Maria Cornelia Oros, *Introductory study* by deac. Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis, Sibiu, p. 130.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 135.

³⁴ St. SYMEON the New Theologian, *The Eros of Divine Hymns*. 30. *To one of the disciples...*, p. 188.

³⁵ Homily 62. The Works of St. Symeon the New Theologian were published in Smyrna in 1886. This edition being nowhere to be found, Krumbacher confesses that he never came across it (*Geschichte der byzantinischen Litteratur*, ed. 2, Munich, 1897, p. 194). I quote Symeon from a Russian translation by Bishop Theophan, 2nd ed. at the Russian Monastery of St. Panteleimon on Mount Athos, Moscow, 1892). Several hymns were published in *Vie spirituelle*, XXVII, 2 and 3; XXVIII, 1 (1931, May-July), in Mrs. Lot-Borodine's translation. St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Theological and Ethical Discourses. Writings I; Catecheses. Writings II; Hymns, Epistles and Chap. Writings III*, introd. e trad. de diac. Ioan I. Ică jr., Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, Sibiu, 2001, resp. 2003.

³⁶ St. John DAMASCENE, *De fide orthodoxa*, I, 13, P.G., vol. 94, col. 856.

Come, ineffable Reality.
Come, Person beyond all knowledge.
Come, unceasing Joy!
Come, Light without evening.
Come, Hope that seeks to save all.
Come, Resurrection of the dead.
Come, O Mighty One, who by Your will fulfill, transform, and transfigure all things.
Come, Invisible One, utterly untouchable and intangible.
Come, You who remain ever unmoved,
And yet in every moment move and come to us who lie in the depths of Hades.
You are above the heavens.
Your Name – so longed for, so often invoked – no one can say what it is.
No one can know who You are, of what nature or in what manner
For this is impossible.
Come, crown that never withers.
Come, O You whom my poor soul has loved and continues to love.
Come, You who have separated me from all things
And made me solitary in this world,
You who Yourself became desire within me,
Who willed that I should long for You
You, the utterly inaccessible.
Come, breath and life of mine,
Consolation of my humble heart.”³⁷

This evocative invocation, rich in apophatic imagery, lies at the heart of Saint Symeon the New Theologian’s mystical theology. It reflects the inner experience of the hesychast, in whom the uncreated grace of God becomes a tangible, transformative presence, not abstract, but intensely personal. The prayer does not describe the Holy Spirit in positive, dogmatic terms, but rather through paradox and negation, in the tradition of *apophatic theology* (theologia apophatikē), which emphasizes that God, in His essence, transcends all conceptual knowledge and language. In this context, the Holy Spirit is invoked as the One who reveals Himself by remaining hidden, who approaches while remaining beyond reach – “the Person beyond all knowledge,” whose name is “so longed for, so often invoked,” yet ultimately unknowable. The Spirit is both the *divine eros* and the response to it, both the gift and the Giver of union. His presence is not defined by rational understanding, but by *experience* (*en aisthesei kai gnosei*), by spiritual sensation and contemplative vision, in the very heart of the one who prays. Symeon’s language mirrors the hesychast tradition of Mount Athos, in which prayer becomes encounter, and theology becomes doxology. The Spirit is the Breath, the Life, the Consolation, the One who dwells within and draws the soul upward into divine communion. This solitude Symeon describes is not abandonment, but divine election: the radical setting-apart of the soul for intimacy with God, who “has willed that I should long for You.” In Symeon’s vision, deification (*theōsis*) is not metaphor, but existential participation in the mystery of the Trinity, wherein the Spirit leads the soul into union with Christ, the Image of the Father, making the human person, by grace, a “created god.”

The Holy Spirit imparts Himself to persons, sealing each member of the Church with the mark of a personal and unique relationship with the Trinity, becoming present in every

³⁷ P.G., vol. 120, col. 507-509. See also, *The Eroses of the Divine Hymns*, in St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns, Epistles and Chapters. Writings III*, pp. 49-50.

person. How does this happen? That remains a mystery, the mystery of the descent, the *kenosis* of the Holy Spirit who comes into the world. If, in the *kenosis* of the Son, the divine Person became visible while divinity remained hidden beneath the “form of a servant,” in the coming of the Holy Spirit, the common nature of the Trinity is revealed, while His personal identity is veiled beneath divinity. He remains undisclosed, hidden by the gift, so that the gift He bestows may become fully ours, appropriated by our very persons³⁸. In one of his hymns, Symeon glorifies the Holy Spirit, who unites Himself with us in a mysterious way, granting us the fullness of divinity:

