

The Dark Night: St John of the Cross and Eastern Orthodox Theology

The Dark Night: St John of the Cross and Eastern Orthodox Theology

By Johannes Pulkkanen



UPPSALA
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Dissertation presented at Uppsala University to be publicly examined in Room IV, University Main Building, Uppsala, Friday, May 22, 2009 at 10:00 for the degree of Doctor of Theology. The examination will be conducted in English.

Abstract

Pulkkanen, J. 2009. *The Dark Night. St John of the Cross and Eastern Orthodox Theology*. 163 pp. ISBN 978-91-506-2073-3.

Russian émigré theologian Vladimir Lossky's (1903–1958) claims in his classic study of 1944, *The Mystical Theology of Eastern Church*, that the emphasis on the experience of spiritual separation from God in Western mystical theology ultimately goes back to how Latin churches began to add the word *filioque* (and-of-the-Son) to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in the sixth century. In his explanation Lossky discusses the theology of the Greek fathers, suggesting that the idea of the Spirit's generation from both the Father and the Son both builds upon and generates philosophical ideas that conflict with the possibility of receiving personal experiential knowledge of God. To exemplify such ideas and their negative influence Lossky points especially to neo-Platonism and the Western mystical theology of dark nights. Simultaneously he makes positive mention, for example, of the Orthodox theologies, of St Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022) and St Maximus Confessor (580–662).

The problem with Lossky's claims and suggestions is that he never substantiates them by actually comparing relevant sources with each other. As a consequence many refuse even to consider his claims, leaving the question of what distinguishes Western theologies of the dark night from Eastern Orthodox theology untouched. This study discusses the Spanish Carmelite St John of the Cross' (1542–1591) theology of dark nights of the soul from the point of view of Lossky's claims. It conducts a substantial comparison of St John's theology with the theology of St Symeon the New Theologian. In addition, it also compares select aspects of his theology with aspects of Vladimir Lossky's and St Maximus Confessor's theologies and the thought of the neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus (204–270). The purpose of these comparisons is to propose a definition of the relationship of St John of the Cross' theology of dark nights to central orthodox theological principles and emphases and to evaluate the truth of Lossky's more general attempt to define the Western notion of dark nights from an Eastern Orthodox perspective.

Keywords: Orthodox theology, Catholic theology, mystical theology, St John of the Cross, the dark night of the soul, Plotinus, neo-Platonism, spiritual exercises, St Symeon the New Theologian, compunction, spiritual father, Vladimir Lossky, *filioque*, Trinitarian theology, *energeiai*, St Maximus Confessor, deification, union with God

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ISBN 978-91-506-2073-3

urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-100633 (<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-100633>)

Printed in Sweden by Edita Västra Aros, Västerås 2009.

Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible apart from professional help, patience and kindness from the following persons: Professor Dr Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm and Docent Dr Anders Ekenberg, my supervisors; Dr Norman Russell, who provided invaluable advice and helped me to improve my English; Professor Dr Gösta Hallonsten and Dr Magnus Lundberg, who read and made important comments upon an early version of the whole study; Professor Dr Gunnar af Hällström, who helped me to get started some years ago; Dr Olof Andrén, Docent Dr Ezra Gebremedhin, Docent Dr Anders Gerdmar, Doctoral Candidate Joel Halldorf, author and theologian David Heith-Stade, Dr Karin Johannesson, Doctoral Candidate Maria Klasson Sundin, Doctoral Candidate Anders Kraal, author and theologian Torsten Kälvemark, who all read parts of this study and provided professional insight; Professor Dr Eberhard Herrmann, Docent Dr Mattias Martinson, Dr Hugo Strandberg and Professor Dr Kari Syreeni, who took time to comment upon my early attempts to form a hermeneutical position; and all my colleagues and friends at the Department of Theology. I alone bear responsibility for whatever deficiencies this study still contains.

I am also grateful for the financial support of the following institutions and foundations: Gunvor och Josef Anérs, Helge Ax:son Johnsons, O Ekmans, Ordo Sancti Constantini Magni, Olaus Petri, Räty-Penttinen.

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Abbreviations

St Symeon the New Theologian's Works

CAT	<i>Catéchèses</i>
CAP	<i>Chapitres théologiques, gnostiques et pratiques</i>
EP	St Symeon's Epistles
ETH	<i>Chapitres éthiques</i>
EUCH	<i>Action de grâces</i>
HYMN	<i>Hymnes</i>
THEOL	<i>Chapitres théologiques</i>

St John of the Cross' Works

CA	<i>Cuatro avisos a un religioso para alcanzar la perfección</i>
C	<i>Cántico spiritual</i>
Car	<i>Cartas</i>
Caut	<i>Cautelas a un religioso</i>
D	<i>Dichos de luz y amor</i>
Grad	<i>Grados de perfección</i>
Ll	<i>Llama de amor viva</i>
N	<i>Noche oscura</i>
S	<i>Subida del Monte Carmelo</i>
P	<i>Poesías</i>

Frequently Quoted Studies

Hadot: <i>Exercises</i>	<i>Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault</i> by Pierre Hadot
Hadot: <i>Philosophy</i>	<i>What is Philosophy?</i> by Pierre Hadot
Lossky: <i>Mystical</i>	<i>The Mystical Theology of Eastern</i>

Louth: <i>Origins</i>	<i>Church</i> by Vladimir Lossky <i>The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition. From Plato to Denys</i> by Andrew Louth
Russell: <i>Deification</i>	<i>The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition</i> by Norman Russell
Thunberg: <i>Mediator</i>	<i>Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor</i> by Lars Thunberg

Works of St Maximus the Confessor

<i>Amb. Io. And Amb. Th.</i>	<i>The Liber Ambiguorum</i>
<i>Cap. Car.</i>	<i>The Chapters on Love</i>
<i>Cap. Theol.</i>	<i>The Gnostic Centuries</i>
<i>Ep. 2.</i>	St Maximus' letter to John the Cubicularius
<i>Myst.</i>	<i>The Mystagogia</i>
<i>Opusc.</i>	St Maximus' works on Christological themes
<i>Or. Dom.</i>	<i>Commentary on the Lord's Prayer</i>

Other

<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
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INTRODUCTION

Russian émigré theologian Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958) declares in his classic study of 1944, *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient* that the Orthodox theological tradition does not distinguish sharply between mysticism and theology, or between experience and doctrine, but views them as aspects of the same thing.¹ At the same time he also claims that the ideological environment of the Western World does not support this understanding of theology. Rather, in this environment theology has for a long time tended in a philosophical, and as such an impersonal and non-experiential, direction. He writes:

Indeed, in the doctrinal conditions peculiar to the West all properly theocentric speculation runs the risk of [...] becoming a mysticism of the 'the divine abyss', as in the gottheit of Meister Eckhart; of becoming an impersonal apophaticism of the divine nothingness prior to the Trinity. Thus by a paradoxical circuit we return through Christianity to the mysticism of the neo-Platonists.²

Moreover, Lossky exemplifies neo-Platonism especially with references to the founder of this philosophical school, the Greek philosopher Plotinus (204-270), and asserts that when his kind of mysticism predominates in theology it becomes an obstacle to knowing God in a personal way, as the specific God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and Christ himself.³ Therefore Western mystical theology emphasizes separation from God at the expense of his presence. He points out:

In fact both the heroic attitude of the great saints of Western Christendom, a prey to the sorrow of a tragic separation from God, and the dark night of the

¹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 8. This corresponds to his maintaining simultaneously that the explicit end of Orthodox theological expression and spiritual practices as a whole is to enable the believers to participate "in the divine life of the Holy Trinity" so that they may become deified. See Lossky: *Mystical*, 65. The English title of this study is *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. See the "Biography" of this study for more information.

² Lossky: *Mystical*, p. 65.

³ For references to Plotinus see p. 29 f., 37 f., 46 f., 49 of Lossky: *Mystical*.

soul considered as a way, as a spiritual necessity, are unknown in the spirituality of the Eastern Church.⁴

Furthermore he declares that this difference, which the reader is most likely to associate with the theology of the Spanish Carmelite priest and monastic reformer St John of the Cross (1542-1591), ultimately goes back to how Latin theologians began to claim that the Spirit proceeds not only from the Father but also from the Son. It goes back to how Latin churches consequently began to add the word *filioque* (and-of-the-Son) to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed after the Third Council of Toledo (589), and in particular to Pope Benedict VIII's doing the same in early eleventh century Rome.⁵ Thus according to Lossky

the two traditions have separated on a mysterious doctrinal point, relating to the Holy Spirit, who is the source of holiness. Two different dogmatic conceptions correspond to two different experiences, to two ways of sanctification which scarcely resemble one another. Since the separation, the ways which lead to sanctity are not the same in the West as in the East. The one proves its fidelity to Christ in the solitude and abandonment of the night of Gethsemane, the other gains certainty of union with God in the light of the Transfiguration.⁶

In association with this claim Lossky presents the mystical theology of the Byzantine hegumen, i.e. monastic superior, and priest, St Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) as something of a paradigm of this kind of positive way to sanctification.⁷ Lossky, however, saw no possibility of ultimately resolving this issue. In a footnote to the passage just quoted he also adds the following:

In thus opposing the ways of sanctification proper to East and West, we would not wish to make any absolute distinction. This is much too delicate and subtle a matter to lend itself to any kind of schematization; thus in the West, the experience of the dark night is in no way characteristic of St. Bernard, for instance; on other hand, Eastern spirituality provides us with at least one clear enough example of the dark night, in St. Tikhon Zadonsky (eighteenth century).⁸

⁴ Lossky: *Mystical*, 226.

⁵ Lossky: *Mystical*, 12–16, 21–22, 58–66. Jaroslav Pelikan: *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)*, 183–198.

⁶ Lossky: *Mystical*, 226–27.

⁷ In this study the expression “mystical theology” denotes the teaching of those spiritual directors whose explicit aim is guide their disciples to union with God as much as that is possible in this life in the context of the Christian Church. “Mysticism” in its turn denotes all spiritual teachings that promote union of the soul with divinity.

⁸ Lossky: *Mystical*, 227, n.1.

Thus Lossky seems to be saying five things. The first is that neo-Platonism plays a role in creating the emphasis on separation from God in Western mystical theology. The second is that the same applies to the Western decision to add *filioque* to the Nicene Creed. The third is that the mystical theology of St John of the Cross exemplifies the Western emphasis. The fourth is that the theology of St Symeon the New Theologian is a prime example of an opposite Eastern emphasis. The fifth is that the matter defies simple categorizations.

In my view Lossky's claims contain kernels of truth. This applies especially if one reads them in the light of those patristic epistemological principles he also presents in the above-mentioned study. Yet since Lossky never substantiates his claims in a way that would transform them into a scholarly thesis which others can accept, reject or modify on the basis of how sources that are of relevance to the issues at hand have been interpreted, they contribute in their present state neither to ecumenism nor to research. This is evident especially in the way his attempt to soften them has not been able to deter their reception from being sadly polarized: While some Orthodox theologians support the claims more or less uncritically, others, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, reject them as too speculative and as such too problematic to be taken seriously.⁹

⁹ The Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart rejects Lossky's anti-Western claims. See his article "The Bright Morning of the Soul," 324–326. According to John Zizioulas, another Orthodox theologian, they are "in need of revision." See his "The Doctrine of God the Trinity Today: Suggestions for an Ecumenical Study," in *The Forgotten Trinity*, 110. The Orthodox theologian John Romanides seems to support Lossky's anti-Western claims without reservations. See for example the way he introduces "Franco-Latin" Trinitarian doctrines in his *An Outline of Orthodox Patristic Dogmatics*, 13–46. See the third volume of Yves Congar's *Je crois en l'Esprit Saint – la Fleuve de Vie coule en Orient et en Occident*, 14–18, 97–116, 271–276, for a Catholic critique of Lossky's view. According to this author Lossky's sharp distinction between mystical theologies East and West goes back to the idea of the French Jesuit Théodore de Régnon (d. 1893) that St Augustine and the Cappadocian fathers initiated two dominating and opposite models of Trinitarian theology. The Swedish theologian Bo Sandahl makes this same observation in his *Person, relation och Gud*, 74–76. The French theologian Michel René Barnes is of the opinion that de Régnon's reading of St Augustine and the Cappadocian fathers was superficial. See Barnes' article "De Régnon Reconsidered," 51–58. For an opposite view see Kirsten Hennessy's article "An Answer to de Régnon's Accusers: Why We Should Not Speak of 'His' Paradigm," in *Harvard Theological Review* 100:2 (2007), 179–197. See Lossky: *Mystical*, 57–58 for his key references to de Régnon's magnum opus *Études de théologie positive sur la Sainteté Trinite*. See Irénée Hausherr's article "Les Orientaux connaissent-ils les 'nuits' de saint Jean de la Croix?" for a general criticism of the position that the theology of dark nights is unknown in Eastern Orthodox theology.

Purpose, Method and Content

The general aim of this study is to contribute to the ongoing discussion of the manner in which Eastern and Western mystical theologies differ from and resemble each other and what such differences and similarities mean. To this end this study seeks to propose a definition of the relationship of St John of the Cross' theology of dark nights to central orthodox theological principles and emphases. Likewise it seeks to evaluate the truth of Lossky's more general attempt to define the Western notion of dark night from an Eastern Orthodox perspective.

In terms of method this is a comparative study. As such it consists of one major and several smaller comparisons. The major comparison concerns the above-mentioned St Symeon the New Theologian's and St John of the Cross' mystical theologies. I present these theologies on the basis of the question which also underlies the work of these theologians as spiritual directors. This question is what they expect their disciples to do, believe and experience to reach union with God and in which order. Since their respective answers to this question are substantial, I will deliver them in altogether six parallel chapters, two in each of the three parts of the study.

Each part of the study also contains two additional chapters. The parts begin with a chapter that presents a supplementary point of comparison from a perspective that corresponds to the content of the following two parallel chapters. The parts end with a chapter that contains a concluding comparative discussion.

Thus *Part One* begins with a chapter that presents the teaching of ancient philosophers, especially of the above-mentioned Greek neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus (204-270), on spiritual exercises. The contents of this chapter help to evaluate the truth of Lossky's claims concerning the influence of neo-Platonism in Western mystical theology. In addition, they help to understand similarities and differences in St Symeon's and St John's teachings. This is possible because the theme spiritual exercises is central also in the two chapters that follow, summarizing and presenting the way St Symeon and St John address their disciples who are still beginners. The comparative discussion that ends this part lays the ground for the rest of my analysis.

Part Two begins with a chapter that discusses the patristic epistemology Vladimir Lossky presents in the above-mentioned study, a study which I will from now on call simply *The Mystical Theology*. The purpose of this discussion is to cast more light on his polemical interpretation of the *filioque*-doctrine. Its purpose is also to provide tools to analyze St Symeon's and St John's theological epistemologies which are a central theme in the two chapters that follow, presenting the theologians' teachings as regards the

further development of their disciples. The comparative discussion in the end of this part continues to develop the previous analysis.

Part Three begins with a chapter that presents central aspects of St Maximus Confessor's (580-662) doctrine of deification. I include this great patristic theologian as a point of comparison for two reasons. The first is that Lossky's patristic epistemology and St Symeon's mystical theology alone are too limited a base for proposing a definition of the relationship of St John of the Cross' theology of dark nights to central orthodox theological principles and emphases. The second reason is that St Maximus' doctrine of deification provides perspectives that help to assess St John's theology. Deification is also a central theme in the following two chapters that summarize and present St Symeon's and St John's teaching on their disciples' final spiritual state. The "General Conclusion" of the study follows immediately after the concluding comparative discussion of this part.

This Study and Other Related Studies

David Bentley Hart has previously addressed the very problem of this study in a substantial article written in the year 2004. Like me he also uses Vladimir Lossky's remarks on the Western spirituality of dark nights as a point of departure to a study of St John of the Cross' mystical theology. He focuses especially on "the progress of the soul toward divinization in Christ," hoping to be able to show that St John

was a thoroughly classical contemplative, of the most 'Eastern' variety, whose works can be understood only properly as accounts of the soul's experience – in the Holy Spirit – of resurrection.¹⁰

With this aim Hart embarks on a reading of St John of Cross which lacks references to Lossky and other Orthodox theologians. He admits that St John's theology contains features that are problematic from an Eastern Orthodox perspective. These are for example the way this Spanish saint seems to emphasize "the infinite disparity between God and the soul" and his consequent conviction that the purification that precedes the divine union takes the form of the soul's total annihilation.¹¹ Yet, Hart argues, since the soul's disparity with God is in St John's teaching simultaneously her "innate capacity to be transformed" and to become participant in "the same love that unites the Trinity in its eternal life of love" and in this way to become deified, the only thing that actually distinguishes St John's mystical theology

¹⁰ David Bentley Hart: "The Bright Morning of the Soul," 328.

¹¹ David Bentley Hart: "The Bright Morning of the Soul," 339 and 341.

from the theology of Eastern Orthodox fathers is his “Western tongue” and “accent.”¹²

In my view Hart’s article does not provide a solution to the problem Lossky’s claims represent. This is not because his interpretation of St John’s theology is not possible, but because he does not read this mystical theology in the light of comparable Eastern Orthodox alternatives or even of a pronounced understanding of the latter.

Andrew Louth makes mention of Lossky’s polemics in his study of 1980, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*. This is when he addresses the problem of how St John’s doctrine of the dark night relates to patristic theology in the chapter “Patristic Mysticism and St John of the Cross.”¹³ His general conclusion in this chapter is basically the same as above: the differences are more a matter of style than of substance.

