



LIBERATION FROM THE PASSIONS, VIRTUE, SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE, AND THE VISION OF THE UNCREATED LIGHT

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ABSTRACT

Saint Gregory Palamas declares that there is a knowledge of God through the mind, which is the affirmative theology derived from created things; and there is one beyond the mind, through the negation of everything. Finally, there is a third, superior to the first two, through union. The knowledge through the negation of everything is also considered by Saint Gregory Palamas to be beyond the mind, because some benefit from it on the basis of their experience of God, while others, although they have not raised the eye of the soul beyond the mind to union with God, listen in faith to the former. Faith is also an eye of vision beyond the mind, although not of a direct vision, but of a mediated one. In practicing negative theology, it does not remain a mere rational exercise, nor does it stop at the notion of an impersonal pantheistic absolute in the Neoplatonic sense but believes in the personal God expressed through negation. Only in a personal God can one believe. Only faith in a personal God is properly faith. It is an interpersonal act. It is an act of trust, a moral act, an act of love. Whoever believes in a person is in a personal relationship with that person. Faith comes to him through an action of that person upon him. Faith sees the Person of God because it is helped by a power beyond his mind, which comes to him from Him. Saint Palamas thus built a bridge between the vision or experience of God and rational negative theology, Christianizing the latter, that is, helping it to know God not as an impersonal incomprehensible reality, but as a personal incomprehensible reality. The divine incomprehensible is also known in moments of rational negative theologizing. Even this requires faith. Man is therefore free to choose, without any constraint, the means most suitable for accomplishing the good; he is even free to choose between good and evil. "The sphere of human freedom is so vast that it contains the possibility and the risk of saying no even to the good." As the subjective condition of salvation, faith is a gift granted to the soul by God, so that it may know God's revelation and enter into communion with Him through divine grace.

Keywords: *Mystical union with God; patristic theology; deification; anthropology; Saint Gregory Palamas; spiritual transfiguration;*

INTRODUCTION

The essence and power of Christianity is life in Christ. The premises of deification are man as the image of God (Genesis I, 27), the Incarnation of the Son of God, and the Church as the theandric Body of Christ. The Church, the theandric community, through Christ, its founder and Head, and through the Holy Spirit, who causes the mystical Body of Christ to grow, is the framework in which



man is deified. The mission of the Church in the world is to sanctify man and the world, communicating through grace “wisdom and faith in Christ” so that “the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (II Timothy 3:15, 17). The mystical union of man with God is achieved through asceticism, beginning with the reception of the graces of the Holy Mysteries, because man does not possess by nature a power capable of accomplishing deification. “If mysticism indicates the culmination of religious life, asceticism encompasses the ascent that leads to this summit.”¹

Deification is attained only by those who believe and work in Christ, receive Him as Lord and Savior, and continue to live in a vital and intimate relationship with Him, within the theandric community of the Church. Salvation can be obtained only in the Church; it is the mystical Body of Christ, the field of action of the energy of the grace of the Holy Spirit, who dwells fully in the risen humanity of Christ, and from it communicates to us, through the Holy Mysteries, the state of holiness. The faithful constitute the mystical Body of the Lord, that is, the Church (I Col. 1:24 and 18), in which each believer is a member of the ecclesial body and receives the grace of the Holy Spirit through the Holy Mysteries. Therefore, “whoever believes and is baptized will be saved...” (Mark 16:16); grace is transmitted within the community of believers, who partake of the Holy Spirit sent by Christ (John 14:17; 16:13), to those who unite themselves with Christ not only as man, but also as God, and through Him with God the Father. As a consequence of the presence and work of the Spirit, there arises an impulse toward brotherhood with all people, for the Holy Spirit is the divine energy that tends to accomplish the adoption of all as children, in relation to the Father and thereby universal brotherhood. As Holy Scripture shows, life in Christ is presented as a continuous orientation and union toward perfection, together with the entire redemptive work, so that the old man may receive the radiance of the new man, resurrected and exalted by Christ in the Holy Spirit.

1. DEIFICATION IS THE GOAL OF ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

The process of attaining perfection is divided by the Holy Fathers and theologians of the Orthodox Church, according to the three great theological virtues (faith, hope, and love), into three phases: purification, illumination, and perfection. “Concretely, in this process there are three closely connected stages: 1. Cleansing from passions through the acquisition of virtues; 2. Contemplation (the concentration of the spirit’s vision upon God); 3. Union (immediate experience, the final stage of deification).”²

The effort of continuous spiritual purification must be harmoniously combined with the renewal of life and growth in virtue, through good deeds continually shown to our fellow human beings and to the community of which we are part, as a state of grace. Only in this way does salvation correspond to the perfection of spiritual life, according to the Savior’s exhortation: “Be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Progress toward perfection through asceticism takes place gradually through the creation of an inner tension by the Holy Spirit, who, placed through the Holy Mysteries upon the members of Christ’s Body, strengthens them in their work and fills them with gifts (I Corinthians 12:14; Galatians 3:20) for the building up of the whole Body – the Church (Ephesians 4:11–12). We receive the grace of salvation from Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit in the Holy Mysteries (Ephesians 1:23). By fulfilling the commandments, and especially Christ’s counsels, these powers of grace lead us through the same labors and states

¹ Prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Christian Asceticism and Mysticism, or the Theology of the Spiritual Life*, Cluj, Casa Cărții de Știință, 1993, p. 11.

