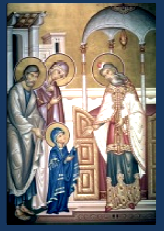


Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Sermon for Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the Sunday designated by the Liturgical Fathers as the Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas, a truly and very great Holy Father of the 14th century—so great, in fact, that he is given a Sunday all his own, in itself very significant, for the only other saint who has this privilege is St. Mary of Egypt. One can read St. Gregory’s life on line, in several sites, and I also recommend strongly the fine book by Metropolitan Nafpaktos, *St. Gregory Palamas as a Hagiorite*. (A “Hagiorite” is a monk of the Holy Mountain, Athos.) So this morning I will speak not about his interesting and eventful life, but rather about his teaching, which is so important to the Orthodox Church and believers today.

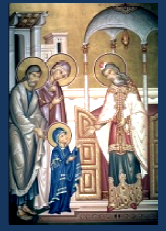
There is a great deal to be said here, but I’ll try to make my remarks simple and brief but also informative for those who may not know much about the doctrinal teaching of St. Gregory Palamas and the whole exercise of theology in Orthodoxy, which is different from that in Western Christianity.

Around the year 1317 the practice of hesychasm in the Church—I’ll define this term a bit later—attracted the interest of a monk from Calabria (a city is located in the “toe” of Italy) by the name of Barlaam. At that time he was an Orthodox abbot in a monastery in Constantinople and had also spent some time on Mount Athos. It was on Athos that Barlaam learned about hesychasts and their practices and began reading the writings of St. Gregory Palamas (who had also been an Athonite monk) on this subject.

However, even though he was Orthodox, coming from the Western Church, Barlaam had been trained in the medieval scholastic way of thinking, reasoning, and teaching, and he found St. Gregory’s teachings and the practices of the monks to be shocking, even scandalous, and openly said so, taking a much more philosophical and intellectual approach to theological questions than is common among the Eastern theological Fathers. He had learned that the goal of the hesychasts was to experience the Uncreated Light of God, which is *theosis* or deification, and he concluded that this was heresy and even a form of polytheism.

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As he began to publicly preach against this doctrine and propound his own theories, St. Gregory was asked by the monks of Mt. Athos to defend hesychasm—and he did so, at three different synods of bishops gathered in Constantinople, and also continued write on the subject.

St. Gregory explained that there is a difference between the “energies” of God and the “essence” of God. God’s essence, he explained, can never be known or understood by us human creatures. But His uncreated energies can definitely be both known and experienced, both in this life and in the next, and this experience constitutes true knowledge of God. These Uncreated Energies manifest to the hesychast as the Uncreated Light—the same light which shown around Christ on Mount Tabor at the Transfiguration. Barlaam, you see, rejected this, claiming that there is no distinction between God’s energies and His essence. By confusing them in this way, he seem to be suggesting that human beings cannot really come to God, since God’s essence is unknowable.

Thus, one of the three synods of bishops before whom this matter came, condemned Barlaam’s teachings. He then returned to Italy where he subsequently became a Roman Catholic bishop. A synod in 1351 then upheld St. Gregory and the doctrine of Hesychasm as infallible Orthodox teaching...

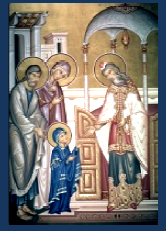
Now, what is “hesychasm” and what are “hesychasts”?

Hesychasm comes from the Greek word *hesychasmos*, which is derived from *hesychia*, which means stillness, rest, silence, quiet. So “hesychasmos” is the study or science of stillness. The term first appeared in the 300’s A.D., by the way, but the practice of inner stillness already existed long before that, from the very first generation of Christians, in fact. Thus, a hesychast is one who acquires this inner stillness and keeps silence, both outward and inner silence. This is based in part of the Lord’s own instruction that when we pray we are to “go into [our] closet to pray”—that is, not being seen of men, not advertising our inner life to others. In the hesychast tradition this has meant than one retires or goes “inward”, into the heart (the “inner closet”), into the spirit, the *nous*, by withdrawing from our outward five senses, and in this way one begins to draw close to God and *experiential* knowledge of Him rather than merely theoretical or head knowledge, such as one learns from a book.

So these are the meanings of hesychasm and a hesychast. What, now, is the “method” or “technique” of the hesychast—which was part of what so shocked Barlaam when he encountered this on the Holy Mountain?

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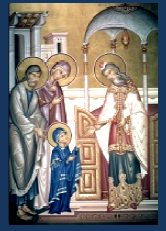
Hesychast practices—that is, the means by which we go deeply “within” and withdraw from our senses in order to meet God—are completely integrated with the continual repetition of the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” In the higher degrees of practice this can also be combined with certain physical practices or methods. A great deal of literature now exists in the English language concerning all of this, and I urge those who have not dipped into this particular spiritual genre to do so while these books are still available in print. Even if one doesn’t have time to read and study them now, acquire them for the home library, and one day, God-willing, there will be time and opportunity to turn to this rich literature. A good place to begin is the justly famous “Way of the Pilgrim”, available in several English translations now, beginning in the 1950’s. But this is only an introduction.