In discussing this question Louth focuses, for example, on the suggestion that the Eastern Orthodox emphasis on synergism, i.e. “the idea that at every point the soul works together with God,” is in conflict with the way Western theologians presuppose in allegiance to St Augustine that the will of the soul cannot actually respond to God’s grace except by being moved by grace to do so.¹⁴ He admits that St John’s emphasis on passivity as the response of the soul to God’s grace seems to confirm this suggestion. Yet he also points out that this very response in St John’s theology presupposes “great effort” from the side of the soul’s will.¹⁵ Correspondingly he suggests that when St John compares the soul to a model who must be absolutely still when the artist paints her and when Macarius and other patristic fathers use the same image to call attention to the need of the soul to be “attentive” to the work of the Divine Artist, this difference is only one of emphasis.¹⁶ There is according to Louth no “fundamental contrast between the idea of our responding to God and the idea of our working with God.”¹⁷

Louth makes no claim of giving this topic an exhaustive treatment, and does not. At the same time he makes an important contribution especially by calling attention to the fact that the kind of passivity St John promotes presupposes great effort of will. Although I will not follow Louth in assessing this topic, his remarks are nevertheless a reason not to overemphasize the significance of the differences in what St John and St

¹² David Bentley Hart: “The Bright Morning of the Soul,” 342–343.

¹³ I refer to pages 174–185 of the study in question.

¹⁴ Louth: *Origins*, 183. Louth refers this suggestion especially to Mme Lot-Borodine’s *La deification de l’homme* which is a very Losskian interpretation of the differences between mystical theologies East and West.

¹⁵ Louth: *Origins*, 184.

¹⁶ Louth: *Origins*, 184.

¹⁷ Louth: *Origins*, 185.

Symeon, St Maximus and Vladimir Lossky teach with regard to divine-human cooperation.

Previously Helen Creticos Theodoropoulos has related aspects of St Symeon's theology to that of St Bernard of Clairvaux in her doctoral dissertation of 1995, *Love of God and Love of Neighbor in the Mystical Theology of St Bernard of Clairvaux and St Symeon the New Theologian*.¹⁸ According to her, St Bernard's Augustinian emphasis on the corruption of human nature does not allow him to fully integrate the two loves in question. The same does not apply to St Symeon's mystical theology, which is grounded in the Greek patristic view of human nature as something essentially good.¹⁹

Scholars have compared the theology of St John with that of various Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Buddhist, Hindu and other mystics and thinkers. The same applies to key Western philosophers as diverse as René Descartes, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Yet no one, as far as I know, has compared him seriously with an Eastern Christian mystical theologian of an analogous status.²⁰ In 1955 Jean Krynen focused on the influence of Dionysius Aeropagite on St John's theology in a voluminous (995 p.) doctoral dissertation from Sorbonne, and there exist quite a number of articles and essays on this same topic.²¹ In addition, some authors have made brief attempts to relate his theology to that of St Gregory of Nyssa.²²

Two other rather recent studies resemble this one in terms of their general aim and methodological approach. These are Michael J. Fahey's long essay *Trinitarian Theology East and West: St. Thomas Aquinas – St. Gregory Palamas* from 1986 and Anna Ngaire Williams' monograph *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* from 1999.

Given that so little has been done to bring clarity to the questions Lossky's claims raise concerning especially the Western mystical theology of dark nights, this study is long overdue.

¹⁸ The University of Chicago: The Faculty of the Divinity School, June 1995.

¹⁹ See especially her concluding "Chapter VI: Bernard and Symeon in Dialogue," 338–369.

²⁰ See the section "Estudios comparativos" (515–589) in Manuel Diego Sánchez' *Bibliografía Sistemática de San Juan de la Cruz*.

²¹ Jean Krynen: *Théologie du baroque: Dénys le Mystique et Saint Jean de la Croix. Contribution à la l'étude de la tradition dionysienne en Espagne au XVIe siècle et à l'étude des sources de Saint Jean de la Croix*. See also the chapter "Patristic Mysticism and St John of the Cross" in Louth: *Origins*. See pp. 353, 386 and 567–568 of *Bibliografía Sistemática de San Juan de la Cruz* for other essays and articles on this topic.

²² See for example Luis Gardet's article "De Grégoire de Nysse à Saint Jean de la Croix: Les nuits sanjuanistes, en expériences mystiques en terre non-chrétienne" from 1956 and Jean-Philippe Houdret's article "Grégoire de Nysse et Saint Jean de la Croix. Lecture de deux textes de la 'Vie de Moïse'" from 1979.

St Symeon's and St John's Sources of Inspiration

St Symeon was a son of a provincial aristocrat. He had come to Constantinople at an early age to study and pursue a career at the imperial court. He worked eagerly at his studies but left school without moving ahead to learn the Greek classics.²³ At first he managed a patrician's household and became later a chamberlain of the emperor's bodyguard (σπαθαροκουβικουλάριος) and a member of the senate.²⁴ Although he was advancing his career, his life, according to his own words, was far from exemplary.²⁵ It became a spiritual burden.²⁶

To find a cure St Symeon turned to St Symeon the Pious (ca 917–ca 987), a lay monk and sought-for spiritual father at the influential Studios monastery in Constantinople.²⁷ Although this man was somewhat eccentric in his ways, he commanded the respect of many because of his ability to give spiritual counsel. The encounter transformed the life of the younger Symeon completely. He became a monk himself at the age of 27 serving at first the elder in his daily ministry at the Studios monastery and later as a spiritual father and hegumen at the monastery of St Mamas.²⁸ Their writings confirm their close association.²⁹ What the elder initiated, the younger received, and developed further. In this sense they relate to each other much like the prophets Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament.³⁰

In training his disciple, St Symeon the Pious made him read the writings of St Mark the Monk, also known as “the Ascetic” or as “the Hermit,” and of Diodochus of Photiki, two fifth-century authors deeply rooted in the tradition of the desert fathers.³¹ The same seems to apply to the homilies of the desert

²³ Nicéas Stéthatos: *Vie*, 3:2. See Håkan Gunnarsson's *Mystical Realism in the Early Theology of Gregory Palamas*, 56–63, for a short introduction to St Symeon's life and thought.

²⁴ Nicéas Stéthatos: *Vie*, 3:9–11. Hilarion Alfeyev: *St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 29–30.

²⁵ I refer especially to how he makes mention of himself in HYMN 24 and in passages such as CAT 22: 281–288 and EUCH 2:6–35.

²⁶ Nicéas Stéthatos: *Vie*, 3:3.

²⁷ Nicéas Stéthatos: *Vie*, 3:4.

²⁸ Nicéas Stéthatos: *Vie*, 3:5–21. See also Hilarion Alfeyev's *St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 19–27, 31–34, 102–123, and H.J.M Turner's *St Symeon the New Theologian and Spiritual Fatherhood*, 24–31, 51–58.

²⁹ St Symeon the Pious is also commonly known as St Symeon the Studite. See how Hilarion Alfeyev compares the contents of his *Discours Ascétique* with the production of the younger Symeon in the chapter “the Influence of Symeon the Studite on Symeon the New Theologian” of his study *St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*. See also the section “L'Écrit du Syméon Studite,” 44–51, of Irénée Hausherr's “Introduction” to Nicéas Stéthatos' *Vie*.

³⁰ 2 Kings 1–8.

³¹ Alfeyev, Hilarion: *St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 129–130. See *Philokalia: The Complete Text, Volume One* for an English translation of the texts in question.

father St Makarios of Egypt.³² It is also known that St Symeon read and appreciated the classic handbook of ascetic life, *The Ladder of the Divine Ascent* by St John Climacus and St Gregory Nazianzen's festal orations, both of which belong to the Church's daily cycle of reading.³³ Moreover, he shows familiarity with St Athanasios' classic work, *The Life of Anthony*, and other similar hagiographical sources and he may have read the ascetic writings of sixth century father St Isaac the Syrian, also known as St Isaac of Niniveh.³⁴

It is also to be expected that the culture of the Studios monastery influenced the younger Symeon as he served the elder. The monks at Studios were to live not out of the world but in midst of it. The monastic offices were open to the people of the city and monks served as spiritual fathers and religious educators. Hymnography and the veneration of icons flourished and the monastery had a library and a scriptorium for copying books.³⁵ The way St Symeon emphasizes the importance of being separated from the world, while he simultaneously criticizes the powerful for corruption and instructs both monks and laypeople in helping the poor and serving others, all reflect this culture.³⁶ I mention this aspect here since this study reflects it only in part.

St John began his spiritual career in a school for poor children in Medina del Campo. From there he moved on to serve at a hospital for poor people with venereal diseases. When the administrator of this hospital discovered his abilities he helped him to enrol at a Jesuit school. Later he entered the novitiate of the Carmelites and was sent to study in Salamanca. There he first received three years of training in the so-called seven liberal arts of grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music and after that a year of specific training in scriptural interpretation, preaching, teaching the catechism and in conducting the liturgy.³⁷

³² Alfeyev, Hilarion: *St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 130–131. See also Walter Volker's *Praxis und Theoria bei Symeon dem neuen Theologen: Ein Beitrag zur byzantinischen Mystik*, 357, and Athanasios Hatzopoulos' *Two Outstanding Cases in Byzantine Spirituality: The Macarian Homilies and Symeon the New Theologian*, 49.

³³ See Kalistos Ware's "Introduction" to *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, in *The Classics of Western Spirituality* series, 61. See also Hilarion Alfeyev's *St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 132. Walther Volker especially has demonstrated the close association of the theologies of St Symeon and St John Climacus in his *Praxis und Theoria bei Symeon dem neuen Theologen: Ein Beitrag zur byzantinischen Mystik*. St John was a sixth or seventh century hegumen of the monastery of Catherine on Mount Sinai.

³⁴ Alfeyev, Hilarion: *St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 132.

³⁵ Alfeyev, Hilarion: *St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 13–16.

³⁶ See for example CAT 2:107–120, CAT 5:594–632 and CAP 3:90–100. See also the chapter "Monasticism and the World" (149–159) in Basil Krivochéine's *In the Light of Christ*.

³⁷ Crisogno de Jesus: *Vida de San Juan de la Cruz*, 25–66. Kieran Kavanaugh: "General Introduction," 9–12. See also Anders Piltz' *The World of Medieval Learning*, 15–23, for background.

These studies exposed St John especially to the theology of Thomas Aquinas, the scholastic version of stoicism and the philosophy of Aristotle, whom St John often calls simply “the Philosopher.” In addition, he became acquainted with various forms of Platonism. This was at least to a degree through St Augustine and through St Dionysius Areopagite who was familiar with Plotinus’ neo-Platonism through the philosopher Proclus (d. 485).³⁸ Moreover, St John’s works bear traces of the mystical theologies of for example Gregory the Great, Hugh of St Victor, Bonaventure, Tauler, and Francisco de Osuna.³⁹ The sublime sensuality of his poetry clearly relates to the Spanish poetry of his time and his emphasis on the need to deny spiritual consolations may relate to a similar tendency in 14th century Spanish Islamic mysticism.⁴⁰

In the year 1562 St Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) had founded a convent in Avila for Carmelite nuns who sought to return to evangelical simplicity as expressed in the original Carmelite rule, *The Rule of Saint Albert*.⁴¹ This reform-initiative grew rapidly into an independent branch within the order, the *Descalced* Carmelites. St John met St Teresa while a student in the year 1567, joining this reform a year later as one of its first two friars.⁴² In this way he both become influenced by and participated in shaping the *descalced* way of life. These reformed communities were small, the nuns and friars lived in poverty praying the full *Liturgy of the Hours*, spending additional time in silent prayer, and doing penance. While the sisters lived enclosed lives, the friars also engaged in ministry. Expansion and missionary zeal were characteristic of the reform’s early days.⁴³

It is also important to be aware that both St Symeon and St John were keen students of the Scriptures and they referred their mystical theologies to them.⁴⁴ The former explicitly emphasized the importance of searching the

³⁸ A Benedictine of Stanbrook Abbey: *Medieval Mystical Tradition and St John of the Cross*, 18. Kieran Kavanaugh: “General Introduction,” 35–37. Cary, Phillip: *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self*, 31–40, 55–57. St Dionysius is also the author St Aquinas quotes the most in his *Summa Theologiae*. See Ralph McNerny’s comment on this in Thomas Aquinas’ *Selected Writings*, 429.

³⁹ See the chapters II–VI of the *Medieval Mystical Tradition and St John of the Cross* by a Benedictine of Stanbrook Abbey.

⁴⁰ Kieran Kavanaugh: “General Introduction,” 35. Miguel Asín Palacios’ *Saint John of the Cross and Islam*, 14.

⁴¹ The new convent was dedicated to St Joseph.

⁴² The other friar was Antonio of Jesus.

⁴³ See for example Rowan Williams’ “Introduction: A Biographical Sketch” to his monograph *Teresa of Avila*.

⁴⁴ See the chapter “Symeon and Holy Scripture” of Hilarion Alfeyev’s *St Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition* and for example Gabriel Gastro’s article “Escritura Sacrada” in Eulogio Pacho’s *Diccionario San Juan de la Cruz* and Francisco de Brändle’s study *Biblia en San Juan de la Cruz* as regards this question.

Scriptures and it is known that St John's original disciples marveled at the amount of biblical passages he had learned by heart.⁴⁵

In the first chapter of each part I shall provide some background to the thought of our three supplementary discussion partners: Plotinus, Vladimir Lossky, and St Maximus Confessor.

Reading the Sources

The Writings of St Symeon and St John

The six chapters that present St Symeon's and St John's mystical theologies go back to their original writings, which I have consulted along with existing translations.⁴⁶ In the chapters themselves I refer all short quotes to original Greek and Spanish texts and longer quotes to both these and their translations, indicating when I have modified the latter. One general modification is that I have consistently used the word 'mind' to render the Greek word *nous* ($\nu\omicron\upsilon\delta\zeta$) in the chapters which present St Symeon's theology. This word is usually translated both as "mind" and as "intellect" neither of which actually captures its meaning. This is because the word $\nu\omicron\upsilon\delta\zeta$ refers in ancient Greek not only to the human faculty of cognition but also to the human the ability to enter into participation with invisible objects of knowledge.⁴⁷ At the same time I have used the word 'intellect' to render the Spanish word *intellecto* which St John uses in a sense that both differs from and resembles the way St Symeon uses the word $\nu\omicron\upsilon\delta\zeta$, as especially *Part Two* of the study will demonstrate.

In *Part Two* of this study I have organized the chapter on St Symeon's theology, "Faith, Charisms, and the Eucharist," on the basis of the themes St John discusses when addressing the disciples who have left the state of beginners. This is because while St John presupposes that his disciples will ascend gradually from the state of beginners toward higher more or less definable states, St Symeon does not. For him there exist two fundamental spiritual states: the state of baptized penitents and that of those whom the Spirit has transformed through a second spiritual baptism. In this way I have, despite the difference, been able to produce material that makes the comparison possible.

⁴⁵ See also Crisogno de Jesus: *Vida de San Juan de la Cruz*, 301, footnote 46.

⁴⁶ See the *Bibliography* for more information.

⁴⁷ See "Introduction" (xiv-xvi) in Louth: *Origins*.

Reading Plotinus, Vladimir Lossky, and St Maximus the Confessor

The interpretation of Plotinus' concept of spiritual exercises at the beginning of *Part One* is based especially on Andrew Louth's account of his thought in his *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*. The inspiration to my brief comparison of Plato and Plotinus comes from Pierre Hadot's *Plotinus, or The Simplicity of Vision*, which also influenced my interpretation of this philosopher's mystical teaching. Yet the interpretation of Plato's *Symposium* in the context of this comparison is my own.

Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient, which I discuss in the beginning of *Part Two*, is Vladimir Lossky's main work. Apart from it he has also written other theological works which I have not included in the present discussion. The first reason is the need to keep the discussion in manageable limits. The second reason is that since Lossky did not return to substantiate the above-mentioned claims in them, they are of secondary significance to this study.

Since translating theological texts from French to English is seldom problematic, and since the English translation of the *Théologie mystique* is of good quality, I have used it consistently, only checking the translation of larger quotes with the French original. From now on I will also refer to this study in English, simply as the *Mystical Theology*.

The chapter "St Maximus' Doctrine on Deification" is based on his writings read with the help of existing translations, Lars Thunberg's *Microcosm and Mediator: the Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, Norman Russell's *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* and few other studies.

PART ONE – SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

The ancient concept of spiritual exercises is only vaguely related to philosophy as practiced in contemporary universities. Instead it goes back to philosophy as the first Christians encountered it. The first part of this chapter discusses this encounter, and its second part provides an account of what spiritual exercises meant to the Greek philosopher Plotinus, the founder of neo-Platonism. While the discussion will help to discover certain similarities in St Symeon's and St John's mystical theologies, the account will make it possible not only to identify but also to analyze key differences. This analysis in turn will help to estimate the truth of the way Vladimir Lossky points to the direction of neo-Platonism when judging the Western theology of dark nights.

Background to Spiritual Exercises in Philosophy and in Theology

The philosophical schools of Greek antiquity considered their task to be “the love of and search for” wisdom which they often defined as “the state of perfect peace of mind.”¹ In their view the opposite of this state was the ignorance which various passionate attachments to life's pleasures and concerns cause.² Accordingly the Epicureans, for example, believed “the quest for false pleasures” to be the major human problem, the Stoics “egoistic self-interest” and the Cynics “social constraints and conventions” and “luxury and vanity.”³

To eradicate such problems the schools recommended various spiritual exercises (*ἄσκησις, μελέτη*) which their disciples should practice under the guidance of a capable teacher, a lover of wisdom. Thus the Epicureans and the Stoics taught their disciples to read, memorize and practice chosen precepts, i.e. rules for practical and intellectual life, while the Cynics promoted whatever supported their quest for freedom and independence

¹ Hadot: *Philosophy*, 102.