² Prof. Marian CIULEI, *Patristic Anthropology*, Sirona Publishing House, Alexandria, 1999, p. 345.



through which Christ Himself passed in His life. The Holy Mysteries are acts that transfigure the body and soul of man fallen into sin. This is also the meaning of the text of the Holy Apostle Paul, who says: “Beholding as in a mirror, with unveiled face, the glory of the Lord, we are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18). “The pleasure or sensation from above, which is born after the suppression of every pleasure or sensation from below, is not pleasure or sensation for a present satisfaction, touch, or possession, but for the hope of future goods. The monk has given up everything he had for what he does not yet possess. It is the joy of the loss suffered.”³

In order to bear the image of holiness, σώμα πνευματικόν, and to attain “the stature of the perfect man” (Ephesians 4:13), man must unite himself with Christ. This union with Christ is initiated by the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and continues throughout his life through the other Holy Mysteries. The Sacrament of Holy Baptism is indispensable for attaining perfection: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5), and “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). Baptism is offered to man without taking his worthiness into consideration. Justification is accomplished through Baptism. It is our death to sin. Therefore, “we who have died to sin, how shall we still live in it?” (Romans 5:2). Through Baptism we reiterate Christ’s sacrifice. “Therefore, we were buried with Him through Baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3–4). Through Baptism the two aspects of our justification are accomplished: death to sin and participation in the new life in Christ. A radical transformation has taken place in the baptized person. He has put off the old man together with his deeds and has put on the new man, who is renewed according to the Image of Him who created him (Colossians 3:19).

The union of man with God is “a precious teaching specific to the Fathers and to Orthodox doctrine throughout all ages.” The union of man with Christ is initiated by the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. The beginning of union with Christ is rewarded by God through the outpouring of the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit in the Holy Mystery of Chrismation. Saint Nicholas Cabasilas says: “Chrismation incorporates us into the humanity of Christ, opens holiness to us, and is the direct outpouring of uncreated divine grace into the souls of those who are chrismated.” Complete union between man and Christ is accomplished in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Through it, Christ is impressed upon our innermost being through His Eucharistic Body and Blood. The intimacy between us and Christ is now all the closer because He opened the way to us by carrying out His service for us unto death on the cross. Christ, suffering and rising for us, makes us partakers of deification in His Body, a state that He extends to the faithful, to the members of His Body, through the grace of the Holy Spirit. “The Eucharist is the Mystery of the full union and communion of man with Christ, as a member of the Church, as well as the Mystery of the very constitution of the Church. Through the Eucharist, therefore, a communion of the faithful with one another in the same Christ is also achieved. The Eucharist is pre-eminently the Mystery of Unity and ecclesial community. “Because the faithful now partake not merely of an energy of Christ corresponding to a certain state in His life, but of His very Body, which becomes in them the source of all divine energies, as the risen Body, through the Eucharist the Church is realized and maintained in the full sense of the word, as the Body of the Lord, as a potentially complete unity of the faithful with Him and with one another.” The growth in virtue, the growth in Christ, is the result of the permanent interweaving of the work of divine grace and the work of man, because progress in holiness is

³ Prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *The Meaning of Asceticism in Monasticism*, Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2005, p. 24.



simultaneous with progress in Christ, in the actualization by grace of our state as a deified human being accomplished by Him through sacrifice and resurrection and extended sacramentally by the Church to its members.⁴ The spiritual ascent:

1. purification from passions and adornment with virtues,
2. contemplation of God in created beings,
3. mystical union by grace with Christ – has as its final goal the deification of man. Deification is participation in the divine life from the deified Body of Christ, through the deifying grace of the Holy Spirit received as a member of the Church.

The first stage on the Christian's path toward perfection consists in purification from sins and the acquisition of virtues. Man in the practical stage is called *πρακίς* – the worker, whose orientation is identified with liberation from passions and the acquisition of virtues; he is a man of action whose goal is to acquire Trinitarian love, which frees body and soul from the passions (*απαθεία*). Purification from passions is accompanied by the presence of virtues. "The virtues themselves are the work of God. In every virtue there is a part of His spiritual strength brought down to the level of our needs. As we ascend toward Him, it becomes more perceptible to us. The virtues are our reaching out toward God, but these reaches do not take place without His descent toward us." The virtues represent acts of freedom and love toward God, accomplished by Christians and establishing them in the bond of grace with Christ.