When comparing the hesychast experience with the Western or Roman Catholic approach one has to be very careful to inner spiritual life—and much of Roman Catholic mysticism can be found in the biographies and literature produced on this subject—one finds a large emphasis on ecstatic experiences, often visionary, and it is easy to mistake these for an end in themselves (although the Catholic Church does warn against this; nonetheless it is present). In Orthodoxy one never thinks of ecstasies or visions, or other supernatural phenomena—in fact one flees from them and resolutely rejects them!—but for us the goal is to acquire the Holy Spirit, who is identical with the Uncreated Light, and who comes to completely purify one of one’s sins. No special “techniques” can make this happen, and it has nothing to do with “ecstatic” states. We can only dispose ourselves to God’s activity, according as He Himself chooses. For us, a sign that we have fallen into some kind of delusion is when we begin to see ourselves as saints or elders (something that, in fact, does sometimes happen in the lives of certain Catholic mystics and has happened to a few fraudulent Orthodox practitioners, too). This state of spiritual delusion is called *plani* in Greek (or *prelest* in Russian), and it can lead to damnation—however, in its early stages it is superficial and can be corrected and banished under the careful care of a wise and experienced spiritual director.

Now, let me step aside from St. Gregory here for a moment. Our Church is “apostolic” in the sense that we are build upon the foundation of the preaching of the Apostles, with Christ as the cornerstone. But the Church is also “patristic”—which means that we are the Church of Fathers, the Holy Fathers. (“Patristic” comes from the Latin word for father, *pater*.) So the study of the Holy Fathers is much more than just a history lesson; it is a *witness*, because these Fathers of the Church were themselves saints, holy men, deified, and therefore true and authentic sources of revelation for the Church.

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St. Gregory was one of those Fathers. Orthodoxy, to a degree unknown by Western Christians, has not only kept alive the witness of these Fathers, but we keep this witness alive not just in an academic way, by preserving their writings in libraries, or reading and studying their writings, but we still actively *teach and practice* what they had to say. This is why I say that the Fathers are a still-living *witness* in the Church. This understanding has kept the Holy Fathers of old alive and well, and still in our midst today. This is an exceptional treasure of Orthodox Christianity, this living witness, and it could be a great gift to other Christians if they wished to seek for the fullness of the Faith and the living experience of spiritual life.

So this is why we say that it can be a dangerous thing to simply “quote” the Fathers—this verse or that—for when we take them out of their context, a context which is the Church herself, who is living out these teachings even in our own day, and which alone gives proper meaning to their writings, then we become like those who like “to cherry pick” verses from Scripture to prove their own point, rather than seeing everything in the full context of Scripture. So we say that we do not just “quote” the Fathers, but more than that, we “follow them”—that is, we take their teachings to heart and try to live those teachings out in our own daily lives. In this way, the patristic heritage has never become a nice museum piece or the special preserve of just academics and theologians.

And it is the job of every Orthodox bishop and priest to encourage the rest of us to indeed “follow” the Fathers. And if they do not do this, our archpastors and pastors, then any and every Orthodox Christian is entitled to sit at the knees of the Fathers himself, on his own if necessary, for this is his heritage, his rightful inheritance.

Now we come back to St. Gregory Palamas and hesychasm, theosis. St. Gregory was not, unlike Barlaam, a speculative theologian, as I already explained. He was, first, a *monk*—and in Orthodoxy that means a great deal. The abstractions and speculations of Western scholasticism or philosophy did not interest him. Rather, he simply wished to clearly express, in preaching and in writing, the actual *experiences* of a true Christian in the Church, and describe and interpret these experiences for others. In other words, he wrote about what Orthodox monks were already experiencing in their prayer lives and had been experiencing from the beginning, from the time of the Apostles. He didn’t theorize about it. *He described and explained.* Do you understand this difference? It is a critical difference! St. Gregory was rooted in an already long existing tradition, already earlier described in outline form by St. Dionysios the Areopagite in the first century, who had been a disciple of

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St. Paul himself. St. Gregory didn't "theorize"—he first experienced it for himself and then described what he was experiencing.

The late great Orthodox priest, professor, and theologian, Fr. Georges Florovsky, in a magnificent essay about St. Gregory Palamas that you can find online, explained that it is only this "theology of facts" (as he called it)—that is, theology based upon actual experience—that is sound and to be trusted. "It is Biblical," he wrote. "It is Patristic. It is in complete conformity with the mind of the Church." So therefore, he concluded (and so do I), "in this connection may we regard St. Gregory Palamas as our guide and teacher, in our endeavor to theologize from the heart of the Church"—rather than from books and college diplomas and degrees. It is theology of the heart, rather than theology of the head.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.