² Hadot: *Philosophy*, 102.

³ Hadot: *Philosophy*, 102.

from social conventions. This was both ascetic bodily exercises and even vulgar “doggy” acts the purpose of which was to point toward a more natural and as such more true way of living. It is told for example that Diogenes of Sinope (d. 323 BC), who was one of the first Cynics and whom his contemporaries nicknamed “the dog,” threw away “his bowl and his cup when he saw children do without such utensils.”⁴ In fact, the name of the whole school derives from the Greek adjective *kynikos* (κυνικός) which in its turn derives from the word dog, i.e. *kyon* (κύων).

The goal of the philosophers’ spiritual exercises was not only to free people from their attachments. Rather it was transformation of the human self into wisdom. Interestingly, the schools viewed this goal as lying outside their way of life. According to them this transformation occurred when both philosophical discourse and its related exercises achieved their end in the metamorphosis of the philosopher into a friend of the gods. I refer to the ancient concept of the sage as a person who has passed from the state of seeing reality in the manner of the mortals into contemplation of the same reality together with gods themselves.⁵ The fact that few believed in the possibility of de facto reaching this deified state did not render the ideal redundant.⁶

Since the basic idea behind the concept of spiritual exercises is commonsensical, with an exercise repeated in some area of life allowing one to gain strength in that area, religious movements of antiquity including the emerging Christian church, could easily adopt and transform it to fit its own purposes. In addition, early Christian teachers could always refer to St Paul, who seems to promote the concept as such by writing: “I discipline my body and bring it into subjection.” He also instructs his disciples to do the same so that they also can obtain “an imperishable crown” (ἀφθαρτος στέφανος) and not become “disqualified” in their ministry to others (1 Cor 9:24-27). In any case, the Church soon began to give detailed instruction on how the faithful should fast, pray and worship at given times of the year and what scriptural texts and saints’ lives they should read and mediate upon.

This development had a lot to do with how important early fathers such as St Clement of Alexandria (d. ca 215), Origen (d. 254) and Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399), St Basil (d. 379), St Gregory Nazianzus (d. 389), and St Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395) and others presented the Christian faith as the most true of philosophies, the one that was also capable of achieving the ends which the schools had only dreamt of.⁷ Today their approach to this question continues to find expression, for example, in the *Philokalia*, the great Greek 18th century Hesychast collection of texts from Orthodox spiritual masters from

⁴ Hadot: *Philosophy*, 110.

⁵ Hadot: *Philosophy*, 220ff.

⁶ Hadot: *Philosophy*, 220ff.

⁷ Hadot: *Spiritual Exercises*, 128ff.

the fourth to the fifteenth centuries. The *Philokalia* includes texts of both St Symeon the New Theologian and St Maximus the Confessor.

Most early Christian teachers encountered the philosophers' definition of the basic human problem, and their attempt to solve it by spiritual exercises, in its Stoic and Platonic versions. This was to a great part thanks to the Jewish author, teacher and theologian, Philo (d. 50), whose writings contain two lists of typical Stoico-Platonic spiritual exercises. The first of these itemizes practices such as "research (*zetesis*), thorough investigation (*skepsis*), reading (*anagnosis*), listening (*akroasis*), attention (*prosoche*), self-mastery (*egkrateia*), and indifference to indifferent things," while the second adds "reading, meditations (*meletai*), therapies of the passions, remembrance of good things, self-mastery (*egkrateia*) and the accomplishment of duties."⁸

These lists are interesting especially since they combine some exercises that we associate today with academia, with others that we could also associate with for example a religious therapy of some kind. According to the French scholar Pierre Hadot, to whom I owe this information on ancient philosophy and early Christianity, the latter observation is perfectly valid. In fact, the Stoics and even the Epicureans thought that spiritual exercises also served in bring health to the soul.⁹ According to the latter school, for example, the purpose of more introspective exercises such as being attentive to one's self, *prosoche* (προσοχή), was to allow their disciples to distinguish between three categories of attachments and desires; natural and necessary, natural but unnecessary and "neither natural nor necessary" and thus help them to discover the therapeutic power of "the simple joy of existing."¹⁰ Even the Stoics defined this exercise primarily in terms of self-knowledge. Its purpose was to make the philosophers aware of their acts and intentions so that they could know their "place in the cosmos" and live in the presence and guidance of the Logos, the universal Reason.¹¹

Although the Christian conception of healing differed from that of the philosophers, they also understood the therapeutic value of spiritual exercises. It was in fact so easy to Christianize *prosoche* that it came to summarize monastic Christians' attitude to life.¹² The early monastic fathers in particular immediately understood the value of guarding one's inner self from thoughts and intentions that violated the healing presence of God's

⁸ Hadot: *Spiritual Exercises*, 84. ζήτησις, σκέψις, ανάγνωσις, ακρόασις, προσοχή, ἐγκράτεια, μελέται (plural of μελέτη). Hadot renders the Greek words in Latin characters.

⁹ Hadot: *Spiritual Exercises*, 87.

¹⁰ Hadot: *Spiritual Exercises*, 87.

¹¹ Hadot: *Philosophy*, 138 (135–139).

¹² See for example the "Glossary" of the first and the fourth volumes of *The Philokalia* for "watchfulness" i.e. *prosoche*.

Spirit in the soul.¹³ In part this implied hindering thoughts and other impulses from entering from outside so as to divert one's attention from God. Thus St Basil exhorts his disciples to "attend to" themselves "so that" they "may be attentive to God."¹⁴ This also implied that the disciples should be attentive to God's withdrawals in the soul and to learn virtue from them, as is the case for example in the teaching of eighth or ninth century father, St Hesychios the Priest.¹⁵

The following account on Plotinus' concept of spiritual exercises reveals more similarities and differences between ancient philosophy and Christian faith.

Plotinus on Spiritual Exercises

Only a little is known of the Greek philosopher Plotinus' life. According to his disciple Porphyry, who wrote a short biography on Plotinus and organized his works into a single collection, the *Enneads*, the philosopher was born in Egypt in the year 204 and grew up in there. At the age of twenty-seven he became passionately interested in philosophy. After a period of searching for a suitable philosophical guide, Plotinus chose to become the disciple of Ammonius Saccas for eleven years. The latter was a self-taught Alexandrian philosopher with leanings toward Persian and Indian wisdom. In the year 238 Plotinus left Ammonius to join the emperor Gordian's campaign against Persia. This was because he wanted to explore the sources of his teacher's wisdom. Since Gordian died later the same year in unclear circumstances, the campaign failed. In this situation Plotinus fled first to Antioch from where he soon headed for Rome. Having arrived there he set up a successful Platonist school of philosophy, lectured and had disciples until his health failed him a couple of years before his death in the year 270.¹⁶

Plotinus shares with Plato certain fundamental cosmological, anthropological, and epistemological and even mystical-spiritual ideas and convictions. Both presuppose that the center of all existence is pure spirit as opposed to all matter. To them this spirit is impersonal and the realm of unchangeable unity, goodness, truth and beauty. Opposed to it is whatever has emanated from this realm becoming many and, as such, becoming the realm of change, illusion and corruption. Both also think that since the

¹³ Špidlík: *The Spirituality of the Christian East. A Systematic Handbook*, 107.

¹⁴ Špidlík: *The Spirituality of the Christian East. A Systematic Handbook*, 107.

¹⁵ *The Philokalia*, Vol. I, p. 162–162 (1,3,7). This short reference to St Hesychios' concept of watchfulness is somewhat interpretative.

¹⁶ Porphyry: "On the Life of Plotinus and his Works," cii–cv, cviii–cix (V.P. § 1–3, 7). Edward Moore: "Plotinus," § 1.

human soul belongs to the first of these realms, and body to the second, they also are in fundamental conflict with each other. This conflict is expressed by the way that being in the body causes humans to forget their true origin. They become individuals and as such subject to various passions which draw them further away from what is of spirit.

Thus Plato, for example, compares embodied souls to prisoners in an almost completely enclosed cave in which their only access to the real world is through some shadowy reflections on one of the stone walls. To see the real world, i.e. the spirit realm, souls must first recognize the corruption of their present state and then do what it takes to remember what they once knew and return to it.¹⁷ To both philosophers the latter means that imprisoned souls must devote time to spiritual exercises that shatter the power of both passions and individuality. In addition, both philosophers describe the return of these souls to the spirit-realm in terms of some kind of spiritual ascent. This latter point is also where their doctrines deviate from each other the most.

This difference is visible especially in their different attitudes to love, contemplation and activity. In the *Symposium* Plato describes love (*Ἔρως*, i.e. *Eros*) as some kind of middle thing between what belongs to the realm of spirit and what belongs to this world. When he characterizes it as a divinity, he calls it in words attributed to Socrates a son of Poverty (*Πενία*) and Resource (*Πόρος*).¹⁸ As such *Eros* is always poor and yet resourceful. The latter means that although “god does not mix with man,” *Eros* nevertheless succeeds in mediating between the two.¹⁹ In this sense love characterizes the whole universe.²⁰ It is the constant desire of every soul to “possess permanently what is good.”²¹ This good is immortality in which human beings share by giving birth to new life. Thus both birth-giving and the states and acts that lead to it share in immortality and are something divine: sexuality, procreation and pregnancy.²²

Yet this does not mean that the desire of ordinary procreation leads to spiritual ascent toward the spirit realm. This is because such desire arises out of the body, and not out of the soul, which is the realm of the divine in man.²³ The true ascent thus arises out of the soul. It is a result of a “divine gift” and begins when young men first experience the thrust of love in them,

¹⁷ This is a reference to Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” from the seventh book of the *Republic*. See Louth: *Mystical*, 3–5 for easy access.

¹⁸ Plato: *Symposium*, 203 b1–e5.

¹⁹ Plato: *Symposium*, 203 a1.

²⁰ Plato: *Symposium*, 202 d–e and 205d.

²¹ I allude to how Plato also defines love as the desire for “permanent possession of what is good” in *Symposium*, 206 a12–a13.

²² Plato: *Symposium*, 206.

²³ Plato: *Symposium*, 208.

directing this thrust toward the physical beauty of one particular boy or man.²⁴ Later, as they fall in love with other beautiful bodies they also fall in love with beauty in general and discover that some of objects of their love also have beauty of the soul. In this way they become pregnant with the desire to give birth to beauty of the soul in themselves and in whomever they love.²⁵ It is by this desire that their soul begins the ascent toward the realm of the spirit.

This ascent does not take place automatically. According to Plato the love of these divinely gifted men must become purified and in this way directed toward the spirit realm.²⁶ This purification requires initially that they become attuned to the rhythm and form of music and poetry, receiving in this way help to acquire the moral virtues, i.e. “justice, prudence, temperance, and courage.”²⁷ The latter strengthen the rational part of their soul (*νοῦς*) so that it may gain control over the soul's desiring part (*τὸ ἐπιθυμητικόν*). Thus their soul becomes tranquil. In addition, even the rational part of their soul must become purified. This end requires in its turn exercises in mathematics and in the art of distinguishing the essence of all things, i.e. dialectics proper. The latter enhances abstraction accustoming in this way their mind “to deal with objects apart from the senses, pure reality (*οὐσία*).”²⁸ This accustoming of the mind to abstraction separates the body from the soul and purifies their love directing it toward non-material beauty.²⁹

The gifted men benefit greatly from the new orientation of their love. They gain control over their lower amorous desires and become true lovers of wisdom, i.e. philosophers.³⁰ As such they also became skillful statesmen, householders and educators of their loved young men.³¹ This is because their new state of being allows them to contemplate, i.e. envision in their soul not only the beauty of all the forms which have emanated from the wholly immaterial centre of everything and joined matter, but also touch and unite

²⁴ Plato: *Symposium*, 209–211. Quotation: 209 b2. See also A.W. Price: *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, 38–45 and C.D.C. Reeve's article “Plato on Friendship and Eros,” § 4.

²⁵ Plato: *Symposium*, 209 a–c (209–211).

²⁶ Plato: *Symposium*, 210 a–d. Louth: *Origins*, 9–11.

²⁷ Louth: *Origins*, 7 (7–11). In this paragraph I follow Andrew Louth reading Plato's *Republic* 401 d, *Phaedo* 66–67 and *Symposium* 210–211.

²⁸ Louth: *Origins*, 7–9. See also Plato's *Republic* VII: 521d–532a.

²⁹ Louth: *Origins*, 9–11. Plato: *Symposium*, 210–211. *Phaedo* 66–67.

³⁰ This seems to be what Plato is saying for example when he makes Alcibiades praise Socrates' sexual self-control in *Symposium* 215–217 and when he makes Socrates distinguish between true philosophical life and life without philosophy in related terms in *Phaedrus* 256 a–d. Yet in the continuation of the same discourse Socrates is contemptuous of non-amorous friendships between men suggesting that such relationships cannot lead to philosophy. See *Phaedrus* 256 e–d.

³¹ I refer to how Plato's estimates the true philosophers' ability to give leadership in *Republic* V–VII, especially in V: 471a–478a and VI: 484c and I refer to *Symposium* 209–210, especially to 209 a6–7 and 210 c1–5.

with the very source of these forms. I refer to what Plato calls variedly in his works “the “Form” or the “Idea” of “Truth,” “Beauty,” “Goodness,” “Being” etc and which he considers transcending all lesser forms in an ineffable manner.³² By their participation in this Form they know how things that have emanated from the centre may and should function and how they should be governed to flourish.³³

Being no friend of “Greek love,” Plotinus modified this ascent of the soul from and by male to male carnal love to spiritual values, so that it became, what we call today Platonic and as such applicable to both sexes.³⁴ In this way he facilitated the Christian reception of this philosophy. In addition, he also laid more emphasis on contemplation and passivity. This is when he systematizes the relationship between the material and the spiritual realms in a way which makes even clearer than Plato does that the ultimate unity of knowledge and love is beyond the reach of discursive thought and the exercise of dialectics.

Plotinus describes reality in terms of “three principles, or *hypostases*, or gods” i.e. the One, also called the Good, Intelligence (*Noûς*) and Soul.³⁵ Of these Soul refers to the realm of sense knowledge. It is the paradigm of every form of natural knowing from dialectics to empirical observation. Intelligence corresponds to Plato’s realm of forms.³⁶ Yet Plotinus does not consider this realm to be the ultimate. According to him such a union can take place only in and by the One which is simple and as such beyond all divisions.

In explaining the One, Plotinus compares it to a centre of emanating circles on the surface of water. It is, as such, separate from every emanation (*πρόδοος*) and at the same time present in them. Yet when one looks for it, as such, it is not there.³⁷ This is a reference to how the One in its own total simplicity is not conscious of what has become differentiated from it and has moved into the realms of multiplicity. It is not even conscious of itself in the ordinary sense of the word.³⁸ Simultaneously, Plotinus points out that the process of material multiplication has raised in souls which have emanated from the One a desire for ownership and thus diverted their original undivided attention to the One. As a consequence, they experience a tension

³² Louth: *Origins*, 3, 11–13.

³³ See *Republic* V–VII, especially V:471c–478a and VI: 484c.

³⁴ Pierre Hadot: *Plotinus*, 53 (48–63).

³⁵ Louth: *Origins*, 36.

³⁶ Louth: *Origins*, 37.

³⁷ Louth: *Origins*, 38. In discussing this analogy Louth refers both to the way E.R. Dodds interprets it in “Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus,” 130, and *Ennead* IV.4.16. See also Russell: *Deification*, 40–42, for a brief summary of Plotinus’ doctrine of mystical ascent.

³⁸ Louth: *Origins*, 46. *Ennead* VI.7.37.1 ff. and VI.7.41.

that expresses itself as self-consciousness, self-centeredness and self-will, all of which obscure the soul's divine resemblance.³⁹

The hidden presence of the One in everything expresses itself as a movement of return (*ἐπιστροφή*). According to Plotinus, the One, being the Good, also resembles a beloved fatherland which draws in fact "everything to itself" and in consequence everything "longs to return" to it.⁴⁰ This means in terms of spiritual exercises that when souls recognize this longing they should at first close their eyes and call upon an inner vision of their origin and contemplate it. This is because such contemplation will endow them with the strength to return.⁴¹ In addition, they need to devote themselves to works of beauty; virtuous deeds and arts, and thus work with their souls as a carpenter works with an unfinished statue. They should cut and chisel until their souls begin to emit, in Plotinus' words, "the godlike splendor of virtue."⁴² When doing so, they should also attach themselves to people who have experience in doing the same.⁴³

When discussing what this process is all about the philosopher distinguishes between "civic" and "purificatory" virtues and between "weak" and "genuine" contemplation in a way that demonstrates his tendency to emphasize passivity instead of activity.⁴⁴ According to him civic virtues regulate one's conduct in society.⁴⁵ They are good in themselves, but at the same time problematic. This is because they easily bind souls more solidly to the Soul-realm.⁴⁶ Similarly, weak contemplation is problematic. This is because it has its ground in how the Soul-principle contemplating Nature produced the visible world. Thus weak contemplation actually resembles action. It "leads to something produced outside itself" without achieving the ascent of the soul to its origin.⁴⁷

Echoing Plato, Plotinus emphasizes especially "dialectic and mental training" when teaching on virtues which purify the intellect allowing it to discover that the beauty of "the material order" is "borrowed" and belongs to an order beyond all multiplicity and preparing it in this way for genuine contemplation.⁴⁸ This intellectual contemplation makes the ascent of the soul to the spirit realm possible. This is because both the virtues that lead to

³⁹ Louth: *Origins*, 41.