The second stage in the spiritual ascent is illumination, a state of contemplation of the grace of the Holy Spirit present in the human person from the moment of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. As man advances through union with Christ, becoming contemplative (*θεωρητικός*), an observer and seer of the Logos reflected throughout creation, he reaches mystical knowledge. The stage of illumination causes man, after rising through virtues from the irrational to the rational, to concern himself with the knowledge of God in created beings as the fruit of dispassion and love. Therefore, "after purification from passions and the acquisition of virtues, which requires at once a voluntary and a rational effort, man must exercise his reason in knowing the logoi of created things, and only after he has also passed beyond this stage, appropriating the logoi of created things and uniting them with his own reason, does he enter the stage of mystical knowledge."⁵

The third stage, mystical union by grace with Christ, is given by the ecstasy of Trinitarian love: "for the perfect work of virtue during advancement (the first phase) is the work of faith, righteousness, and genuine fear of God; likewise, natural contemplation without error during the ascent (the second phase) is the work of sure hope and undistorted understanding; finally, deification through elevation (the third phase) is the fruit of love, perfection, and of the mind voluntarily rendered completely immobile in the sense of transcending things," in God.

The state of "perfection is continuous progress, unceasing increase, an uninterrupted ascent on the golden ladder that leads to the palace of light of the blessed life, illuminated by truth, holiness, and ineffable joys. Perfection is never finished; it has no culmination beyond which it no longer continues. Perfection is a flight from summit to summit, namely from a high summit to an even higher one, forming ever higher peaks "lost in the azure of heaven, upon which it is to ascend." In perfection everything is surrounded by love. The great mystery of love is the union it accomplishes between those who love one another without abolishing them as free subjects. The bond established by love does not consist only in the fact that those who love one another think of each other with pleasure, that is, in the orientation of each one's intention toward the other, but in the fact that each

⁴ Prof. Dumitru RADU, *The Communal and Conciliar Aspect of Salvation*, in *Ortodoxia*, vol. XXVI, no. 1, 1974, p. 101.

⁵ Prof. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *The Meaning of Asceticism in Monasticism*, p. 32.



receives the other within himself, all being united with God in His sanctifying love. Therefore, love is the supreme union and mutual advancement and, precisely for this reason, the supreme way of knowledge, in which one's fellow human being is not passive, but freer than in any other state or relationship.⁶

Mystical union with God constitutes the reception of holiness, or likeness to divinity, through Christ, the Model of all people, the beginning and end of union and of life. Therefore, "life in Christ consists in the union of our soul with God... the One who died and rose in this human body... the One who is joined to humanity and understands it as being of the same blood; and as God He is able to subdue human nature, raise it up, and unite it with His own being," clothing it in glory beyond nature, revealing in Himself the glory of the Father's image and the beauty of the Original, who out of love created all things (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16) and sustains all things in harmony, helping them remain in existence: "for it pleased God that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, making peace through Him, through the blood of His cross" (Colossians 1:19-2; II Peter 1:4).⁷

2. SAINT GREGORY PALAMAS, THE THEOLOGIAN OF THE DIVINE LIGHT

Among the Holy Fathers who reveal to us the theology of grace at the highest level is Saint Gregory Palamas, who, through the distinction between essence and energy, correctly defines grace, as well as through the prayer of the heart embodied in hesychastic practice. Palamite doctrine upholds the knowledge of God and the experience of eternal life through direct communion with Him in the Church. This is an experience potentially given to all Christians through the Sacrament of Baptism and through participation in the life of Christ by receiving Him in the Divine Liturgy. But the act of Eucharistic communion with Christ must be prolonged and actualized in man through unceasing prayer; thus the dialogue of man with Christ is continuous and constantly increasing, man becoming "a partaker of the divine nature" by being filled with the deifying grace of the Holy Spirit.

Born in 1296, the young Gregory was from childhood within the circle of the imperial family, since his father, Constantine, was a close adviser to Andronicus II (1282-1328) and tutor to his nephew, Andronicus III. When he was seven, his father died, and he was educated and trained in the sciences of his time by the celebrated scholar Theodore Metochites, acquiring a solid cultural foundation. His close contact with monks from Mount Athos led Gregory, from adolescence, to follow a strict ascetic regimen, with fasting and much vigil, feeding only on bread and water. His first teacher in the life of prayer was Theolept, who later became Metropolitan of Philadelphia and who guided him in the practice of watchfulness and the prayer of the mind while he was still living in the world. Rejecting the attractions of the world, in the autumn of 1317 he set out for Mount Athos with his two brothers.

Near the Monastery of Vatopedi, under the guidance of the elder Nicodemus, he led a life of fasting, vigil, and unceasing prayer, day and night. After three years, in 1321, the monk Gregory entered the Great Lavra of Saint Athanasius, where, for another three years, he distinguished himself in the practice of the virtues, in wisdom and speech, restraining even his most natural needs, "fighting, as it were, with the body in order to become bodiless." For three months he did not sleep at night, but only a little in the afternoon. Then he withdrew for two years to Glossia, and in 1326,

⁶ Prof. Ioan G. COMAN, "The Importance and Meaning of Perfection in Monasticism", in *Studii Teologice*, Year VII, 1995, nos. 3-4, p. 217.

⁷ Saint Nicholas CABASILAS, *On Life in Christ* II; III, translated by Rev. Prof. Dr. Ene Braniște and Rev. Prof. Dr. T. Bodogae, Publishing House of the Archdiocese of Bucharest, 1989, pp. 150; 201.



after being ordained as a priest in Thessaloniki, he climbed the mountain near the city of Beroea (Veria) in Greek Macedonia. There he lived an intense spiritual life. Five days a week he remained isolated from everyone and spoke to no one, while on Saturdays and Sundays he gathered with the other monks for the Divine Liturgy and conversations. He was in the thirtieth year of his life, physically healthy and not yet afflicted by any illness. He intensified his fasting and vigil, and through many tears purified the eye of his soul. The unceasing prayer of his mind enabled him to attain immediate union with God. Sometimes, during the Divine Liturgy, his face shone supernaturally, transfigured by the fire of the Holy Spirit. He began to preach and then to write about the life of the Mother of God and of certain holy Athonite fathers.