“I thank You, for You, divine Being above all beings, have become one spirit with me – without confusion, without change – and have become for me everything in all: Ineffable food, freely given, pouring from the lips into my soul, flowing abundantly from the fountain of my heart; The radiant garment that covers me and protects me, and which burns the demons; The cleansing that washes me from all defilement through these holy and unceasing tears which Your presence grants to those into whom You enter. I thank You that You have revealed Yourself to me, like the day without evening, like the sun that never sets, O You who have no place to hide; For You have never hidden Yourself: You have never scorned anyone, but rather, it is we who hide ourselves, unwilling to come toward You.”³⁹

Although he is among the very few Eastern mystics who have described the most secret personal experiences of their spiritual lives, Symeon the New Theologian imparts to all these mystical experiences a *sacramental* dimension. His mysticism is a sacramental mysticism, deeply permeated by the personal event, a mysticism in which personal experiences are integrated into ecclesial, communal life.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

St. Symeon the New Theologian is a mystic of experience. He is a visionary pneumatophorus who, throughout his teaching, shares his own contemplation. Above all, as a spiritual master, he is a spiritual father who seeks to guide others toward the light, for the entire Christian life is oriented toward contemplation insofar as it becomes more conscious. Perhaps what is most striking about the great Byzantine mystic’s personality is precisely that he was a spiritual father.

For love – about which he spoke so extensively in his writings – to reach the mystical life, it must be preceded by asceticism. The vision to which Symeon appeals is not achieved by the

³⁸ This interpretation follows the theological tradition of the hidden yet active presence of the Holy Spirit within the ecclesial body, as emphasized by the Orthodox understanding of *kenosis* and divine economy. See also Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. I, București: EIBMBOR, 1996, pp. 280–285.

³⁹ Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns of Divine Love*, trans. into English from the Greek by George A. Maloney, S.J., in *Symeon the New Theologian: The Discourses*, Paulist Press, 1980; for the Romanian critical edition, see: Deac. Ioan I. ICĂ Jr., St. Symeon The Theologian, *Hymns, Epistles and Chapters. Scrieri III*, Deisis, Sibiu, 2001.

⁴⁰ His teaching regarding the perception of the presence and activity of the divine light within the soul is closely connected to the importance he places on the Holy Sacrament of Baptism as the gateway to Christian life. For him, the revelation of the divine light means nothing other than the full actualization of the gifts that the soul has received through Baptism and Chrismation. Christ is present potentially within the Christian’s soul. See Fr. Ioan TEȘU, “The Experience of Divine Light in Saint Symeon the New Theologian,” (Experierea luminii dumnezeiești la Sfântul Simeon Noul Teolog), in *Scientific Annals of the ‘Al. I. Cuza’ University of Iași*, New Series, vol. IX, 2004, p. 170.

ascetic's effort alone but is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who is from the very beginning the essential enlivener of the inner life, who "...revives and causes to revive with Him the dead souls through will and faith." Thus, the vision of Christ begins even here and now, and "we do not wait for the end to see Him, but we already struggle to contemplate Him."⁴¹

The *mystical life* is inseparable from the existential encounter with Christ, from ontological participation in Him through communion with His divinized Body. In the prayers preparing for the Eucharist, Symeon says: "He who partakes of the divine and deifying Gifts is not alone, but with You... with fire I partake, though I am dry grass, and – strange wonder! – I am refreshed, not burned, like the bush of old which, though aflame, was not consumed."⁴² Thus, through receiving Christ, the Spirit is also received. Prophecy is rooted in the sacramental institution.

St. Symeon suggestively concludes his *Hymns of divine love* with Hymn 58, in which he speaks of the light of Christ, in whom will be all the people of good faith, who have been taught by bishops and priests in a happy communion. Then, emphasizes Fr. Stăniloae, all those in the kingdom of light will fully and satisfactorily understand God and everyone and everything, for "all will know all things, but they will be eternally deepened in the unending divine mystery which is their foundation. All shall be to them all light and in the light, but a light and in a light in which they shall not cease to go forward."⁴³

The nickname of *the New Theologian*, given by his disciples, makes him a true renovator of the mystical life, which leads directly to the anticipated participation in the Kingdom, the final Christian's final deification.

In his time, St. Symeon was not only a great monk, but, more than anything else, a great theologian. "The true theologian is not the person who can speak eloquently about the profound things of God. Rather, the true theologian is the person who embodies that understanding of God in prayer and holiness. In other words, a true theologian is not one who speaks of God from mere theoretical understanding, but one who knows Him through lived experience and inner communion. I wonder what would happen to the Church if we shared Evagrius' conviction that, *If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian.* (On Prayer, 61) (Εἰ θεολόγος εἶ, προσεύξῃ ἀληθῶς, καὶ εἰ εἰ ἀληθῶς προσεύξῃ, θεολόγος εἶ.) What would the Church look like if all our leaders were of this kind of praying theologian? If all our scholars embodied this kind of saint? If all our pastors had this kind of relationship with God? I've come to believe that you can't give what you don't have. You cannot teach me how to become what you are not already. So as a pastor, how can I teach people to pray if I'm not praying yet? How can I teach people how to be holy if I am not already holy, or at least on the right path?"⁴⁴

Forgotten for many centuries, Symeon the New Theologian reemerged in Byzantine monasticism only in the 14th century (from which date also the oldest manuscripts of his *Life* originate), coinciding with the canonization of Athonite Hesychasm by the charismatic hesychasts who became bishops in 1347.⁴⁵ His cult was revived only at the end of the 18th century, along with the renewal of Neo-Hesychasm linked to the publication of the

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2, p. 381.