⁴⁰ Louth: *Origins*, 38.

⁴¹ Plotinus: *Ennead* I.6.8–9. Read in Louth: *Origins*, 39–40. See also *Ennead* V.8.9 as quoted in Louth: *Origins*, 44.

⁴² Plotinus: *Ennead* I.6.8–9. Quoted in Louth: *Origins*, 40. Louth uses Stephen McKenna's translation of the *Enneads*. See *Plotini Opera*, 3 vols. edited by P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzler for the original Greek text.

⁴³ Plotinus: *Ennead* I.6.8–9. Quoted in Louth: *Origins*, 40.

⁴⁴ Louth: *Origins*, 39, 42–43.

⁴⁵ Louth: *Origins*, 43.

⁴⁶ Louth: *Origins*, 42–43.

⁴⁷ Louth: *Origins*, 39.

contemplation and contemplation itself are fundamentally an expression of the love that the Good has previously planted in souls and that wakes up when souls receive “a glow from the divine,” experience divine presence (*παρουσία*) and sometimes even touch.⁴⁹

In genuine contemplation souls may also experience the One as a boundless light and themselves as having been turned into this light.⁵⁰ Such experiences quicken the souls’ true nature and their desire to reach beyond “the order of the beautiful” and “the choir of the virtues” and beyond all their self-consciousness, self-centeredness and self-will.⁵¹ They now desire to “cast out their inborn sense of Matter” altogether and use their very selves to unite with what transcends self.⁵² Yet since this desire goes against what they previously thought was their nature, they also experience immense pain and terror in the face of their union with the divine.⁵³

When Plotinus discusses how to overcome this terror and how to reach the state of divine union, he mentions the souls’ sudden rapturous and ecstatic going out of themselves into a state beyond all description. And he suggests that the lives of the souls that have reached the most perfect spiritual state on earth consists in being repeatedly “lifted” to “the likeness of the Supreme” and to “still higher – image to archetype” and in falling back again to a lower state from which they make their way back upwards or rather inwards again “by virtue.”⁵⁴ It is to such a life he refers in the following often quoted words:

This is the life of gods and of the godlike and blessed among men, liberation from the alien that besets us here, a life taking no pleasure in the things of earth, a flight of the alone to the Alone.⁵⁵

In addition, he also suggests that union is a state which the individual soul can learn of only indirectly and with the help of philosophy. This is because

in seeking thus to know the Unity it is prevented by that very unification from recognizing that it has found; it cannot distinguish itself from the object

⁴⁸ Louth: *Origins*, 43 and 46. Plotinus speaks of analogies and abstraction in *Ennead* VI.7.36 and he speaks of borrowed beauty in *Ennead* V.9.2.

⁴⁹ Pierre Hadot: *Plotinus*, 69–71. In *Ennead* VI.7.31, 17–18 Plotinus claims explicitly that “the soul loves the Supreme Good, from its beginning stirred by it to love” (trans. MacKenna). Plotinus mentions the glow in *Ennead* VI.7.22 and the presence in *Ennead* VI.9.4 both quoted by Louth: *Origins*, p. 45 and 48.

⁵⁰ *Ennead* I.6.8–9. See also VI.7.36. Referred to in Louth: *Origins*, 40 and 46.

⁵¹ Plotinus uses these expressions in *Ennead* VI.9.11. Quoted in Louth: *Origins*, 49.

⁵² *Ennead* V.8.9. Quoted in Louth: *Origins*, 44.

⁵³ Louth: *Origins*, 48. *Ennead* VI.9.3.

⁵⁴ Louth: *Origins*, 46–47. *Ennead* IV.8:1.

⁵⁵ *Ennead* VI.9.11. Quoted in Louth: *Origins*, 49.

of this intuition. Nonetheless, this is our one resource if our philosophy is to give us knowledge of the One...⁵⁶

As promised, I will return to compare this account of the soul's ascent to the One with St Symeon's and St John's mystical theologies and discuss the truth of Lossky's claims in the chapter that concludes Part One: "St Symeon, St John, and Plotinus." Before that, however, it is essential to begin to summarize and present St Symeon's and St John's theologies from the point of view of the question of what they expect their disciples to do, believe and experience to reach union with God and in which order.

⁵⁶ *Ennead* VI.9.3. Quoted in Louth: *Origins*, 48.

2. TWO BAPTISMS

According to St Symeon the disciples' spiritual journey begins in water baptism and leads to a second spiritual baptism. While making this journey their primary task is to engage in various spiritual exercises in obedience to their spiritual father. The latter is for St Symeon an image of Christ himself painted with striking colors.

First and Second Adam

In the beginning God created everything good. This means according to St Symeon that although, for example, Adam's body was not yet spiritual it was nevertheless "incorruptible (*ἄφθαρτος*)."¹ Only when he sinned did he and the creation under him become corruptible (*φθαρτός*).² The hopelessness of this state grew deeper especially as Adam's descendants began to forget God and deify creation by worshipping it instead of the Creator.³

In the beginning God had made the first woman, Eve, out of the side of Adam, the first man who had been born of him alone. Now he acted by "Mary the Theotokos (God-bearer) and ever-Virgin" to remedy the evil Adam had caused.⁴ This is when he took flesh from this specific daughter of Adam in order to be born himself as a man, as Christ the new Adam, and conquer sin and its consequences.⁵

The disciples participate in Christ's victory by eating his death-conquering body in the Eucharist. In this way they become spiritual little by little in their souls.⁶ They share in his divinity and become themselves gods "by adoption and by grace."⁷ Even their bodies will be transformed into

¹ ETH 1.2:1–5.

² ETH 1.2:1–93.

³ ETH 1.2:118–147.

⁴ ETH 1.3:21.

⁵ ETH 1.3:1–48. St Symeon alludes to 1 Cor 15.

⁶ ETH 1.3:79–98 (49–149).

⁷ ETH 1.3:43.

Christ's new resurrected state of incorruption. This takes place when God transforms the whole creation "into a greater and everlasting condition."⁸

First and Second Baptism

This transformation begins in baptism. By baptism God forgives the disciples' sins and sanctifies them by "the presence (*παρουσία*) of the Holy Spirit."⁹ In other words, he chases away condemnation, recreates them spiritually and frees them from the devil's tyranny.¹⁰ The latter is possible since God restores their "original free will" (*τὸ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἀντεξούσιον*) by baptism.¹¹ As a consequence they can conquer the devil more easily than the saints "who lived before Christ's coming."¹² They can also draw near to God and participate in him at will.¹³ In other words, they can choose freely between hardening of heart and repentance.¹⁴

St Symeon also claims that the disciples who sin after their baptism also undo its effects in their lives, save the powers of self-determination.¹⁵ As a consequence, they now need to do whatever it takes to arrive at what baptism is really about, namely new spiritual birth. Differently expressed this means that they must be born of the Spirit, which is the same as to be baptized in Him.¹⁶ To explain, St Symeon points out that since God is spirit, water alone does not suffice for salvation.¹⁷ Accordingly he calls water baptism "a type of truth" (*τύπος τῆς ἀληθείας*) and Spirit baptism "the truth."¹⁸ To assent to this truth the disciples must imitate the saints' repentance and "display a

⁸ ETH 1.3:132–134.

⁹ CAP 3:45.

¹⁰ CAT 5:384–386, 445–448. I have read CAP 3:45 into these passages presupposing that this is what the Spirit's sanctifying presence accomplishes in the disciples' lives.

¹¹ CAT 5:387. In the original the noun is in the dative.

¹² CAT 5:388–390. CAP 3:89.

¹³ CAP 3:89. CAT 32:99–115. In ETH 7:594–598 St Symeon supports this claim with a reference to St Basil the Great's claim that where "there is a ready will, there is nothing to hinder." Krivochéine refers these words to St Basil's *S. Baptisma*: PG 31. 437 B.

¹⁴ CAT 4:93–95 (47–125). In ETH 2.2:1–201 St Symeon suggests that predestination in the Scriptures means only that God knows which disciples are unwilling and lazy. See also EUCH 2:22–28 where St Symeon reflects upon his own powers of self-determination.

¹⁵ CAP 3:45 and CAT 32:59–73. See also CAT 30:129–142 where St Symeon supports this claim with a reference to St John Climacus' sermon "On Repentance" in the *Scala Paradisi*, i.e. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Krivochéine's reference is PG 88. 764 B – 781 A. See also CAP 3:90 and EP 1:5.

¹⁶ CAP 1.35. In this passage St Symeon explains "spiritual birth" with a reference to John 3:5 and 7. See also CAT 32:59–73. ETH 10:323–565.

¹⁷ CAP 1.35–36. ETH 10:426–470.

¹⁸ CAP 1.36.

worthy penitence by means of all sorts of deeds and words (*λόγος*).¹⁹ In this way they renew their first baptism and “draw” on themselves “the grace of the all-holy Spirit.”²⁰

Demons and Passions

The disciples who have sinned after their baptism will not find it easy to draw on themselves the Spirit’s grace. In fact, St Symeon points out that it is always a matter of “many toils and labors, sweat and violence, difficulty and tribulation” to break through “the soul’s own darkness” or to see “the light (*φῶς*) of the all-holy Spirit.”²¹ The reason for this difficulty is the effect of sins (*ἁμαρτίαι*) and especially of passions (*πάθη*) on the disciples.²²

According to St Symeon, passions are defined as covetous attachments to something that “is on earth.”²³ These are, for example, hidden desires to commit this or that sin.²⁴ They are also the disciples’ love for things such as “tasty dishes,” “shiny cloaks,” “garments with gold embroidery,” “sandals and shoes” etc.²⁵ In addition, St Symeon also calls vices such as “envy, avarice, jealousy” passions.²⁶ To him this does not mean that physical things are bad in themselves. They exist to fulfill basic needs.²⁷ Similarly there is nothing wrong with natural bodily desires as such. They become corrupted only when the mind uses them to develop worship-like relationships to what is created.²⁸

The fundamental problem of such relationships is that they violate both the first commandment to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength,” (Mk 12:30) and the related commandment not to love “the world” (*κόσμος*) or its things (1 John 2:15).²⁹ This means according to St Symeon that the disciples who yield to their passions become God’s enemies.³⁰ They become “ignorant of” God’s

¹⁹ CAT 32:76–78.

²⁰ CAT 32:78–79.

²¹ CAT 6:105–108. In support St Symeon refers to Matt 11:12 and Acts 14:22.

²² See for example CAT 5:770–819.

²³ CAT 5:796–797.

²⁴ CAT 5:790–800.

²⁵ CAT 5:807–812.

²⁶ CAT 10:136–138 (134–150). CAT 5:1016–1023.

²⁷ CAT 5:727–730. See also CAT 5:735–736 and CAT 5:786–787.

²⁸ CAT 25:50–83. In ETH 1:129–133 St Symeon states: “For nothing else so soils the work of God and makes unclean what is clean as the deification of creation and the worshipping of it as equal to God the Creator and Maker.”

²⁹ CAT 5:801–804. CAT 2:304–312.

³⁰ CAT 2:306–312. In CAT 5:790–803 St Symeon refers to James 4:4 where St James claims that the world’s friends become God’s enemies and to 1 John 2:15 where St John describes

wishes and of their own state of sickness.³¹ Their conscious rebellion pushes them into habitual sinning. In the end the only thing that really inspires them is sinning itself. This amounts to saying that the passions now rule them.³² When this rule continues long enough it can acquire “the strength of a “nature” (*φυσίς*).³³ This means that they can no longer be cured.³⁴

To explain further St Symeon points out that even one single passion hinders the disciples from obeying God and from entering “into the kingdom of heaven.”³⁵ In support he refers to St James claiming that “whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumbles in one point, he is guilty of all” (Jas. 2:10).³⁶ In addition, those who yield to the passions actually yield to the devil and his forces, the demons.³⁷ Consequently, since the purpose of the latter is to alienate the disciples “from the glory of God and the grace of the Holy Spirit,” the disciples have no alternative but to fight the passions.³⁸

Practices of Repentance

The word repentance (*μετάνοια* or *μεταμέλεια*) summarizes everything the disciples need to do to “draw” grace on themselves and to overcome the passions and the demons that work through them. Repentance is fundamentally to recognize God “by practice” (*διὰ πράξεως*) while being united with him “by faith” (*διὰ πίστεως*).³⁹ These two relate to each other in that faith is the reason why the disciples fight their passions in the first place.⁴⁰ It is the reason why they regard humiliation as “true honor and nobility” and are prepared to die for Christ and his commandments.⁴¹ It is also the reason why they despise the pleasures of life and count them as nothing, and it is the reason why they bear all sufferings with patience and wait until God chooses to “visit” them, i.e. to reveal himself and to impart

the two loves in question in terms of mutual exclusivity.

³¹ CAT 2:338. CAT 24:154–164.

³² CAT 2:334–350.

³³ CAT 2:350–352.

³⁴ CAT 2:350–352. CAT 27:1–19.

³⁵ CAT 31:14–17.

³⁶ CAT 31:17–18. CAT 27:1–19.

³⁷ ETH 7:61–65.

³⁸ CAT 3:172–175. See also 3:129–132 and 330–346.

³⁹ I have borrowed the expressions from CAT 2:353–354 where St Symeon actually discusses contemplation.

⁴⁰ CAP 1:5–13.

⁴¹ CAP 1:10. See also CAT 3:289–294.

grace.⁴² Faith also makes them fear the coming judgment and practice the scriptural commandments intently.⁴³

The latter practice is significant because the Scriptures as such contain “the intention (διάνοια) of the Holy Spirit’s love.”⁴⁴ This means, more specifically, that God has charged each saying of Christ with a certain “charged meaning” (δύναμις).⁴⁵ Hence the Scriptures are something like a window into spiritual reality. They have the capacity to fill the disciples’ “spiritual perception (αἴσθησις νοερά) with every pleasure,” to lift them “entirely from earthly things and the lowliness of what is visible” and make them “angelic in form (ἀγγελοειδός) and sharer[s] (ὁμοδίαυτος τοῖς ἀγγέλοις) in the angels’ very life.”⁴⁶

This character of the Scriptures is also the reason why the practice of the commandments leads to the acquisition of the virtues (κτῆσις τῆς ἀρετῆς) which in its turn leads to illumination (φωτισμός), i.e. to the inner vision of God.⁴⁷ This means simply that as the disciples practice the scriptural commandments, such as to love, to show mercy and to be holy, they also acquire love, compassion and righteousness.⁴⁸ The first and most crucial virtue to acquire is humility (ταπείνωσις, ταπεινοφροσύνη).⁴⁹ This is because it deactivates the disciples’ self-will that would otherwise hinder them from practicing God’s various other commandments.⁵⁰ The final virtue to acquire is the very antithesis of all passions: purity (καθαρότης). By it the disciples see God in his glory.⁵¹ It is in this sense that all the virtues and virtuous actions which grow out of humble obedience and lead to purity form “a ladder” (κλίμαξ) of spiritual ascent and a “royal highway” to the union of love with God.⁵²

The disciples should also study and meditate upon the Scriptures “night and day”⁵³ Yet such study is without benefit apart from practicing the commandments. St Symeon points this out by comparing the disciples’ being in the world and having bodily needs to a “dark and lightless prison.”⁵⁴ While

⁴² CAP 1:11.

⁴³ CAP 1:5–6, 13. CAT 23:202–237.

⁴⁴ ETH 12:4–5.

⁴⁵ CAT 3:289–291. Similarly in ETH 12:4–5 St Symeon asserts the Scriptures contain “the intention (διάνοια) of the Holy Spirit’s love.”

⁴⁶ ETH 12:5–8 (1–13). See also ETH 3:1–410.

⁴⁷ ETH 11:2–3. HYMN 1:146. See also ETH 11:77–81.

⁴⁸ ETH 11:49–81. ETH 6:103–108.

⁴⁹ ETH 11:49–54, 67–72 (49–81).

⁵⁰ ETH 11:53–61 (49–81). This is implied in how St Symeon relates self-will to humility.

⁵¹ ETH 11:77–81.

⁵² ETH 11:94–95, 108 (82–109). This is an obvious reference to St John Climacus’ *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. In CAP 1:6 St Symeon points out on the basis of I John 2:3 that the disciples pass from fearing God to loving him by the practice of the commandments.

⁵³ ETH 12:2.

⁵⁴ ETH 1.12:388.

they are in this prison they should not be thinking that mere study of the Scriptures helps them to know and see the sun of divine light that shines outside it. Rather, as they first search them to keep the commandments and to do everything God wants them to do, something like a “hole in the visible roof of heavens” opens in their very souls and they see into the divine mysteries.⁵⁵ In this situation the inexperienced disciples “go out of themselves” (ἐξίστημι) in ecstatic wonder, but later this phenomenon no longer surprises them or causes such reactions.⁵⁶

Prayer (εὐχή) has a key position among the disciples’ repentant practices. This is especially since the evil forces cannot “prevail” against disciples who are “advanced in prayer or devoted to the practice of prayer.”⁵⁷ To this rule there is only one exception. This is *acedia* (ἀκηδία), i.e. “the demon of listlessness.”⁵⁸ To succeed in its attacks, it often works with other demons, especially with the “demon of cowardice” (δειλία).⁵⁹ According to St Symeon the combined attacks of these two bring death to “soul and mind” (νοῦς) they can only be conquered with God’s “mystical” help (μυστικῶς) received in complete humility.⁶⁰ In this sense *acedia* is actually “the ambassador of humility.”⁶¹

Since it is not easy to learn to pray, St Symeon ordains that the disciples should complement church prayers with solitary prayers and confessions and follow their spiritual father’s instructions when doing so.⁶² Thus he points out, for example, that before their day begins with the first Office of the day (ὄρθρος), they must rise and “recite the prescribed prayer.”⁶³ After that they should go to the service and pray “untiringly.”⁶⁴ Although the hour is early they should hold their hands together without leaning on anything and without nodding their heads.⁶⁵ It is especially important to focus fully on “the charged meaning (δύναμις) of the words of the divine Scriptures that are being sung or read.”⁶⁶ “If possible,” the disciples should shed tears.⁶⁷ They should “stand with trembling” as if they were watching Jesus’ very sacrifice

⁵⁵ ETH 1,12:404–405.