When Barlaam of Calabria, from 1334 onward and especially after 1337, began to denigrate hesychastic practice and teaching, the hieromonk Gregory became the spokesman of Athonite monasticism and of the entire Orthodox Church. He formulated hesychastic doctrine in two triads (1338, 1339), and also composed the third (in 1341), when Barlaam, in 1340, attacked Eastern mysticism and Orthodoxy itself with greater intensity. As the controversy grew, a synod was convened on June 11, 1341, which sided with the Hesychasts and condemned Barlaam; he fled permanently to the West, where he was not only well received by the Catholic Church but also promoted to bishop of Gerace (southern Italy). Shortly afterward, in 1343, suspected of conspiracy by John Kantakouzenos, Palamas was thrown into prison, where he remained until 1347.

Patriarch John Kalekas convened a synod in 1345 that anathematized Palamas and supported Akindynos, who assumed the role of critic and mocker of Hesychasm. Empress Anna of Savoy, on February 2, 1347, gathered the bishops who restored Palamas to honor. Gregory Akindynos fled but was replaced by Nikephoros Gregoras. Against Akindynos, Gregory Palamas wrote the *Antirrhetics* I–VII and several letters to other Hesychast monks (up to 1345). Having ascended the throne in 1347, John Kantakouzenos convened a synod on May 27, 1351, which decreed Hesychasm to be the official doctrine of the Orthodox Church, condemning the teachings of Barlaam and Akindynos as heretical. Gregoras was imprisoned in the Monastery of Chora.

Although elected Archbishop of Thessaloniki in 1347, Saint Gregory Palamas arrived there only in 1352. In 1354, while attempting to come to Constantinople, he was taken prisoner by the Turks for a year. Between 1358 and 1359 Palamas wrote four more treatises on Hesychasm against Gregoras. Having announced beforehand the day of his death, Saint Gregory Palamas reposed in the Lord on November 13, 1359. Gregoras also returned to Orthodoxy and died the following year. The saint's disciple, Patriarch Philotheos Kokkinos, convened a synod in 1368 which, on the basis of the testimonies of many monks and bishops and the miracles at his church, declared Gregory Palamas a saint, establishing as his feast days November 14 and the Second Sunday of Great Lent.⁸

Saint Gregory Palamas was regarded by the Orthodox Church as a defender of Orthodox teaching which, in opposition to scholastic intellectualism, grounds the believer's experience of encountering God in prayer. In recent times, especially following the strong affirmation of the doctrine of the uncreated energies by Vladimir Lossky in "*Essai sur la Theologie mystique de l'Eglise orientale*" and the study by John Meyendorff, not only Orthodox theologians have appreciated the doctrine of the uncreated energies in many respects, but even among Catholic theologians a more positive attitude toward this doctrine can be observed.

⁸ *General Orthodox Synaxarion and Hagiographical Dictionary*, edited by Archimandrite Ioanichie BĂLAN, Publishing House of the Diocese of Roman, 1998, p. 150.



3. UNCREATED ENERGIES OR DEIFICATION BY GRACE

The work of the Holy Spirit unfolds in the world in time when it extends to creation. In this respect, it differs from the eternal intra-Trinitarian work in which all the Persons of the Holy Trinity participate simultaneously, for intra-Trinitarian life is unfathomable, perpetual, mysterious, beyond contingency, and always transcendent. In intra-Trinitarian life the Holy Spirit gives Himself totally, through love, to the other Persons, namely to the Father and the Son together, although He proceeds from the Father eternally and receives the love of the Father and the Son, eternally and together, without any trace of ontological subordination.

Grace, as uncreated divine energy, gives birth to and cultivates life in Christ through the Holy Spirit, who is sent into the world by the Father and the Son. Thus, divine power is given to man for “sensation” through the Spirit, and makes the presence of Christ real in human nature through communion with Him in the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist: “in order to free you from every defilement of sin, and to grow continually in grace, you must become ever more deeply rooted in the unity of the nature that has Christ Himself as its hypostasis. Through the mystery of the body and blood (the Holy Eucharist), the union of our nature with Christ is accomplished, and at the same time with all the members of the Church – His mystical Body.”⁹

Since, therefore, there is no ontological subordination – because the divine ousia knows no subordination, but only the perfect equality of the Persons in the same love – in intra-Trinitarian life the Holy Spirit possesses holiness and truth together with love. Both holiness and truth constitute defining attributes of the Godhead and at the same time indicate the individuality of each Person. The truth of the Spirit is also the truth of the Father and the Son, because God is not only incomprehensible love but also absolute truth, or the Truth (John 14:6). Yet between Absolute Truth – God – and the religious truth communicated to human beings through Revelation there is a considerable distance. First, because God as Truth – and therefore the Holy Spirit as Truth – is always integral in Himself, without impairment, diminution, or change. He communicates Himself interpersonally in the most fitting and mysterious way, beyond every power of the creature to think – in particular, beyond the human being. He communicates Himself directly, in the one Godhead, without symbols or means; yet He is also continually open toward the most precious creature in creation – man, the believer.