⁴² *The Rite of Holy Communion*, The Seventh Prayer of St. Symeon the New Theologian, in *Liturgikon* (*Liturghier*), Bucharest, EIBMBOR, 2012, pp. 359-361.

⁴³ Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Jesus Christ, the Light of the World and the Deifying of Man*, Anastasia, Bucharest, 1993, p. 285.

⁴⁴ See <http://laurenporter.wordpress.com/2011/02/25/what-makes-you-a-theologian>

⁴⁵ The oldest manuscripts of Symeon's *Life* date to the 14th century, coinciding with the canonization of Athonite Hesychasm by the charismatic hesychasts elevated to episcopacy in 1347.

Philokalia.⁴⁶ In Orthodox consciousness, the image of Symeon as an “urban hesychast” (Kallistos Ware) has taken hold and continues to dominate to this day.⁴⁷ However, this image has been retouched and corrected through a reception filter that has omitted the theologically or canonically disputable points from his spiritual thought.⁴⁸

No matter how highly Saint Symeon was esteemed as a spiritual writer, especially among monks, and from the 20th century onward also among laity, the Orthodox consciousness has not accepted either the equation of sainthood with extraordinary mystical charisms or the identification of grace with the feeling of it, nor the reservation of the theology and reception of confession solely to charismatic monks.⁴⁹ In other words, the enthusiastic positions, considered excessive for the social and communal order of the Church, were tacitly set aside or, more precisely, internalized in a “hesychast” style.⁵⁰

At the cost of these few reductions and hagiographic disguises already operated by his first biographer, the *Life of Saint Symeon the New Theologian* has reached us not as a scandal or a chapter of Byzantine heresiology, but as “almost entirely a miracle⁵¹,” and his writings have been read, and continue to be read, not so much as a canon of dogmatic and canonical Orthodoxy, but certainly as “writings of Life.”⁵²

For Saint Simeon, knowing God is no mere pastime of the mind, nor a cold, dry abstraction. It springs forth from the very depths of a soul that has been touched, healed, and freed from ancient wounds by the boundless grace flowing from the ocean of divine love. With humble gratitude, he confesses that his experience was a living encounter with this infinite love for humanity, an ocean immeasurable by any human standard. Though the water tasted may be but a single drop, though the vast sea seems forever beyond reach, that taste remains the ocean itself. It is not the quantity, but the essence and the truth of the experience that hold sway. The thirsty seeker of the Absolute cannot drink the entire ocean, but in a sacred moment, can still savor its infinitude. And this pure, perfect taste kindles within him an ever-deepening thirst, an ardent longing to plunge further into this limitless draught.

The strength of this sacred optimism springs from the undeniable authenticity of the encounter with God. No matter how small or fleeting our capacities may be, the experience of God bestowed upon the heart is steadfast and true. The enduring nature of this experience, coupled with the promise of infinite growth, is the very essence of grace. To grasp the mystic’s sense of this infinite divine ocean is to understand deeply that grace is inseparable from the very being of God Himself. Thus, with humility and joy, we “swim” alongside the saints in the same boundless ocean of God’s love, united forever in the mystery of grace that enfolds us eternally.

⁴⁶ The revival of Symeon’s cult is linked to the 18th-century renewal of Neo-Hesychasm following the publication of the *Philokalia*.

⁴⁷ Kallistos WARE, *The Orthodox Way*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995, p. 129.

⁴⁸ The reception of Symeon’s theology often omits or softens points that are theologically or canonically controversial.

⁴⁹ Orthodox tradition refrains from equating sainthood strictly with mystical charisms or from restricting theological knowledge and confession to charismatic monks.

⁵⁰ Enthusiastic mystical positions deemed socially excessive were tacitly internalized in a hesychast style. See Rev. Alexandru I. ROȘU, *The Experience of Grace in the Theology of Saint Simeon the New Theologian (Experiența harului în teologia Sfântului Simeon Noul Teolog)*, Eikon Bucharest, 2023.

⁵¹ Diac. Ioan I. ICĂ jr., “The Life of Saint Simeon the New Theologian and his Era”, in *St. Simeon the New Theologian, Life and Era. Writings IV*, Deisis Publishing, Sibiu, 2006, p. 104.

⁵² His writings continue to be read primarily as spiritual and existential texts rather than strict dogmatic canons.

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