⁵⁶ ETH 1.12:407, 406–443.

⁵⁷ CAP 1:73.

⁵⁸ CAP 1:72 (CAP 1:66–75). CAT 12:173–174. CAT 4:176–178.

⁵⁹ CAP 1:72.

⁶⁰ CAP 1:74. See also CAP 1:71.

⁶¹ CAP 1:72.

⁶² The disciples should obey their spiritual fathers in everything. ETH 4:156–159. CAP 1:24, 55–56, 61–62. See also CAT 26: 288–291.

⁶³ CAT 26:23–24. According to deCatanzaro this is about a two-hour long service which corresponds “roughly to Latin matins and lauds.” See footnote 1 on pp. 274–275 of *The Discourses*.

⁶⁴ CAT 26:28. See CAT 30:143–184 for a parallel instruction.

⁶⁵ CAT 26:20–41.

⁶⁶ CAT 26:37.

⁶⁷ CAT 26:47–48.

itself.⁶⁸ In addition, the disciples should never be idle either in their cells or during the day. Instead they should either work or read.⁶⁹

Along with prayer the disciples should devote themselves to fasting (*νηστεία*). This practice is according to the saint “the beginning and foundation of every spiritual activity” (*ἐργασία πνευματική*) without which it is impossible to acquire the virtues.⁷⁰ Fasting chases away whatever darkness sin has brought into the disciples’ souls.⁷¹ When combined with vigil (*ἀγρυπνία*) it “penetrates and softens” the hardness of their hearts.⁷² This applies especially in combination with Lent’s sacred readings.⁷³ While the disciples who eat excessively harm both their souls and their bodies, the disciples who observe the fast and listen to these readings acquire health in both body and soul.⁷⁴ This is because the words of saints are also God’s words. As such they bring life to those who earnestly receive them.⁷⁵

Furthermore, St Symeon points out that the disciples need to be ready to engage in “mortification and extreme self-control” (*κακοπάθεια, ἐγκράτεια ἀκροτάτης*) according to their spiritual father’s will.⁷⁶ To explain he naturally mentions both fasting and vigil but also practices such as lack of washing, sleeping on the ground, sleeping with the belt, refusing to scratch, weeping, lamenting, making prostrations, plucking out one’s hair, never eating or drinking to satiety, wearing iron chains and hair shirts, etc.⁷⁷

This kind of self-control can also express itself as the practice of stillness (*ἡσυχία*). This means according to St Symeon that the disciples choose to remain quiet and stay in their cells in the spirit of the same adoration that made St Peter propose building tabernacles on Mount Tabor to Jesus, Moses and Elias whom he had just seen in a bright cloud according to Matt 17:1-8.⁷⁸ The purpose of this quiet adoration is intimate knowledge of God. By it the disciples may “see precisely and thoroughly feel with the intelligible hands of the mind (*νοῦς*) and the perceptions (*αἴσθησις*) of their soul whether He is indeed Himself the God of all.”⁷⁹ I will return to the concept of knowledge implied here in the chapter “Faith, Charisms and the Eucharist.”

⁶⁸ CAT 26:116–119.

⁶⁹ CAT 26:67–79.

⁷⁰ CAT 11:83–86.

⁷¹ CAT 11:61–70.

⁷² CAT 11:66–67.

⁷³ John Climacus’ *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* has been and still is common reading during Great Lent in Orthodox monasteries.

⁷⁴ CAT 11: 131–150.

⁷⁵ CAT 11:151–156.

⁷⁶ CAP 1:21. McGuckin translates *ἐγκράτεια ἀκροτάτης* as “strict discipline.” I followed the usual Latin translation of *ἐγκράτεια*, *continentia* i.e. self-control. J. Darrouzès’ French translation of this expression is “la tempérance la plus stricte.”

⁷⁷ ETH 7:195–217, 321–326, 384–424. See also CAT 20:33–43.

⁷⁸ ETH 15:12–73.

⁷⁹ ETH 15:79–82. Transl. Golitzin, modified. *On Virtue and Christian Life*, 177.

St Symeon also questions stillness. In his view the disciples' physical inactivity can easily turn into sinful laziness and leisure, at least before they know how "to work spiritually" (πνευματικῶς) on the basis of a vivid inner vision of God.⁸⁰ Consequently, the disciples who practice stillness should also devote themselves "to the practice (πράξις) of God's commandments which are accomplished by the body."⁸¹

Compunction

The disciples who practice the commandments with persistence and zeal will discover that they cannot "attain to the height of the commandments." As a consequence they will discover the true "poverty of their spirits" and deem themselves "unworthy" either "to receive" or even to thank God.⁸² Their sorrow will be so deep that it will make them weep and mourn in true meekness.⁸³ St Symeon calls this sorrow and weeping "compunction" (κατάνυξις) and claims that it is a spiritual gift without which the disciples cannot become free from the passions and acquire the virtues.⁸⁴

To receive this gift the disciples need not only to study the Scriptures and practice the commandments but also to actively examine themselves in their light.⁸⁵ They need to ask whether this or that passion has control over them, and they should ask whether they have "neglected this commandment or that" by ignoring and failing to practice it.⁸⁶ Similarly, when they read *The Beatitudes*, they should ask themselves whether they fit into what the Lord says.⁸⁷ Thus when reading for example "blessed are those who mourn (μακάριοι οἱ πενθοῦντες)" they should ask themselves whether or not they have compunction.⁸⁸

St Symeon also claims that the present tense of participle πενθοῦντες indicates that the disciples should continuously weep for their sins.⁸⁹ This is crucial especially when receiving the Eucharist: the disciples should never

⁸⁰ ETH 15:105 (94–119).

⁸¹ ETH 15:108–109.

⁸² CAT 2:200–204 (196–207), 224–225.

⁸³ CAT 2:204–228.

⁸⁴ CAT 4:442–452, 456–460. The reference of St Symeon in this passage is to Abba Poemen saying: "He who desires to cut off passions cuts them off by weeping, and he who desires to obtain virtues obtains them by weeping." Krivochéine refers in a footnote to lines 456–458 to *Apophth. Alfab.*, Poemen 119: PG 65. 353 A.

⁸⁵ CAT 31:1–27, 144–167.

⁸⁶ CAT 31:14–15, 20–22.

⁸⁷ CAT 31 is an examination of this kind.

⁸⁸ CAT 31:51–56.

⁸⁹ CAT 31:51–56. See also CAT 4:1–46.

“communicate (κοινωνέω) without tears.”⁹⁰ Otherwise their hearts will become insensible.⁹¹ It applies in fact that “those who refuse to do and to endure all things that lead to virtue and to God” will become morally speaking “worse than” they were before believing.⁹² They testify to their own “lack of virtue.”⁹³ Conversely, the disciples who weep continuously also keep on driving out the passions and replacing them with virtues “little by little.”⁹⁴ In fact, only such disciples are Christians in the true sense of the word.⁹⁵

Although this may sound difficult or even impossible, St Symeon stresses that the case is otherwise. The only thing the disciples must do to receive compunction is to imitate those who have attained to it previously. As a consequence, they will receive it automatically.⁹⁶ Only those who are slack in their obedience and who fail to control their tongue or their stomach fail to receive it.⁹⁷ The same applies to those who behave carelessly in the church and even to those who think that mere attendance at church services is able to make them spiritual.⁹⁸

In addition, it actually profits the disciples to recognize that there are “many (πολλοί) who have made their contribution without receiving that which God usually gives.”⁹⁹ To explain, St Symeon claims that such persons have acted “without a right mind (λογισμός) and pious intention (διάθεσις) and fervent faith, or without great humility.”¹⁰⁰ To not be like them the disciples need to think that whatever they do to prepare themselves to receive from the Lord is equivalent to what the physically ill do to prepare themselves to meet the doctor.¹⁰¹

To explain, St Symeon points out that the preparations of the sick actually serve themselves alone. This is because the need to be healed is theirs and not the doctor’s. By analogy the disciples should recognize that even the most difficult humiliations they go through because of their obedience to the Lord only “serve” (δουλεύω) themselves and not him.¹⁰² Similarly they should recognize that although they need to practice the commandments to

⁹⁰ CAT 4:12 (1–46).

⁹¹ CAT 4:1–46.

⁹² CAT 4:394 (388–396).

⁹³ CAT 4:454–455.

⁹⁴ CAT 4:386, 670–689. *κατ’ ὀλίγον*.

⁹⁵ CAT 8:104 (90–104).

⁹⁶ CAT 4:93–125.

⁹⁷ CAT 4:126–154, 247–402.

⁹⁸ CAT 4:155–246.

⁹⁹ CAP 3:40. See also ETH 8:170–219.

¹⁰⁰ CAP 3:40 (*ὀρθός λογισμός, εὐσεβής διάθεσις, πίστις θερμή, πολλή ταπεινοφροσύνη*). See also CAT 16:54–57.

¹⁰¹ ETH 7:235–276. See also CAP 2:1.

¹⁰² ETH 7:239 (235–276).

keep the grace they have received and benefit from it, this practice is simultaneously without worth apart from God's grace.¹⁰³

Baptism of Love

As we have already seen, the goal of all the disciples' spiritual preparations is to draw on themselves the grace of the Holy Spirit in a second spiritual baptism. In this especially the tears of compunction are crucial.¹⁰⁴ As these tears "soak" the disciples' "entire body," the fire of the Spirit purifies them baptizing them "gradually" and "entirely."¹⁰⁵ This process can also contain specific turning points. Assisted by tears, the disciples often come to point where the Spirit suddenly visits them, allowing them to contemplate "the nature of reality (*φύσις τῶν ὄντων*) in a way" that was not possible previously.¹⁰⁶

St Symeon also compares the disciples' spiritual baptism to how they receive "the light (*φῶς*) of the Holy Spirit" or a vision of God himself as light, a theme which I will return to more fully in *Part Three* of the study.¹⁰⁷ This light helps the disciples to see whether their actions (*πράξις*) please God or not.¹⁰⁸ More importantly, it effects a conscious spiritual metamorphosis which allows the disciples to commune with God with intimacy and which gives them a new ability to serve him.¹⁰⁹ Consequently, they leave behind the state of penitents and unlike previously become fit for example to "lead and teach others" and to hear their confessions.¹¹⁰

It is obviously in this sense that St Symeon also compares the disciples' virtues to "an army encamped and mobilized" and their tears to its "king and commander" without whom this army really does not know how to wage war.¹¹¹ His point is that the love that arises out of compunction and the visions of the divine light also teaches them to serve God in a way that pleases him and is beneficial not only to themselves but even to others.¹¹² In

¹⁰³ CAP 3:56.

¹⁰⁴ CAP 3:12.

¹⁰⁵ ETH 10:114–118. See also CAP 3:12.

¹⁰⁶ CAP 1:35.

¹⁰⁷ CAT 33:35 (1–79). CAT 16:78–107.

¹⁰⁸ CAT 33:35–37.

¹⁰⁹ CAT 33:1–79. CAT 24:102–153. CAP 2:8–9.

¹¹⁰ CAT 33:37–41. See also how St Symeon calls those who "seem to be adorned with all virtues" but have not yet received the fire i.e., God's "nature and light" "unkindled" and "uncertain" in their "works" in CAT 33:8–16. On the difference between penitent disciples and true servants, see especially ETH 7:446–537. On the monks' right to hear confessions, see especially EP 1.1, 11–16.

¹¹¹ CAT 4:476–480.

other words, the disciples' "sorrow" (πένθος) and their "weeping" (κλαυθμός) orders the virtues in the best possible way.¹¹³

Ultimately the disciples' metamorphosis by light is a matter of love. According to St Symeon the fire of the Spirit not only purifies and baptizes the disciples, but also generates "love and desire for God" (ἔρως καὶ πόθος Θεοῦ) in their hearts.¹¹⁴ Consequently, they become free from passions and sins and acquire the virtues.¹¹⁵ This is because passions cannot dominate those disciples who "love God genuinely" and "persevere in His love."¹¹⁶ Their will becomes so dominated "by the sweet love of God" that they only use their mind and their body to do what pleases him.¹¹⁷

The Spiritual Father

Parallel to what has been said above St Symeon also claims that the disciples who have sinned after their first baptism cannot arrive at this second life-giving one without a capable spiritual physician and "friend of God" i.e. spiritual father (πατήρ πνευματικός).¹¹⁸ Since they have recently been slaves of sin they cannot immediately become God's friends without first serving a person who is that already.¹¹⁹ This service builds on total obedience.¹²⁰ In support St Symeon claims that whoever seeks "his own will, however slightly, will never be able to observe the precept (πρόσταγμα) of Christ the Savior."¹²¹ This is what Christ means when he commands his disciples to leave their families and take up their crosses in Matt 10:37-38.¹²²

¹¹² For centrality of love see especially CAT 1. See also ETH 4:515–562, ETH 5:129–164, ETH 7:446–537 and EP 1.10.

¹¹³ CAT 4:479 (470–492).

¹¹⁴ CAP 3:12. ETH 9:337–343. See also CAT 4:403–452.

¹¹⁵ CAT 4:453–493.

¹¹⁶ CAT 25:109–111 (109–121).

¹¹⁷ CAT 25:117 (109–121). I have interpreted St Symeon's negative expression in a positive fashion. See also ETH 5:129–131 where he points out that perfect love "comes to pass" in the disciples to whom the Lord has manifested himself because of their practicing the commandments.

¹¹⁸ EP 1.5. St Symeon also discusses spiritual fatherhood in his *Epistles* 3–4 which exist only as manuscripts: *Vatic.gr.* 1782. 205v. –230 and *Vatop.* 667. 377–383. I have accessed their contents through Basil Krivochéine's reading of them in *In the Light of Christ*, 95–98. The first of the above-mentioned manuscripts also contains St Symeon's *Epistle* 2. Its topic is repentance and confession of sin. See *Metaphrastes, or, Gained in Translation. Essays and Translations in Honour of Robert H. Jordan*, 236–239, for an English translation by John Turner.

¹¹⁹ EP 1.5. ETH 7:474–480.

¹²⁰ ETH 4:156–159. CAP 1:24, 45, 55–56, 61–62. CAP 3:76. CAT 20:28–43.

¹²¹ CAT 20:43–44. See also CAP 1:61.

¹²² CAT 20:28–43. See also ETH 10:905–913 and CAT 6:105–108.

In times of religious tolerance such obedience is their “voluntary death,” i.e. martyrdom.¹²³

Consequently, they must “constantly call on God” to find the right person to follow and to obey.¹²⁴ God will not fail to answer this prayer.¹²⁵ If the disciples already have a father, the Spirit may even lead them to replace the current one with another.¹²⁶ The reason why it is crucial to find exactly the right person is that obedience to an inexperienced father or to someone who is a “slave to his belly” could cause the disciples to pursue “diabolical” instead of “evangelical” lives.¹²⁷ Indeed, only the fathers who have “first practiced the commandments” and seen and contemplated “the shining and brilliant radiance (τὸ φωτίζον φῶς) of the Spirit within themselves” can truly help others.¹²⁸ Naturally their teaching must also be in line with that of earlier spiritual fathers and the Scriptures.¹²⁹

After having found the right person, the disciples should commit themselves to him totally. They should never criticize or judge him.¹³⁰ This applies even if they would see him eat “with harlots and publicans and sinners” and even “commit fornication.”¹³¹ In fact, whatever they happen to observe, the disciples should think that their fathers are free from passions and do that they do what they do only “to be all things to all men.”¹³² Should doubt arise, they should question their own eyes.¹³³ In addition, they should attend to the father’s words as if their lives depended on them both now and eternally.¹³⁴ They should regard these words “as though they came from the mouth of God.”¹³⁵

All this also means that the disciples should only do what the spiritual father says without taking any initiatives of their own. This concerns even drinking and eating. When thirsty and hungry, they should simply wait until “God inspires him and he instructs me.”¹³⁶ The same applies to whatever wealth they might have brought with them to the monastery. They should not give alms or use that money in any ways without permission.¹³⁷ In addition, the disciples “should confess” even their most innermost thoughts to the

¹²³ CAT 20:36.

¹²⁴ CAT 20:45–50. See also ETH 7:435–445, CAP 1:49 and EUCH 1:71–102.

¹²⁵ CAT 20:57–60.

¹²⁶ CAT 20:54–55.

¹²⁷ EP 1.7 line 6 and CAP 1:48.

¹²⁸ CAP 1:4.

¹²⁹ CAP 1:49.

¹³⁰ CAT 20:57–98.

¹³¹ CAT 20: 80–82. CAT 26:303–307.

¹³² CAT 20:83. St Symeon refers to 1 Cor 9:22.

¹³³ CAT 20:85–87.

¹³⁴ CAT 14:13–19.

¹³⁵ CAT 14:16.

¹³⁶ CAP 1:27 (CAP 1:24–30).