This openness of the Holy Spirit toward the other Persons of the Holy Trinity is essential to the Godhead. Like the Spirit, the Son is open toward the Father and the Holy Spirit, just as the Father is eternally open toward the begotten Son and toward the Spirit who proceeds from Him before all time, that is, eternally. The openness of the Spirit toward the Father and the Son encompasses all forms of expression of divine love – rather, the infinite manifestations of intra-Trinitarian love. These, of course, transcend time, space, and place, because they are supernatural, absolutely spiritual, and beyond everything created or conceivable within the plane of creation. Like the Father and the Son, the Spirit remains forever in intra-Trinitarian love, in the limitless, incomprehensible, ineffable, and mysterious love proper to the divine absolute.

There are two names that properly apply to God: “light” and “love.” We see from the words of the Holy Apostle and Evangelist John that God is Love and God is Light. The most fitting name for God is love, as the Holy Apostle and Evangelist John repeatedly teaches. Love is the sharing of the Father’s joy with the Son and the Holy Spirit, of the Son’s joy with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and of the Spirit’s joy with the Father and the Son. The Holy Apostle Paul says that first there

⁹ Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. in Romanian by Rev. V. Răducă, Anastasia Publishing House, Bucharest, pp. 211–212.



was light and then everything else was formed. What is light before God? What is the first light? It is God's own grace, for God, out of His love, brings forth light, and His grace is light. It is an immaterial light from which material light was also made, for through this immaterial light, through His energies, God made the sun, moon, stars, earth, and all the planets.

To understand that grace is light, the Holy Gospel and Holy Scripture show us in several places that when God's angels, who were clothed in light as with a garment, opposed God, they lost the garment in which they were clothed, and those who stripped themselves of light remained in darkness. Therefore, spiritually speaking, we can have two kinds of garments: some may clothe themselves in light, while others in darkness. Maximus the Confessor says that the garment of the mind is knowledge, while the garment of the soul is truth.

We can all clothe ourselves in this garment; whoever confesses the truth clothes himself in Christ's garment, because Christ is the truth, and Christ's truth clothes all our spiritual powers: it clothes the mind in knowledge, the will in strength, and perception in wisdom, and all our powers become balanced when Christ's truth conquers our nature, that is, when mind, will, and perception are in equilibrium. This is because God has left to all of us the gift of His joy, and God's joy is to make His mysteries known to us; His mysteries are the gifts He spreads like beneficent rays over us when we partake of God's presence. "Saint Palamas, faithful to the Christian vision, maintains that first there is Being, from which the Gracious Energies – the Divine Logoi – proceed, which then become clothed in the corporeality of things. Thus, Being and Its Gracious Energies are the Integral Spirit. For us, this is the Dichotomy of Spirit and Body. From a Christian perspective, Being and Mind together constitute the Spirit, without being either separated or confused: they are Being and Its gracious energies. Moreover, the gracious Divine Mind should not be confused with the created mind."¹⁰

By the words "uncreated energies" of God are understood the various works of God through which He works and has worked from eternity in the creation and governance of the visible and invisible world. Through the uncreated energies man partakes of God's gift, not of His essence, which remains forever untouched by any of His visible or invisible creation. The uncreated energies may also be called God's works, and they are innumerable: His all-creating and boundless power (Psalm 32:6), His all-knowing power (I Kings 2:3; Job 60:1), His all-sanctifying power (Isaiah 57:11; Jer. 1:5). There is also His all-seeing power (Psalm 32:13), His all-encompassing power, and His providence, according to the word: "He gives food to every creature..." (Psalm 85:25). All these powers spring from His essence. Through them God sends His uncreated gifts to all creatures, which work in many ways throughout everything visible and invisible.

"Saint Palamas, in order to demonstrate the possibility of communion between the incomprehensible and inaccessible Godhead and the thinking creature – man – works out a new chapter in Orthodox Theology, that of the 'Distinctions' in the Holy Trinity, distinguishing between essence, hypostases, and energies, establishing that while in His essence or intimate being God remains unknown, inaccessible, and incommunicable to every creature, the same is true of the three Hypostases. In His uncreated energies, which are inseparable from His being, God 'goes forth,' manifests Himself, communicates Himself, and gives Himself, the energies being the common work of the Holy Trinity. Through them we participate in divine life, know God, and are deified by grace. For although distinct from the essence and Persons of the Holy Trinity, the energies are nevertheless inseparably united to Them because they spring from Them. Thus, the presence of the energies in the human soul means the presence of God Himself. Only in such a way can the texts of Holy

¹⁰ Gheorghe GHELASIE, "The Hesychast Practice," vol. I, Hesychasm Collection, Bucharest, 1996, p. 28.



