

DEFINING ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

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It is necessary first to define the terms: "orthodox" and "spirituality". We cannot speak about "Orthodox spirituality" unless we know exactly what we mean by these two words. This is what the Holy Fathers of the Church have done. In his exceptional book "The Fountain of knowledge", and more specifically in the sections entitled "Philosophical Chapters", St. John of Damascus analyses the meanings of these words: Substance, nature, hypostasis, person etc. Because these terms can be defined differently within other contexts he explains why they are so defined here.

The adjective "orthodox" comes from the noun "orthodoxy" and shows the difference between the Orthodox Church and every other Christian denomination. The word "Orthodoxy" manifests the true knowledge about God and creation. This is the definition St. Athanasios of Sinai offers.

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

God has revealed this truth to people who were prepared to receive it. Judas expresses this point well by saying: "contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Judas, 3). In this quotation as in many other related passages it is clear that God reveals Himself to the Saints, i.e. to those who have reached a certain level of spiritual growth so as to receive this Revelation. The Holy Apostles were "healed" first, and then received the Revelation. And they transmitted this Revelation to their spiritual children not only by teaching them but primarily by mystically effecting their spiritual rebirth. In order for this faith to be preserved the Holy Fathers formulated the dogmas and doctrines. We accept the dogmas and doctrines; in other words we accept this revealed faith and remain with the Church so as to be healed. For faith is, on the one hand, Revelation to those purified and healed and, on the other it is the right path to reach theosis, for those who choose to follow the "way".

The word "spirituality" (pnevmatikotis) comes from "spiritual" (pnevmatikos). Thus, spirituality is the state of the spiritual person. Spiritual man has a certain way of behaving, a certain mentality. He acts differently from the way non-spiritual people behave.

The spirituality of the Orthodox Church, however, does not lead to abstract religious life; nor is it the fruits of man's inner strength. Spirituality is not an abstract religious life because the Church is the Body of Christ. It is not simply a religion which believes in a God, theoretically. The Second Person of the Holy Trinity -the Logos of God- assumed human nature for us. He united it with his hypostasis and became the Head of the Church.

Thus the Church is the Body of the Godman Christ. Moreover, spirituality is not a manifestation of the energies of the soul as reason is, or the feelings are etc. This is important to state because many people tend to label a person spiritual who cultivates his reasoning abilities: a scientist, an artist, an actor, a poet etc. This interpretation is not accepted by the Orthodox Church. Certainly we are not against scientists, poets etc. but we cannot call them spiritual people in the strict orthodox sense of the word.

In the teaching of the Apostle Paul the spiritual man is clearly distinguished from the man of the soul. Spiritual is the man who has the energy of the Holy Spirit within. Whereas the man of the soul is he who has body and soul but has not acquired the Holy Spirit, which gives life to the soul. "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man" (1 Cor. 2, 14-15).

In the same Epistle, the Apostle Paul draws the distinction between the spiritual man and the man of the flesh. The man of the flesh is he who does not have the Holy Spirit within his heart but retains all the other psychosomatic functions of a human being. Therefore it is evident that the term "man of the flesh" does not refer to the body, but signifies the man of the soul who lacks the Most Holy Spirit, and who operates out of his so called "psychobiological" self. "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?" (1 Cor. 3, 1-3).

If we combine the above mentioned passages with those referring to the Christians' adoption by grace, we ascertain that, according to the Apostle Paul, spiritual is the man who by grace has become son of God. "Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. operates out of his so called "psychobiological" self. "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8, 12-16).

Spiritual is the man who is witness to the Holy Spirit within his heart and is thus well aware of the indwelling of the Holy Triune God. In this way he realizes that he is son of God by grace; and within his heart therefore, he cries "Abba, Father". According to the testimony of the Saints this heartfelt cry is essentially the noetic prayer or prayer of the heart.

St. Basil the Great in examining what is meant by "man becomes the temple of the Most Holy Spirit", teaches -inspired by God- that the man who is the Temple of the Holy Spirit is not disturbed by temptations and constant cares; he seeks God and has communion with Him. Clearly the spiritual man is he who has the Holy Spirit within and this is confirmed by his uninterrupted remembrance of God.

According to St. Gregory Palamas, just as the man endowed with reason is called rational, in the same way the man who is enriched with the Holy Spirit is called spiritual. Thus spiritual is the "new man"; the regenerated by the grace of the Most Holy Spirit.

This same outlook is shared by all of the Holy Fathers. St. Symeon the New Theologian, for example, says that the man who is prudent, forbearing and meek, and who prays and beholds God, "walks in the spirit". He is pre-eminently the spiritual man, par excellence.

Again according to St. Symeon the New Theologian, when the parts of man's soul -his nous and intellect- are not "clothed" in the image of Christ, he is considered a man of the flesh, since he does not have the sense of spiritual glory. The man of the flesh is like the blind person who cannot see the light from the sun's rays. In fact he is considered both blind and lifeless. In contrast, the spiritual man, who partakes in the energies of the Holy Spirit, is alive in God.

As we emphasised, previously, communion in the Most Holy Spirit makes the man of the flesh spiritual. For this reason, according to Orthodox teaching, the spiritual man, par excellence, is the Saint. Certainly, this is said from the point of view that a Saint is he who partakes, in varying degrees, in the uncreated grace of God, and especially in the deifying energy of God.

The Saints are bearers and manifestations of Orthodox spirituality. They live in God and consecutively they speak about Him. In this sense, Orthodox spirituality is not abstracted but is embodied in the personhood of the Saints. Hence the Saints are not the good people, the moralists in the strict sense of the term, or simply those who are good natured. Rather, saint is the person who submits to and acts upon the guidance of the Most Holy Spirit within.

We are assured of the existence of the Saints firstly by their Orthodox teaching. The Saints received and are receiving the Revelation of God; they experience it and they formulate it. They are the infallible criteria of the Ecumenical Synods. The second assurance is the existence of holy relics of the Saints. The holy relics are the token that through the nous the grace of God transfigured the body also. Consequently, the bodies participate in the energies of the Most Holy Spirit.

The primary work of the Church is to lead man to theosis, to communion and union with God. Given this, in a sense we can say that the work of the Church is to "produce relics".

Thus, Orthodox spirituality is the experience of life in Christ, the atmosphere of the new man, regenerated by the grace of God. It is not an abstract, emotional and psychological state of being. It is man's union with God.

Within this framework we can detect some characteristic traits of Orthodox spirituality. It is firstly Christ-centred, since Christ is the one and only "remedy" for people, by virtue of the hypostatic unity of the divine and human nature in His person. Secondly, Orthodox spirituality is Holy Trinity-centred, since Christ is always united with the Father and the Holy Spirit. All the sacraments are performed in the name of the Triune

God. Being the Head of the Church, Christ cannot be thought of as being outside of it. Consequently Orthodox spirituality is also Ecclesiastic-centred, since only within the Church can we come into communion with Christ. Finally, as we shall explain later, Orthodox spirituality is mystical and ascetical.

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