¹³⁷ CAP 1:24–25.

spiritual father as if to God himself.¹³⁸ If possible, they should do it hour by hour. If not, it can wait until the evening.¹³⁹ This practice makes the disciples discover the true poverty of their spirits, i.e. their “failings and foolishness.”¹⁴⁰

St Symeon also describes the relationship of the disciples to their spiritual father in the light of Christ’s last days with the original twelve disciples. Thus he suggests that if the spiritual father should desire to wash the disciples’ feet they should first refuse, but when they hear that it is about having a “part in him,” they should even offer their whole bodies to be washed.¹⁴¹ If the father should suggest that there is a traitor among them, the disciples should ask, “Is it I master?”¹⁴² Should the father be heading for persecution at the hands of evil people, the disciples should seek to protect him even violently as St Peter did with his sword.¹⁴³ Should the disciples feel ashamed as St Peter once did, they should also “weep bitterly” like he did.¹⁴⁴

Should it happen that the father comes to die as a criminal, the disciples should also seek, “if possible,” to die with him.¹⁴⁵ If not, they should not hesitate to invoke his post-mortem intercession.¹⁴⁶ His intercession will cause them to receive the second baptism and the vision of the divine light.¹⁴⁷ By this vision “every passionate thought will vanish and every passion of the soul be dispelled, and every bodily disease healed.”¹⁴⁸ By it the disciples come to be “entirely changed.”¹⁴⁹ They will “know God” and be “known by him.”¹⁵⁰

¹³⁸ CAT 26:299–300. HYMN 4:25–30. See also EUCH 2:47–98.

¹³⁹ CAT 26:300–302.

¹⁴⁰ EP 1.3:13.

¹⁴¹ CAT 20:114.

¹⁴² CAT 20:123–124.

¹⁴³ CAT 20:133–138.

¹⁴⁴ CAT 20:141. St Symeon’s use of hyperbole when discussing spiritual fatherhood may have to do with what this institution looked like in tenth- and eleventh-century Byzantium. Since even members of the high society of the day commonly consulted spiritual fathers for their spiritual good and as regards whatever burdened their hearts, even in matters concerning the exercise of power, the fathers commanded not only considerable spiritual influence but often even political influence as well. This situation naturally influenced the institution itself, not least in Constantinople, in a direction that was not likely to please St Symeon and others who wanted to emphasize its spiritual dimensions. See the chapter “Monasticism and Society” of Rosemary Morris’ *Monks and laymen in Byzantium 843 – 1118* for more background.

¹⁴⁵ CAT 20:145.

¹⁴⁶ CAT 20:155–160.

¹⁴⁷ CAT 20:155–174.

¹⁴⁸ CAT 20:172–174.

¹⁴⁹ CAT 20:181.

¹⁵⁰ CAT 20:181–182.

The Community

St Symeon is clear that those disciples who do not love their brothers whom they “have seen” cannot love God “whom they have not seen” either (I John 4:20).¹⁵¹ Likewise, he is clear that the disciples should love all persons equally, but also be equally detached from all.¹⁵² The latter point is crucial for the additional reason that to get involved in the monastery’s affairs in a passionate manner would hinder compunction. Instead the disciples should seek to humble themselves in everything. They should, for example, “rejoice and exult” when “the most worthless brethren” hurt them in one way or another.¹⁵³ When doing so, they advance rapidly.¹⁵⁴ God’s grace drives out the disciples’ “faults” and gradually replaces them with virtues.¹⁵⁵

At the same time the disciples who have already acquired love and who know how to benefit from holy texts should not fail to “stir up, to encourage, to instruct, to educate, to reprove and to rebuke” their faltering brothers.¹⁵⁶ In this way they will prepare ground for the will of God to be effective in their brothers’ lives and thus enable them to receive his blessings. They will save their brothers from God’s wrath.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, St Symeon points out that if all the community’s members should act in this way, they would all rise “to the summit of virtues.”¹⁵⁸

At the same time he also points out that when the time comes to appoint a new superior, the devil will seek to influence each disciple according to his present spiritual condition. The devil reminds the devout of their good qualities and of everything they could accomplish if chosen to this office.¹⁵⁹ Consequently, some of them begin scheming to attain it. While claiming that they themselves do not “need the office,” they simultaneously argue that their getting the office is good for the monastery.¹⁶⁰ Naturally they do not fail to mention in these conversations how their success in this race would benefit their friends.¹⁶¹

In this situation the less spiritual monks engage in the campaign from other motives. Knowing how a devout superior would lead the monastery, they do what it takes to appoint a man after their own liking. As a result,

¹⁵¹ ETH 5:131–135.

¹⁵² CAT 27:80–84.

¹⁵³ CAT 4:554, 552 (543–555). CAP 1:47.

¹⁵⁴ CAT 4: 376–386.

¹⁵⁵ CAT 4: 386–388.

¹⁵⁶ CAT 11:180–182 (151–195).

¹⁵⁷ CAT 11:185–186.

¹⁵⁸ CAT 11:191.

¹⁵⁹ CAT 18:30–38.

¹⁶⁰ CAT 18:63–65.

¹⁶¹ CAT 18:53–71.

“many divisions, dissensions and disputes arise in the monastery.”¹⁶² In this situation the devout should line up collectively behind the most distinguished candidate.¹⁶³ Should their campaign fail, they should neither “cooperate nor obstruct.”¹⁶⁴ Instead they should begin to care about all their brothers as never before and intercede for the community with “toil and tears.”¹⁶⁵ In doing so they need to watch over themselves so that they really pray for the needy and not merely for themselves. The latter would draw God’s “anger” (*ὀργή*) upon them.¹⁶⁶

In any case, the neophytes should always be guarded in their relations with older non-committed monks in the monastery. Such monks use time in the middle of the day merely to chat and socialize. Some of them invite others to their cells to eat, drink and engage in perilous conversations including gossiping.¹⁶⁷ They are a “pestilence.”¹⁶⁸ When the disciples encounter them they should “make a reverence” (*μετάνοια*), i.e. greet them by kneeling “and pass by in silence.”¹⁶⁹ When invited to their cells they should think they are not worthy to enter.¹⁷⁰ Likewise, when invited to engage in the conversation they should think they are “unworthy to speak and listen and to be numbered among men.”¹⁷¹

Food is a particular problem for many of these non-committed monks. Although the rule forbids it, they beg for extra food and drink even after the last service of the day and eat and drink to satiety. Consequently, they come to morning service in a state that makes them unable to benefit from it.¹⁷² Although they have renounced the world, they keep on feeding their relatives at the expense of the monastery.¹⁷³ At ordinary meals such monks both eat and prompt others to eat more than is proper. When this happens the disciples should refuse gently by saying “excuse me.”¹⁷⁴ Similarly they should refuse such monks’ invitations to eat or drink outside scheduled meals.¹⁷⁵ Even on such occasions they should blame themselves, thinking that

¹⁶² CAT 18:122–123 (105–131).

¹⁶³ CAT 18:146–176.

¹⁶⁴ CAT 18:201–202.

¹⁶⁵ CAT 18:222–223.

¹⁶⁶ CAT 18:224–227.

¹⁶⁷ CAT 26:67–113. CAT 4:247–326. See also CAP 1:22. In CAT 4: 126–154 Symeon discusses the effects of gossiping.

¹⁶⁸ CAT 26:90–91.

¹⁶⁹ CAT 26:86–87.

¹⁷⁰ CAT 26:101–105.

¹⁷¹ CAT 26:97–99.

¹⁷² CAT 4:284–315.

¹⁷³ CAT 3:72–77.

¹⁷⁴ CAT 26:206.

¹⁷⁵ CAT 26:211–221.

had they properly repented and done penance they would not have had to refuse the “holy fathers” (ἅγιοι) invitation.¹⁷⁶

As the following chapter will demonstrate, St John’s approach to community life, spiritual guidance, and the battle against passions both resembles and differs from the way St Symeon discusses these topics.

¹⁷⁶ CAT 26:177 (163–182).

3. THE NIGHT OF THE SENSES

According to St John everyone who has become attached to the things of this world by appetites (*apetitos*) is in need of a total spiritual remake of the soul. Although customary spiritual exercises facilitate this remake, they are not the key. The key is rather to devote oneself to one crucial spiritual exercise, discursive meditation, combined with a total renunciation of the self for the sake of Christ. While the latter frees the disciples from their appetites creating a state which St John calls the night of the senses, meditation leads to receiving a secret loving inflow of God into the soul, i.e. infused contemplation.

The Human Condition

St John claims that there exist a natural union between God and creatures (*criatura*).¹ This means that God sustains them and they bear in themselves a certain “trace” (*rastros*) of him.² This trace comes in degrees. The more perfect creatures liken God more than the less perfect.³ This means for example that the soul (*alma*) which is “in itself a perfect and extremely beautiful image (*imagen*) of God” is as different from other creatures as “transparent liquid” is from “the filthiest mire.”⁴ Yet it applies at the same time that there is an infinite gap between God’s being and all creatures whether earthly or heavenly.⁵ This gap is so great that the former “has no relation or essential likeness to” the latter.⁶ Between the two there is no “proportionality” (*proporción*).⁷ Consequently, to unite with God creatures need supernatural help.⁸

¹ 2S 5:3.

² 2S 5:3 and 2S 8:3.

³ 2S 8:3.

⁴ 1S 9:1. See also 1S 9:3.

⁵ 2S 8:3. St John’s thought with regard to this question involves a contradiction that he does not seek to solve.

⁶ 2S 8:3.

⁷ 2S 8:3 and 2S 12:4.

⁸ 2S 5:3.

St John also refers the distance between God and creatures to the fall. He claims that when Adam and Eve chose to disobey him under the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they caused the whole of human kind to participate in their sin.⁹ In other words, they corrupted the human nature and established a barrier between God and every individual human being. God, in his turn, undid this damage. He established another tree, the cross of Christ, as means of grace. This grace the disciples receive already in their baptism. St John points out that it covers their sin, but in order to reach perfection they need yet another grace.¹⁰

To explain he distinguishes explicitly between possessing God “through grace” and “through union.”¹¹ The first is a matter of loving and the second a matter of both loving and “communicating.”¹² Together they constitute the way of the union with God. Similarly he claims that the disciples’ one espousal to Christ in baptism is actually two espousals. The first, so to say, covers the disciples’ former ugliness and the second adorns them with “oil,” “ornaments,” jewels and magnificent clothes.¹³ The first the disciples receive in an instant, the second they make their own only “gradually and by stages.”¹⁴

All these ways of explaining the disciples’ human condition also correspond to St John’s claim that there are three categories of God’s presence: “by essence” (*esencial*), “by grace” (*por gracia*) and “by spiritual affection” (*por afección espiritual*).¹⁵ And they correspond to claim that there exist three corresponding categories of the knowledge of God: “from creatures,” “of the Incarnation of the Word,” and “by means of a touch (*toque*) of supreme knowledge of the divinity.”¹⁶

⁹ This is the traditional Augustinian view based on Rom 5:12. John Meyendorff has pointed that while the Greeks interpreted the ἐφ’ ᾧ πάντες ἡμαρτον (*eph ho pantes hemarton*) to mean “all men have sinned because of death,” the Latins read *in quo omnes peccaverunt* in terms of “in whom all have sinned.” This was because most Greek Fathers read ἐφ’ ᾧ as a masculine pronoun referring to the preceding noun θάνατος (“death”). Most modern translators translate *eph ho pantes hemarton* to mean simply “because all sinned.” To them *ho* is relative pronoun in neuter, which together with *epi* means simply “because.” In any case, most Orthodox theologians regard mortality as the cause of sin and not vice versa. According to them, men sin since they fear death. The immortals have no such need. This is also one of the grounds on which the Orthodox emphasize deification when teaching on salvation: Christ came to make gods i.e. immortals out of men. See John Meyendorff’s *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, 144–145.

¹⁰ C23:2–5. See also *Cántico A* 37:1 and 5 and Eulogio Pacho’s short article “Bautismo” in the *Diccionario de San Juan de la Cruz*.

¹¹ 3 LI 24.

¹² 3 LI 24.

¹³ C23:6 St John refers to Ezek 16:5–14.

¹⁴ C23:6.

¹⁵ C11:3. see also 2N 24:4.

¹⁶ C7:2–4.

Passions and Appetites

According to St John the corruption of human nature is more specifically about passions and appetites (*pasiones y apetitos*).¹⁷ The passions which he also calls “emotions” are four: “joy, hope, sorrow and fear.”¹⁸ When the disciples fix their wills on God the passions “give rise to all the virtues,” when not, they rule and dominate the disciples’ souls and give rise to “vices and imperfections.”¹⁹ The appetites in their turn are defined as desires and likings for created things. They exist in three categories: “natural,” “voluntary” and “habitual.”²⁰ Hunger and thirst are examples of natural appetites. They exist to sustain life and it is neither possible nor necessary to mortify them. The disciples can control them by not allowing them to “pass beyond first movements.”²¹ This is not the case with the voluntary appetites which always involve conscious or unconscious sins or imperfections.²² When the disciples assent to them repeatedly such appetites become habitual. This means that both these types of appetites are in their turn a grave hindrance “not only to divine union but to spiritual progress as well.”²³

One reason why the appetites are such a serious spiritual problem is that they create attachments (*asimiento*) to created things and to their beauty.²⁴ To explain St John refers to the ancient axiom according to which “love effects a likeness between the lover and the loved.”²⁵ According to him it means that love not only equates but also subjects “the lover to the loved creature.”²⁶ Consequently, when the disciples allow themselves to become attached to created things and to their beauty, they also become as low as or even lower

¹⁷ 1S 15:1.

¹⁸ 3S 16:2. This is according to the scholastic reduction of Aristotle’s original eleven passions into four. See p. 292 note 2 in the *Collected Works* for source references in Aquinas’ *Summa theologiae*.

¹⁹ 3S 16:(4–)5.

²⁰ 1S 11:2.

²¹ 1S 11:2.

²² 1S 11:2. In 1S 12:3 St John also claims that if voluntary appetites “involve a matter of mortal sin” they can cause God to withdraw his grace. This statement goes back to the basic Catholic distinction between venial (from Latin’s *venia* i.e. forgiveness) and mortal sins. People commit venial sins without really knowing what they do, without their full consent. When not confessed, such sins cause withdrawal of grace but not loss of salvation. The opposite applies to mortal sins which hinder salvation unless confessed and renounced. The Catholic Church does not specify exactly how the distinction between these two categories of sins is to be drawn. See for example A.C. O’Neil’s article “Sin” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* at <http://www.newadvent.org/> for further details.

²³ 1S 11:3.

²⁴ 1S 11:4.

²⁵ 1S 4:3. According to Lucinio Ruano de la Iglesia it is possible that Minucio Felix was the first Christian author to borrow the axiom *amor pares aut invenit aut facit* from Plotinus’ *Ennead* V. 1.1. See Lucinio Ruano’s footnote to 1S 4:3 in the *Obras Completas*.

²⁶ 1S 4:3.

than these things.²⁷ This in its turn violates the soul's very nature as God's "perfect" image.²⁸

The appetites also cause many practical spiritual problems. To explain St John compares them to little children who weary their parents through constant whining and he compares them to Delilah's tormenting desire to know the secret of Samson's power.²⁹ The appetites actually "weary," "weaken" the soul and make it "blind."³⁰ They divide one's will and make it weak in the practice of virtues.³¹ As a consequence such a soul becomes "ugly in God's sight" and the Spirit of God leaves it.³²

Furthermore, in such a state the disciples cannot lift their eyes from the natural to the divine. They are unable to contemplate God and his qualities and characteristics as they appear in the natural beauty, grace, elegance, goodness and wisdom etc of things. Instead, they attach themselves merely to what is natural and not what is divine.³³ Consequently, their "pure union and transformation in God" becomes impossible.³⁴ They now move toward darkness instead of light.³⁵

Vices and Virtues

The problem of appetites and passions is actually so grave that the disciples who have not mortified their appetites and passions sin even by their very piety. This is since customary spiritual exercises and practices bring sensory consolation and satisfaction to which such disciples become attached according to whatever vices they themselves still cherish in their own lives.³⁶ To exemplify St John points out for example that the spiritual *greed* of some disciples renders them overly attached to the study of spirituality itself. Since they are not content with what God gives them they become insatiable as regards "hearing counsels" and "learning spiritual maxims."³⁷ Some even become attached to objects of spiritual devotion. To illustrate St John mentions that as spiritual director he once took away "a cross roughly made out of a blessed palm and held together by a pin twisted around it" from a

²⁷ 1S 4:3.

²⁸ 1S 9:1.

²⁹ 1S 6:6 and 1S 7:1.

³⁰ 1S 6:1 and 1S 8:3.

³¹ 1S 10:1

³² 1S 4:4.

³³ 1S 4:3–4.

³⁴ 1S 4:3.

³⁵ 1S 4:3.

³⁶ 1N 4:2 (1N 1–4). In 3S 44:4 St John suggest that the *Pater Noster* is an exception to this rule. The disciples can pray it or parts of it without considering this problem.