Scripture be understood as possible: Matthew 5:8 – ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’; John 14:23 – ‘If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.’”¹¹

The teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas concerning the uncreated divine energies is not new but has its source in the revelation or Revelation of the New Testament and in the teaching of the Holy Fathers. Through the divine energies, people become “partakers of the divine nature” (II Peter 1:4), without the human essence thereby becoming the essence of God.

In the discussions concerning the nature of the Taboric light with Latin theologians – who, under the pretext of the simplicity and indivisibility of the divine nature, maintained that grace is created – Saint Palamas distinguishes between the being or essence of God, that is, the uncreated, unchanging, incomprehensible, and ineffable divine nature, and the uncreated divine energies, that is, the works or personal ‘processions’ through which He allows Himself to be shared, manifests Himself, and deifies. The energies spring from the divinity common to the three Persons of the Trinity and are therefore unique, indivisible, permanent, and stable. They are hypostasized, that is, they exist together with the Persons and are contemplated truly, not symbolically.

The energies do not constitute a person, have no hypostasis of their own, and do not exist independently. Energies are contemplated in a hypostasis and manifest through a person, but are not themselves hypostasis. The teaching of the uncreated divine energies is an essential characteristic of Orthodoxy and lies at the foundation of faith in the personal character of God, in the deification of man, and in the transfiguration of matter and creation. Orthodox theology understands grace precisely as divine energy and work, personal and uncreated, through which man becomes a “partaker of the divine nature.” Of course, the distinction between essence, hypostasis, and energy must not be exaggerated, since the Church has rejected emanationism and modalism. Likewise, deification must not be understood as the physical absorption of the creature into God’s being. “Palamism is nothing other than a testimony to the confrontation between two theologies: scholastic substantialism and patristic personalism, conceptions that have had repercussions on many chapters of dogmatics, especially on soteriology and sacramental theology.”¹²

The energies are common to the three Persons or hypostases of the Holy Trinity, and through their work God manifests Himself in the world. The work springs from the essence, but the essence is hypostasized in the three Persons. They raise us up, improve us, and bring us joy through Their common joy. Therefore, Their work is always a work of love, containing within it this communion of love. Thus, those with spiritual sensitivity perceive in these works the three Persons, both distinct and united. The situation is different with the cooperation of individuals directed toward others. Even when they work together, they do not form a *pluripersonal* whole; rather, their works are added together. “For our God, who is in three hypostases, is called our life according to cause. But when divine life is conceived not from the point of view of cause, nor as being for another, but apart from any forced relation and in itself, this is nothing other than the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”¹³

Palamas affirms that God is life for Himself, and that there is no obstacle to His also being life for us, and therefore to there being in Him a distinction between His essence and His work, just as God’s unity is no obstacle to there being in Him a distinction between unity and Trinity. To

¹¹ Archimandrite Dosoftei MORARIU, *On Divine Grace*, Publishing House of the Diocese of Roman, 1996, pp. 17–18.

¹² Ion BRIA, *Dictionary of Orthodox Theology from A to Z*, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1994, p. 141.

¹³ Saint GREGORY Palamas, *Words for Those Who Practice Quietude with Devotion and Other Writings in Defense of Hesychasm*, translated, introduced, and annotated by Rev. Prof. Dr. D. Stăniloae, in *Philokalia*, vol. VII, IBMBOR, Bucharest, 1977, p. 501.



confuse God's life for us with His life for Himself would mean making us indispensable to Him. It would mean that He is not eternal, since neither are we eternal, or that we too are eternal, because He is eternal. The conclusion would therefore be pantheism. There is thus a distinction between God as life for Himself and God as life for us. For life for us is grounded in His quality as cause. But for Himself God is not cause, as He is cause for us. Nevertheless, the same God is life for Himself and life for us.

"In the Orthodox conception, the difference between God's being and His love is presented by Gregory Palamas as follows: in God there is a depth inaccessible to the creature, namely His being, which the Trinity communicates to one another, the three Persons, constituting the intimacy into which the creature cannot enter. God enters relationship with the creature through His works, through His energies. His love is a force that springs from the divine being and pours itself upon the creature, transforming and perfecting it." Palamas calls both divinity and the deifying gift a deliberate irradiation from God. But God as Person, although He is present in this deifying gift, since He Himself wholly accomplishes deification, nevertheless is not exhausted in this gift as work and is therefore greater than it. "God does not suffer multiplication, nor does anyone thereby affirm two divinities." God does not suffer multiplication: He is wholly present as Person even in His deifying grace, and this grace may be called divinity without there thereby being two divinities.¹⁴¹⁵

The grace of the Most Holy Spirit is one of the divine energies and through Baptism makes Christians children of God by gift (Titus 3:3–5; John 3:1), while the grace of the Holy Spirit through which we receive adoption by gift comes to us through God's all-sanctifying energy. It is not God's essence that is sent to man, but grace. The Spirit is one, while the gifts are diverse according to each person's worthiness (I Corinthians 12:6). If the gifts and works of the Spirit are diverse, then the uncreated energies through which God sends His gifts to the saints and faithful are also diverse. Through the energy of holiness, He sanctifies them, through the spiritual and all-illuminating energy He enlightens them, and through the energy of His providence He cares for them. For God's gifts are diverse, but they spring from the same Holy Spirit.