³⁷ 1N 3:1. In 1N 3–8 St John actually alludes to each of the so called seven capital vices: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride.

talented disciple who had been devoted to it for more than a decade.³⁸ Yet other disciples experience *lustful* thoughts and feelings even in prayer and “when receiving the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist.”³⁹ Similarly the spiritual *gluttony* of some makes them develop an unsound relation to the Eucharistic gifts. These disciples develop a false conception of God wishing to “feel God and taste him” as often as possible.⁴⁰ Because of *sloth* certain disciples “strive to satisfy their own will rather than God’s.”⁴¹ “They measure God by themselves and not themselves by God.”⁴²

Naturally St John also discusses virtues. He defines them as most highly desirable “moral goods” (*bienes morales*) which the disciples can possess and with which God endows or even adorns the disciples.⁴³ As such they are the result of the disciples’ cooperation with God.⁴⁴ It applies in fact that every virtuous act produces positive effects in the disciples’ souls. Thus while appetites and vices produce torment, weariness etc, the virtues produce “mildness, peace, comfort, light, purity, and strength” and other “innumerable goods.”⁴⁵ Actually both virtues and appetites gain strength when acted upon.⁴⁶ Yet, since they are mutually exclusive, the disciples can benefit from the virtues’ positive effects only after having eliminated all their appetites and imperfections.⁴⁷

The Dark Night of the Senses

This means that while it is always important to act virtuously, it is absolutely crucial in this stage that the disciples do what it takes to mortify their appetites.⁴⁸ In other words, they need to totally eliminate both “the delight of the flesh and the gratifications of the will” so that their soul will become “empty, naked, and purified of every appetite.”⁴⁹ In support of this St John appeals to the philosophical principle that “two contraries cannot co-exist in the same subject” and claims on this basis that “since God and attachment to creatures are contraries, they cannot coexist in the same will.”⁵⁰ In addition,

³⁸ 1N 3:2.

³⁹ 1N 4:1.

⁴⁰ 1N 6:4–5.

⁴¹ 1N 7:2.

⁴² 1N 7:3.

⁴³ 3S 27:1–3. See also C6:1 and L14:4.

⁴⁴ C30:6.

⁴⁵ 1S 12:5. 1N 11:4.

⁴⁶ 1S 12:5.

⁴⁷ 1S 5:6.

⁴⁸ 1S 5:6.

⁴⁹ 1S 1:4. 1S 5:6.

⁵⁰ 1S 6:1 and 1S 4:2.

he applies this principle to the way in which what he calls “the sensory spirit” (*el espíritu sensual*) relates to what he calls the “entirely spiritual spirit” (*el espíritu puro espiritual*) and claims that these are two opposite forms which cannot exist simultaneously in one and the same subject, i.e. the soul.⁵¹

As a further illustration St John also compares the disciples’ souls in their bodies to prisoners in dark cells. The senses are the only windows of these cells. In this sense they are the prisoners’ only access to communication with the world outside.⁵² The fact that the things they see through the windows cannot enter the cells means that neither the senses nor the things themselves are injurious.⁵³ Yet since the latter give rise to desires and appetites, which in their turn are truly injurious, the prisoners nevertheless need to do what it takes to shut the windows.⁵⁴ In other words, in order to unite with God the disciples need at first to enter the night of the senses (*la noche oscura del sentido*).⁵⁵

According to St John the main thing the disciples need to do to enter this night is to develop “a habitual appetite” (*ordinario apetito*) to imitate Christ as carefully as possible in all circumstances.⁵⁶ Furthermore, to do this in a successful way, they need “out of love for Jesus Christ” to “renounce and remain empty of any sensory satisfaction that is not purely for the honor and glory of God.”⁵⁷ This means in terms of practice, for example, that the disciples should always in all situations choose to do whatever pleases them the least and gives them the least satisfaction and consolation.⁵⁸ And this means that they should in all situations act, speak and think “with contempt” for and of themselves and wish that others relate to them accordingly.⁵⁹

When the disciples act in this way they annihilate both their sensitive parts, and in the long run, as we shall see, even their “spiritual or rational part” (*la espiritual o racional*).⁶⁰ St John compares the first of these annihilations to the “narrow gate” and the second to the “narrow way” Christ mentions according to Matt 7:14.⁶¹ To go through them is the same as “to

⁵¹ 1S 6:2. See also 1S 8:3.

⁵² 1S 3:3. St John subscribes to the Scholastic teaching according to which “the soul is like a *tabula rasa* when God infuses it into the body” and that the information it receives from outside itself comes to it through the senses.

⁵³ 1S 3:4.

⁵⁴ 1S 3:1, 4. See also 1N 14:5 where St John calls such a state for “the fast and penance of the senses.”

⁵⁵ 1S 5:6–8. 1S 13:1.

⁵⁶ 1S 13:3.

⁵⁷ 1S 13:4.

⁵⁸ 1S 13:6.

⁵⁹ 1S 13:9.

⁶⁰ 2S 7:3. See also 1S 9:3.

⁶¹ 2S 7:2–3.

take up one's cross and to follow" Christ.⁶² It is to die to one's natural self in the same way as Christ died "spiritually to the sensitive part" already while living. It is also to die "naturally" as Jesus did on the cross.⁶³ Alongside these expressions St John also claims that the disciples' cross is that "sweet yoke" and that "light burden" that St Matthew records Christ mentioning in Matt 11:30 and he points out that it brings the disciples "relief and sweetness" in all trials and makes their journey lighter and easier.⁶⁴ Indeed, the night they have chosen is in a certain sense "happy" (*dichosa*), "lovely" (*amable*), even "guiding" (*que guiaste*).⁶⁵

From Discursive Mediation to Infused Contemplation

Although St John is critical of most spiritual practices, exercises and charismatic phenomena on the grounds that they stimulate the senses and also on the grounds that the disciples may become attached to them in a wrong way, he points out that God also uses them to lift the disciples from their low state to "supreme knowledge."⁶⁶ This is not since communication through the senses is a good thing as such, but since such communication is, from God's perspective, the only way to reach the disciples who are still sensual. In support of this, St John mentions, for example, the principle *Omnia movet secundum modum eorum* (God uses each thing according to its mode).⁶⁷ In addition, he claims on the basis of how according to the Book of Wisdom (Wis 8:1) God *disponit omnia suaviter* (disposes all things gently) that he deals "gently" with each individual soul when he accustoms it to supreme knowledge.⁶⁸

This process of accustoming follows certain stages. At first God "re-energizes" in the disciples' soul "new enthusiasm and fervor in the service of God" and allows them "to experience intense satisfaction" when they devote themselves to "spiritual exercises" (*ejercicios espirituales*).⁶⁹ This is a reference to things such as

hearing sermons and Masses, seeing holy objects, mortifying the palate at meals, and disciplining the sense of touch through penance and holy rigor.⁷⁰

⁶² 2S 7:4.

⁶³ 2S 7:10.

⁶⁴ 2S 7:7.

⁶⁵ *Noche Oscura*, v. 2, 3 and 5.

⁶⁶ 2S 17:3(-4).

⁶⁷ 2S 17:2.

⁶⁸ 2S 17:2-3.

⁶⁹ 1N 1:2 and 2S 17:3.

⁷⁰ 2S 17:4.

Later when the disciples' senses have become "somewhat disposed," God uses charismatic phenomena such as supernatural visions "of saints and holy things, very sweet odors, locutions, and extreme delight in the sense of touch" to further prepare them.⁷¹ The same applies to more refined spiritual communications.⁷² In the chapter "The Night of the Spirit" I shall return to these themes to present St John's teaching on them in more detail.

He also points out that as this divine preparation proceeds the disciples should devote themselves to their most important spiritual exercise, i.e. the discursive mediation (*la meditación discursiva*). This is a reference to the disciples' active use of their "two interior bodily senses: imagination and phantasy" (*imaginativa y fantasía*) to simulate "forms, figures, and images" that relate to "divine subjects."⁷³ Among such subjects St John mentions "imagining Christ crucified" or "God seated on his throne with resplendent majesty."⁷⁴

The reason why this exercise is crucial is that it makes the disciples acquire "substantially and habitually, the spirit of meditation."⁷⁵ To explain what this means St John points out that each time the disciples act in this way through their interior bodily senses they also obtain some "knowledge and love" of God.⁷⁶ Gradually such meditative acts engender a habit in the disciples' soul. As a result, God will now be able, unlike before, to begin to place the disciples' soul in a state of contemplation without such acts or with only a few of them.⁷⁷ This amounts to saying that he now "converts" them into a totally new mode of knowing.⁷⁸ This conversion activates the disciples' "spiritual faculties" by which they will now be able to "enjoy" God's gifts of "knowledge, wisdom, love and delight" apart from any "further activity of the senses."⁷⁹ In other words, they move from discursive activity into receptive passivity in their relationship to God.

The reason why this change of mode is necessary goes back to how God's wisdom is in itself and even to how God is in himself. St John writes:

But God's wisdom, to which the intellect must be united, has neither mode nor manner, neither does it have limits nor does it pertain to distinct and particular knowledge, because it is totally pure and simple. That the two extremes, the soul and divine wisdom, may be united, they will have to come

⁷¹ 2S 17:4.

⁷² 2S 17:4.

⁷³ 2S 12:3 and 2S 14:2.

⁷⁴ 2S 12:3.

⁷⁵ 2S 14:2. See also 2S 17:5.

⁷⁶ 2S 14:2.

⁷⁷ 2S 14:2. See also 2S 12:5.

⁷⁸ 2S 14:2 and 2S 17. St John's poem *Entréme donde no supe* seems to describe the experience of knowing in this new way.

⁷⁹ 2S 14:2,6

to accord by means of a certain likeness. As a result the soul must also be pure and simple, unlimited and unattached to any particular knowledge, and unmodified by the boundaries of form, species, and image. Since God cannot be encompassed by any image, form or particular knowledge, in order to be united with him the soul should not be limited by any particular form or knowledge.⁸⁰

To illustrate this he appeals to the Vulgate's rendering of Deut 4:12: *Voce[m] verborum ejus audistis, et formam penitus non vidistis* (You heard the voice of his words, and you saw absolutely no form) and claims that God has "no form or likeness."⁸¹ Likewise he states explicitly that God has "no mode."⁸² I shall return even to this aspect of St John's teaching in the chapter "The Night of the Spirit."

Since the disciples will most likely not find it easy to recognize when their conversion to this kind of non-particular knowledge which St John also calls infused contemplation, and with reference to St Dionysius, "mystical theology" that three signs help them to recognize the change.⁸³ The first is when the disciples discover that they are no longer able to continue with their discursive meditations as before and draw satisfaction from them. The second is when they discover in themselves a certain general inability to focus on "particular objects."⁸⁴ The third and the most important one is when they find themselves both able and willing to remain "in the loving awareness (*atención*) of God" without any particular prayers or words.⁸⁵

At the same time, since all of these signs are rather subjective, St John also teaches how to verify them. Thus he claims that "as long as" the disciples are able to meditate discursively and "draw out satisfaction" from this activity they should not "abandon" this exercise.⁸⁶ Furthermore, he points out that even "newly committed sins" and unhealthy psychological states like "melancholy" may cause dissatisfaction.⁸⁷ Such states and feelings are not an adequate cause to discontinue discursive meditation, without which they cannot begin to advance to more spiritual states and union with God.⁸⁸

⁸⁰ 2S 16:7. See also St John's poetic description of the soul's separation from all created things (*toda cosa criada*) in the poem *Sin arrimo y con arrimo*.

⁸¹ 2S 16:8.

⁸² 2S 4:5.

⁸³ See for example 1N 10:6 and 2N 5 for references to infused contemplation. See 2S 8:6 and 2N 5:1 and 3 for references to mystical theology. 2S 13:2–4.

⁸⁴ 2S 13:3.

⁸⁵ 2S 13:4.

⁸⁶ 2S 13:2.

⁸⁷ 2S 13:6.

⁸⁸ 2S 13:6 and 1N 9:2. Both St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross use the term "melancholy" as a general term for different types of spiritual, emotional and mental disturbances. See Rowan Williams' *Teresa of Avila*, 112, and see footnote 3 on p. 368 in the

The Spiritual Director

According to St John it is extremely difficult to reach spiritual perfection without an experienced guide.⁸⁹ This is since solitary disciples are like trees which no one “cultivates and guards.”⁹⁰ They are like solitary coals which cannot keep on burning.⁹¹ When they fall no one helps them.⁹² Experienced guides are important also since “the disciple[s] will become like the[ir] master[s].”⁹³ This means in turn that the disciples should not follow just any spiritual director (*maestro espiritual*). Indeed, St John points out the lack of satisfaction with a particular director’s teaching as an indicator of the need to find a new one.⁹⁴ Yet it applies in general that the disciples should obey their superiors looking on them “as though on God.”⁹⁵ They should not allow their thoughts to “dwell upon” certain superiors’ particular ways of proceeding or their personal characteristics.⁹⁶ Especially as beginners they should obey them in matters of spiritual guidance even when they feel that the directors do not understand them.⁹⁷ They should not seek to enforce their own will on spiritual directors in such matters.⁹⁸ Neither should they seek to become their favorites by pretending to be more perfect than they actually are.⁹⁹

It is actually not easy to find experienced spiritual directors. According to St John many of them lack experience, especially of infused contemplation.¹⁰⁰ In fact, few of them know more than what beginners themselves do. Consequently, these directors lack both respect for and understanding of those whom God prompts to renounce and disdain “the world” and change their lives.¹⁰¹ They seek to control their disciples by not allowing other much more experienced persons to lead them. Sometimes they even express open jealousy toward other spiritual directors.¹⁰² The situation is actually so difficult that the disciples should not expect to find

Collected Works. St John obviously believed that the night could cure all kinds of mental disturbances. See 1N 4:3.

⁸⁹ D 1–11

⁹⁰ D 5–6.

⁹¹ D 7.

⁹² D 8–11

⁹³ 3LI 30 and 2S 18:5. See also 2 S 3:5.

⁹⁴ 3LI 61.

⁹⁵ Cautelas 12.

⁹⁶ Cautelas 12.

⁹⁷ 1N 2:2–3 and 6–7.

⁹⁸ 1N 6:3–4

⁹⁹ 1N 2:4.

¹⁰⁰ S, Prol 4–5. 3LI 30–33.

¹⁰¹ 3LI 62.

¹⁰² 3LI 59.

spiritual directors who can guide them throughout their whole spiritual journey.¹⁰³

When discussing what directors should do, St John emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit. It is of crucial importance that spiritual directors recognize that He is “the chief agent, guide and mover of the souls.”¹⁰⁴ This means that they need, when dealing with their disciples, to monitor what God is already doing with the disciples and act accordingly. If they are not capable of this, they should leave the disciples on their own and not worry about what happens to them.¹⁰⁵ This is since the harm that the spiritual directors’ insensitivity to the Spirit causes is “beyond anything imaginable.”¹⁰⁶ It is comparable to when someone spoils an advanced and delicate painting “with dull and harsh colors” (*con bajos y toscos calores*).¹⁰⁷ Such directors destroy the Lord’s “vineyard.”¹⁰⁸ Their being ignorant does not free them from their guilt.¹⁰⁹ This is since they have not been careful in handling what is actually the Lord’s.¹¹⁰ Consequently, they “will not escape” God’s indignation and his “punishment.”¹¹¹

When counseling, the directors’ first task is “to mortify” their disciples’ appetites.¹¹² Their second equally important task is to provide their disciples with “matter for meditation and discursive reflection.”¹¹³ Then as the beginners meditate discursively and continue with their ordinary spiritual exercises, the Spirit helps them by giving them “delight and satisfaction of the senses.”¹¹⁴ Likewise He prepares the disciples “for himself” by giving them an “unction” (*unción*) of “delicate ointments” (*ungüento*).¹¹⁵ The latter accustom the disciples to the things of God and motivate them to continue in what they do. Since this is the case, the directors should encourage their disciples to seek and enjoy this kind of spiritual aids.¹¹⁶

However, when the disciples reach the point of no longer being able to receive and enjoy them, these instructions no longer apply. In this situation the directors need to know that it is in fact harmful to force the disciples to continue with their customary exercises.¹¹⁷ This is since now the disciples’

¹⁰³ 3L1 30.

¹⁰⁴ 3L1 46. 3L1 32.

¹⁰⁵ 3L1 46 and 61.

¹⁰⁶ 3L1 43.

¹⁰⁷ 3L1 42.

¹⁰⁸ 3L1 55.

¹⁰⁹ 3L1 56.

¹¹⁰ 3L1 56.

¹¹¹ 3L1 57 and 60.

¹¹² 1S 12:6.

¹¹³ 3L1 32.

¹¹⁴ 3L1 32.

¹¹⁵ 3L1 31.

¹¹⁶ 3L1 26–33.

¹¹⁷ 3L1 32.

own acts and attempts would only keep them tied to their senses in a way that would hinder them from receiving the infused contemplation.¹¹⁸ St John points out in fact that since the process of becoming accommodated to the infused contemplation is delicate, only those spiritual directors who have understanding and “experience” can handle it correctly.¹¹⁹ Their common mistake is that they think that the disciples’ new inability to continue with their previous exercises is merely a result of this or that concrete sin. Consequently, such directors easily accuse their disciples of “falling back” and make them do “general confessions” (*confesión general*).¹²⁰ As a consequence the disciples suffer and become confused.¹²¹

In addition to these instructions St John also teaches directors what to do should their disciples receive various supernatural apprehensions (*aprehensión*) such as visions, revelations, and locutions (*dicho*). First of all it is crucial that the directors show only moderate interest in such matters. This is since the opposite attitude would encourage the disciples to become attached to such things.¹²² Secondly, the directors should make their disciples more or less refuse such apprehensions altogether.¹²³ Otherwise the disciples will fail “to walk wholly on the road of nakedness” (*ir en desnudez de todo*).¹²⁴

The Community

Monastic obedience does not pertain only to the disciples’ relation to their superiors. Rather St John claims that everything that the disciples do apart from obedience is “lost,” i.e. such acts either hinder them or do not help them to reach perfection.¹²⁵ The same applies to everything the disciples say apart from obedience.¹²⁶ In fact, instead of having their own ideas about how to reach perfection the disciples should allow themselves to be “taught,” “be subjected and despised” and they should “receive orders.”¹²⁷ They are in the monastery “to be worked and tried in virtue.”¹²⁸ To explain what this means St John compares the disciples’ peers and superiors to “artisans” whose work

¹¹⁸ 3Ll 41. S, Prol 4.