Grace is the uncreated divine energy, power, or work that springs from the divine essence of the three hypostases, being inseparable from them, and that flows through Christ in the Holy Spirit, through the Church, in the Holy Mysteries, upon man for the purpose of salvation and sanctification.

The grace of the Holy Spirit is what guides us to the knowledge of the glory of God, a knowledge by grace rather than by essence, as Roman Catholic theology maintains. "According to Gregory Palamas, the knowledge of God is not merely knowledge that necessarily presupposes a certain externalization between the subject of knowledge and the object known, but a union in the uncreated light: man, indeed, has no faculty capable of seeing God, even if he has a vision. This is possible because God Himself, in His omnipotence, unites Himself with man and makes him partake of the knowledge He has of Himself." From conception, in most people only the energy through God's all-creating power works, followed by providence and others. The gift of the Most Holy Spirit, through which man becomes a child of God by gift, is received when he is baptized (John 1:2; Acts 2:38). The other gifts differ, such as foreknowledge, prophecy, and healings, which are given to man according to God's will (I Corinthians 12:11) and according to the measure of faith (Galatians 3:5), for the strengthening of the Church (I Corinthians 12:7) and the conversion of unbelievers (I Corinthians 14:10). "God does not reveal Himself directly in His essence, for no one

¹⁴ Prof. Dr. Nicolae MLADIN, *Lectures on Orthodox Mysticism*, Veritas Publishing House, Târgu-Mureș, 1996, p. 68.

¹⁵ Saint GREGORY Palamas, *op.cit.*, p. 656.



has ever seen or known the nature of God, but has known Him according to grace, according to His power and work, which belongs equally to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶¹⁷

The uncreated divine energies do not exist outside God. They are what surrounds the essence, its outward irradiation, its manifestation in the created world. The mysterious relationship between essence and energies in God, a relationship that is at once identity and distinction, preserves His total transcendence and grounds the mystical experience of the union of man with God. Thus man can be truly deified without divine transcendence being affected.

“Although God’s being is one, His energies (which Saint Gregory Palamas calls rays) are multiple and are sent in a particular way to those who participate in them, being multiplied according to the varying capacity of those who receive them.” The uncreated energies can be experienced sensibly in the domain of sensory perception or intellectually in the domain of the intellect.¹⁸

As illuminations they are visible to the worthy, although Saint Gregory Palamas does not forget this important qualification – the divine essence is absolutely invisible. As has been seen, Gregory Palamas uses adjectives such as “sensory” and “intellectual” when referring to the perception of these energies; nevertheless, he tends to replace them, apophatically, with spiritual perception. Thus, he emphasizes their uncreated character, which means that these energies (illuminations, powers) are neither sensory nor intelligible: they are beyond sensation and cannot be perceived through intellectual speculation. Gregory Palamas speaks of “grace seen invisibly and known unknowingly”; by using this antinomian expression he shows that grace defies intellectual analysis.

Palamas develops a realist doctrine of the supernatural knowledge of God, independent of any sensory experience, yet granted by Christ to the whole human being, body and soul, who can attain from this world to deification, not through his own powers but through the grace of the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit becomes subject within our subject, and through His works, we know hidden and future mysteries and become gods by grace. If the Spirit were united with us according to essence, we would have a common essence with Him. If He were united according to hypostasis, our person would be one with His Person, or His Person would become our person, as in Christ the Person of the Word became the Person of human nature. Therefore, the Spirit unites with us through His work. Yet He is no less personally united with our person through His work. We appropriate His work, and He appropriates our work. We meet in the common divine-human work, without confusion.

CONCLUSION

The anthropological and theological framework of the Hesychast spirituality systematized by Palamas is the following: from the Incarnation of the Lord, our bodies have become “temples of the Holy Spirit who is in us” (I Cor. 6:19), and here, in our bodies, we must seek the Spirit, in our bodies sanctified through the Holy Mysteries. God is found within us and not outside us. Within ourselves, through pure prayer, we discover the Taboric light. In our bodies we must carefully seek the Holy Spirit, in our bodies sanctified through the Holy Mysteries, through the Holy Eucharist – the Body of Christ. Thus, God is within us and not outside us: therefore within ourselves we shall discover the light of Mount Tabor. The Apostles benefited from this vision only externally, because Christ

¹⁶ John MEYENDORFF, *Saint Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Mysticism*, translated by Angela Pagu, Encyclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1995, p. 97.

¹⁷ Saint GREGORY Palamas, *Homilies*, vol. I, introduction by Rev. Constantin Galeriu, translated from Greek by Dr. Constantin Daniel, Anastasia Publishing House, 2000, p. 112.

¹⁸ Lucian TURCESCU, “Saint Gregory: Palamite Trinitarian Theology”, in *Studii Teologice*, nos. 4–6, 1995, p. 67.



had not yet died and risen; but today we are all truly members of His Body, the Church. “In the unity of the divine essence, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, through the Son.”¹⁹

Then man understands that God is neither an abstract idea nor some person belonging to the past, but a living being. He sees the personal characteristics and distinct ways of existence, because the Son is the Incarnate Light, the Father is the Light who is the cause of the other two Lights, and the Holy Spirit is the Light who has His source in the Father but is not incarnate.

The ecstasy of love, or the feeling of union with God, the feeling that he forms with God a “we,” becomes increasingly prolonged, producing ever greater joy and a happier warmth of the soul. Thus, man’s life gains a continuity of uninterrupted love. The Apostle Paul expresses this continuity by saying: “If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you” (2 Corinthians 5:13), implying: “but also for God.”

Apophatic theology highlights the eternal ascent into deification, which stretches forever toward divine infinity and has as its endpoint, if one can speak of an endpoint where there is continuous growth, union with the Trinity that “blinds with light,” because when “the mind is simple or empty of every meaning, it enters wholly into the divine light, being covered by it; it has nothing else to discover outside the light in which it is, to be moved toward understanding that other thing, but remains in the abyss of divine light, not being allowed to look outside.”²⁰

The realization of holiness means the complete transfiguration and renewal of body and soul. This reality means attaining perfection as the sum of the virtues, because the soul that has united itself completely with God is filled with the splendor of the ineffable light of divinity, no longer contemplating bodily things, being warmed by the heat of the Holy Spirit and subject to spiritual affections, having ascended the highest mountain, like the Savior, Mount Tabor, a moment that brings man out of history and time and anchors him in eternity, because: “those who have acquired bodiless bodies and have attained a sensation beyond sensation, and, being circumscribed, will become uncircumscribed in incorruptible things, having a dwelling worthy of their glory...” The state of complete deification is a state of holiness. The saints make God transparent in their nature through union with Him, which fills all things with His divine light.

The vision of God is superior to affirmative and negative rational theology. It is the actual experience of divine reality; it is not its invention or conjecture through thought, imagination, or illusion. It is superior to negative theology because the disappearance of everything is not forcibly produced by thought, but because all created things and their ideas are overwhelmed or covered by the real vision of divine light, which is beyond nature. This apophatic dimension is an infinite plus, not a minus, in relation to what is known through the senses and reason. The unseen is not simply unseen. The unseen is seen; the incomprehensible and unknown are experienced more intensely than the things seen and known within the created order. Through the vision beyond vision, spiritual people know the deifying work, that is, as an active vision of it. Precisely for this reason they know that the divine Subject or Person who produces this active vision works within it. The Holy Spirit is known especially. Apophatic is an immediate relationship with the Person of the Holy Spirit.

Saint Gregory Palamas says that those who wish to attain such a vision and through it and with it to see what is unseen of God cannot do so unless they also attain a union beyond nature, spiritual and beyond the mind. The vision beyond vision, in the Spirit, is shared only by those who

¹⁹ John MEYENDORFF, *Introduction to the Study of Gregory Palamas*, Paris, 1959, p. 315.

²⁰ Saint SYMEON the New Theologian, *The 225 Theological and Moral Chapters*, trans. by Rev. D. Stăniloae, in *Philokalia VI*, IBMBOR, Bucharest, 1977, p. 55.



attain union with the divine Subject. Those who hear about it from those who possess it, but do not attain union, can reach only the knowledge of God through affirmative theology or rational negation.

In theology by negation, unity unfolds by successively denying various attributes improperly ascribed to God. In union, the mind gathers itself entirely into God encountered in His unity as Person. The union of the mind is not a rational negation of it, but its rapture into God, an “enchantment” by the wonder of His manifestation and by His love. It brings interiorized and fervent prayer to completion.

“The light of apophatic theology is knowledge and reason; that of union is subsistent light.” As the Holy Fathers say, union is rapture toward the Lord through prayer. In prayer, the mind casts off its relations with external things and emerges wholly from everything that exists. This detachment from all things, this ecstasy, is far superior to negative theology, for it belongs only to those who have attained dispassion. Occupation with anything else through the senses or through thought brings within us a kind of inferior light of another order, and the person occupied in this way cannot become wholly a light beyond nature. “And he who sees, if he does not work in any other way, having come out of everything else, becomes himself wholly light and becomes like what he sees; rather, he is united without mixture, being light and seeing light through light. If he looks at himself, he sees light; if he looks toward what he sees, that too is light; if he looks toward that through which he sees, that too is light. This is union.”²¹

According to Saint Gregory Palamas, those who place negative theology at the highest level regard the highest form of knowledge as the recognition of the absence of all knowledge—the knowledge of absolute emptiness. By rejecting the apophaticism of light as superior to negative theology, they, in fact, also undermine rational knowledge.

²¹ Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Life and Teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas*, Scripta Publishing House, Bucharest, 1993, p. 58.



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ICOANA CREDINTEI

Icon of Faith. International Journal of Interdisciplinary Religious Studies

IFIJISR- IISSN 2501-3386; ISSN-L 2393-137X| <https://doi.org/10.26520/icoana>

Frequency: 2 issues/year, with possible supplementary issues.

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IFIJISR, is a journal published and promoted at international level by IFIASA in collaboration with members of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and Education Sciences, "Valahia" University, Târgoviște. Icon of Faith is a Scientific, Open Access journal, with the main aim to promote a high level of Christian Theology in an intercultural context.

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Publisher: IFIASA® Ideas Forum International Academic and Scientific Association.