¹¹⁹ S, Prol 4.

¹²⁰ S, Prol 5.

¹²¹ S, Prol 4–5. See also 3 Ll 53.

¹²² 2S 18:1–3 (1–9).

¹²³ 2S 18:7.

¹²⁴ 2S 18:4.

¹²⁵ Cautelas 11.

¹²⁶ D 84 (85 in the *Collected Works*).

¹²⁷ D 112 (113 in the *Collected Works*).

¹²⁸ CA3.

is to “fashion” and to “mold” the disciple into what he or she should become.¹²⁹ This molding has a lot to do with their peers’ “words, deeds, temperaments and thoughts.”¹³⁰

When explaining the matter he also claims that God actually consents both to “devils who seek to overthrow the saints” and to the consequent friction between religious.¹³¹ This is “to prove and try” them.¹³² As regards the disciples themselves this friction naturally arises out of vices. Thus pride is the reason why certain zealous disciples look down upon other less zealous ones.¹³³ It is also the reason why some disciples yearn for praise and cannot bear others being praised.¹³⁴ Because of lust certain disciples become unduly attached to each other.¹³⁵ And because of anger some disciples rebuke their peers angrily. In this way they set “themselves as Lords of virtue.”¹³⁶

St John claims that the disciples who will advance to perfection do not relate to others in any of these ways.¹³⁷ Rather, they think that their peers are better than they are and that whatever they themselves do for Christ is not worth mentioning. Consequently, when others praise them they find it hard even to believe their words. At the same time they delight when others receive praise.¹³⁸ These disciples also yearn to serve God’s servants and even his servants’ servants.¹³⁹ Indeed, because of “holy envy” (*santa envidia*) they seek to imitate all those that serve God well.¹⁴⁰ In this their only sorrow is that they cannot do this as well as they would desire to.¹⁴¹

Furthermore, when St John teaches specifically how the disciples need to relate to each other in the community, he points out that they should practice “equal love and forgetfulness” of all persons.¹⁴² This means for example that they should not allow their thoughts to dwell on their peers’ different characteristics, neither good nor bad, and never talk or listen to others talking of such things.¹⁴³ In fact, when the occasion of the latter arises they should “humbly” ask not to be told.¹⁴⁴ Naturally they themselves should never

¹²⁹ Caut 15.

¹³⁰ Caut 15. CA3.

¹³¹ Caut 9.

¹³² Caut 9.

¹³³ 1N 2:1.

¹³⁴ 1N 2:2,5.

¹³⁵ 1N 4:7.

¹³⁶ 1N 5:2.

¹³⁷ D 177 (167 in the *Collected Works*)

¹³⁸ 1N 2:7.

¹³⁹ 1N 2:8.

¹⁴⁰ 1N 2:6.

¹⁴¹ 1N 2:6–8.

¹⁴² Caut 5 (–6)

¹⁴³ D 117, 134, 146 (118, 135, 147 in the *Collected Works*).

¹⁴⁴ D 146 (147 in the *Collected Works*).

complain about anyone else.¹⁴⁵ At the same time they also should “esteem” in their peers “things that God most values.”¹⁴⁶ And they should be generous with whatever they have and take no notice of who is for or against them in the monastery.¹⁴⁷

Differently expressed, this amounts to saying that the disciples should live in the monastery as if they were actually living alone.¹⁴⁸ They should neither speak nor think about what happens around them or of any person in particular.¹⁴⁹ They should keep their memories wholly clear from such things.¹⁵⁰ This applies “even were they to live among devils.”¹⁵¹ And it applies to whatever blessings they themselves have experienced, whatever good works they themselves do or to whatever secrets they may have in their hearts. Of these they should never utter a word.¹⁵² Instead, they should always seek to humble themselves in everything.¹⁵³ Thus they should always allow anyone to correct and rebuke them.¹⁵⁴ And they should accept all work without complaints.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, they should focus fully on God alone and suffer both their own weaknesses and those of others in quiet.¹⁵⁶ One reason for all this is that “the purest suffering produces the purest understanding.”¹⁵⁷ Another is that “the language” God “best hears is silent love” (*callado amor*).¹⁵⁸

The following conclusion of *Part One* begins with a comparison of this vision of the disciples’ first spiritual stage with St Symeon’s vision of the same.

¹⁴⁵ D 147 (148 in the *Collected Works*).

¹⁴⁶ D 88 (89 in the *Collected Works*).

¹⁴⁷ D 151, 154 (152, 155 in the *Collected Works*). Grad 17.

¹⁴⁸ CA2.

¹⁴⁹ Caut 8. D 202 (173 in the *Collected Works*).

¹⁵⁰ D 60 (61 in the *Collected Works*).

¹⁵¹ Caut 9.

¹⁵² D 20, 79, 139, 152, 180 (20, 80, 140, 153 in the *Collected Works*),

¹⁵³ Caut 13.

¹⁵⁴ D 142 and 149 (143 and 150 in the *Collected Works*).

¹⁵⁵ D 148 (149 in the *Collected Works*).

¹⁵⁶ D 174 (164 in the *Collected Works*). Caut 9. See also D 27 and 117 (28 and 118 in the *Collected Works*).

¹⁵⁷ D 126 (127 in the *Collected Works*).

¹⁵⁸ D 131 (132 in the *Collected Works*).

4. ST SYMEON, ST JOHN AND PLOTINUS

As we have seen, not only ancient philosophers but even St Symeon and St John explain lack of spiritual health in terms of passions and appetites. Likewise they recommend various spiritual exercises relating them to their core beliefs which both resemble and differ from each other. The following set of comparative discussions defines these differences and similarities more closely:

Similarities

As Christian theologians St Symeon and St John reckon with the creation, the fall, the Incarnation, the Cross, the resurrection and the sending of the Spirit, etc. Likewise they refer the distance between God and creation to the fall and each person's individual sins presupposing that it is impossible to overcome this distance apart from grace. In their capacity as leaders of monastic communities they recognize the spiritual value of obedience, poverty and chastity.

As a consequence their teaching on spiritual directors and fathers has several common features. First of all both affirm their necessity. The disciples cannot cope with the challenges of their quest by themselves. Second, they require that such persons must first have practiced successfully what they teach and that they are sensitive to the Spirit's lead. Third, they indicate that the disciples will become like their master. Fourth, they both leave a door open to the disciples to choose another person to follow.

As regards the community, both theologians presuppose that it is the place where the worst of man manifests itself automatically and where the disciples can choose to manifest the best and, consequently, become spiritually crucified and reach perfection. This occurs especially when they choose obedience to the vows, forgiveness and equal love of all in every circumstance.

In addition, both their theologies have a Greek touch. Together with ancient philosophers and early Christian Greek fathers, they describe the reality of sin in terms of passions making mention of various spiritual exercises and virtues when suggesting solutions. St John echoes Plato's

allegory of the cave when he compares the life of the soul in the body to a prisoner's life in a dark cell. St Symeon in turn alludes to the same image when claiming that as the disciples search the Scriptures in order to obey them, something like a hole to heaven opens up in their prison, the soul. Finally, the goal of both theologians is to bring their disciples to the point of becoming transformed into and united with divine wisdom.

At the same time a closer look at our material also reveals differences:

Similarities and Differences

It is obvious that both mystical theologians' approaches to baptism relate to each other. To them baptism both is and is not sufficient as such. St John indicates that it is enough for salvation but not for reaching perfection. St Symeon is more explicit in claiming that God forgives the disciples' sins, sanctifies them, frees them from the devil and restores their free will in baptism. Yet, since he also claims that post-baptismal sin undoes these effects, except for free will, his accent falls on the necessity of second baptism, i.e. that of the Spirit, in a way that cannot be found in St John's approach to the matter. This applies unless one finds it possible to interpret infused contemplation in such terms.¹

Fundamentally, the two theologians also approach their disciples' attachments to sin, passions and created things in a similar negative fashion. Yet while St Symeon refers the problem of such attachments only to their character as "covetous," St John seems to suggest that all attachments are problematic as if by nature. This is because quite unlike St Symeon he also explains the question with the help of, for example, his principle of non-proportionality and the related claim that two contraries cannot coexist in the same subject, i.e. in the disciples' faculty of will. This corresponds to his presupposition that most disciples develop problematic inner attachments to spiritual counsels and reading, forms of mortification, objects of worship, feeling and tasting God in the Holy Eucharist, etc and this in turn corresponds to how he equals *imitatio Christi* with the practice of refusing all consolations and pleasures of life.

¹ The objection to this would be that while St Symeon thinks spiritual baptism in terms of his disciples' sudden transformation not only into knowing God much better but also into becoming able to serve others spiritually, infused contemplation is to St John a hidden process that leads to union with God at the cost of one's natural self. Yet ultimately, even this process leads to true knowledge of God and acquisition of his spiritual gifts by which the disciples can serve other people. See the chapter "Spiritual Marriage" for more information.

Differences

The latter difference between the two theologies seems to go back to different cosmologies. Both theologians obviously start with the conviction that there is a fundamental difference between the creator and the creation, but while St Symeon seems to refer the disciples' spiritual problems mainly to the fall and its consequences, St John seems to presume that the disciples' finitude as compared to God's infinity is in itself a major spiritual problem.

Likewise even their anthropologies seem to differ. While St Symeon is uninterested in distinguishing body, soul and spirit and various sensitive and spiritual faculties from each other in any particular fashion, this is one of St John's primary concerns. Although my use of the term "the disciples" hides it to a degree, his accent obviously falls on the soul, which he also finds natural and necessary to define as some kind of receptive cognitive-spiritual device.

This in turn may also be one reason why St John identifies the most mental of his disciples' spiritual exercises, i.e. discursive meditation, as the most important one and as the key to receiving infused contemplation, i.e. mystical theology or the loving general knowledge of God. The same does not apply to St Symeon, who does not seem to separate such knowledge from searching the Scriptures and practicing its commandments and who simultaneously promotes a wide range of spiritual exercises.

There is also a corresponding difference in what the theologians teach on themes such as faith and virtues. St Symeon teaches his disciples to act bodily on what they have received by faith no matter the cost. In his view such practice leads to the acquisition of virtues, which in turn leads to illumination, i.e. knowledge of God by God himself. His idea is simply that when the disciples practice, for example, loving their neighbors and even their enemies they learn about God who is love.

St John in turn defines faith in a way that allows him to present the practice of renunciation as some kind of virtue of virtues, i.e. as practice of faith itself. This is when he claims that only faith as opposed to every other thinkable thing can serve as means for union with God, and when he identifies faith with infused contemplation and sees the night of the senses as a spiritual necessity. This seems to relate to how he defines virtues not primarily as faith-based activities but as moral "goods" or "powers" with which God adorns the disciples after the night of the senses has freed them from their appetites.

St Symeon and Plotinus

It is clear that Plotinus and St Symeon presuppose that their disciples resemble and originally derive from God / the *One*. Likewise they presuppose that their present spiritual condition is or has been that of separation and that the goal of their lives is to unite with God / the *One* eternally and as much as is possible in this life. To reach this goal they both propose spiritual exercises and virtuous deeds.

It is also clear that although both ascribe total otherness to the divinity, the New Theologian also bears witness to the creation as something good and the fall as the cause of spiritual separation. He also bears witness to what reverses the separation: the Incarnation and the sending of the Spirit into the world. In other words, while Plotinus' the *One* is beyond ordinary knowledge to the point that there is no room for a positive theology of it at all, St Symeon's Triune God has revealed himself in such a sufficient degree that there is little room for negative theology in his teaching. The main reason why his disciples do not know God is their passions and their sins.

Furthermore, while Plotinus, for example, thinks that the souls' present state of unlikeness does not hinder them from doing what it takes to unite with the One, or at least arriving at the point of becoming drawn to it, St Symeon refers his disciples ability to live up to their Christian calling to baptism, other means of grace and the spiritual fathers' help.

It is also obvious that St Symeon does not emphasize inwardness and contemplation when he discusses spiritual exercises and that he does not present virtues as means to self-made beauty, which may simultaneously be a spiritual problem. Nor does he distinguish between civic and purificatory virtues, suggesting that on a certain level only the latter mean something. Instead, he promotes both spiritual exercises and virtues as means to acquire the Spirit, without, however, questioning their value as ends in themselves.

St John and Plotinus

It is obvious that these general likenesses between Plotinus' and St Symeon's teaching apply even to the teaching of St John. At the same time it is obvious there is much of Plotinus in St John's teaching. His emphasis on non-proportionality relates to the general Platonic dichotomy between *materia* and spirit and the more specific neo-Platonic dichotomy between material multiplicity and divine simplicity. Thus, unlike St Symeon, he clearly considers the very fact of his disciples' ability to know things by their senses to be a problem which they have to deal with by developing an ability

to know and receive God in a way that bypasses the senses, i.e. by infused contemplation.

It is also clear that the way St John suggests that the disciples' soul is in itself a beautiful image of God, and the way he suggests that its present state necessitates its becoming both emptied of all attachments and adorned with virtues, resembles Plotinus' teaching on the souls' divine origin, their present state of unlikeness and their need to polish away this unlikeness by virtues and the arts. In this St John's theology differs from that St Symeon.

It is also obvious that the way St John emphasizes total renunciation of self, mistrusts sensual gratification, rejects mental images of created things and claims that the actual substance of spirit is foreign to all sense relates to how Plotinus maintains that souls in order to unite with the One must also let go of their inborn sense of matter, their attachments to virtues and to beauty itself and to allow for the annihilation of their self-consciousness, self-centeredness and self-will. The same applies to how St John emphasizes discursive mediation as a preparation for infused contemplation and to how Plotinus emphasizes dialectic and mental training as a preparation for contemplation as participation. In other words, both distinguish between primary and secondary spiritual exercises on the basis of how they promote purification from everything that hinders their disciples from turning *within*, and they presuppose when doing so that knowledge of senses is illusory, and that true knowledge of the divine is to be sought in what transcends or is beyond nature. It is actually on this basis that St John juxtaposes faith and knowledge of senses in a way that does not seem to exist in St Symeon's theology.

Furthermore, the way St John describes the disciples' attempts to 'establish' infused contemplation in terms of how they often need to vacillate between it and discursive meditation may relate to how Plotinus describes the souls' union with the One in terms of their continuous returns to the life of virtue. Similarly, there may be a parallel between Plotinus' disregard of action and St John's nearly complete silence as regards life of Christian action, a theme to which St Symeon returns more frequently. It may also be possible to see something of that terror Plotinus expects souls to experience being invited to go out of their ordinary selves in St John's language of dark nights and total annihilations.

Concluding Remark

The comparisons above indicate that the mystical theologies of St Symeon and St John share the same basic Greek-Christian ascetic and mystical frame of thought. At the same time they indicate that their anthropologies,

cosmologies and approaches to spiritual exercises differ from each other significantly. The fact that it is possible to explain these differences in terms of Plotinus' neo-Platonism lends support to how Lossky points in the direction of this philosophy when discussing Western mystical theologies of dark night as a problem. Yet the same does apply to his opaque use of the doctrine of *filioque* as the symbol of what distinguishes between the Christian East and the Christian West. In the chapter that follows I will cast more light on Lossky's thought as regards this issue.

PART TWO – KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

5. VLADIMIR LOSSKY’S PATRISTIC EPISTEMOLOGY

The *Mystical Theology* is essentially a presentation of central Orthodox theological criteria and emphases which Lossky derives from his reading especially of Greek patristic fathers such as St Dionysius (sixth century), St Maximus Confessor (d. 662), and St Gregory of Palamas (d.1359), and the Cappadocians: St Basil (d. 379), St Gregory Nazianzus (d. 389) and St Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395). The resultant “neo-patristic synthesis” has influenced and inspired a whole generation of Orthodox theologians and thinkers.¹ These are, for example, John Meyendorff, John Ziziloulas, Dumitru Staniloae, and Christos Yannaras. According to the latter the *Mystical Theology* is significant especially in that it contributed crucially to the Orthodox rediscovery of “the patristic presuppositions of theology” in a time when Western theological attitudes had begun to penetrate the Orthodox theological tradition.²

In Lossky’s own view his study concerns “those elements of theology which relate to the question of our union with God.”³ Yet, if we look at it, for example, in the light of St Symeon’s and St John’s writings, it becomes evident that it is much less a study of divine union than it is a contemporary patristic discussion on the conditions of knowing God, i.e. a theological epistemology. Since Lossky’s epistemological criteria and emphases also ground his critique of the *filioque*, and since they bear a relation to the content of the following two chapters, I will now present and discuss them starting from the history that helped to shape them.

¹ According to Aristotle Papanikolaou the expression “neo-patristic synthesis” goes back to Georges Florovsky. See Papanikolaou’s *Being in God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine Human Communion*, 9, footnote 1.

² Christos Yannaras: *Orthodoxy and the West*, 211. See pp. 291–292, 294 of this book for other references to Lossky.

³ Lossky: *Mystical*, 177.

Background: Dispute on Sophia

One reason why epistemology plays such a central role in the *Mystical Theology* is Lossky's dispute with Sergius Bulgakov on divine wisdom, i.e. Sophia. Bulgakov was thirty years senior to Lossky. He was a former Marxist economist and a major intellectual who had returned to his ancestral faith especially after the death of his three year old son in 1909. He had been ordained as a priest in 1918 and expelled about at the same time as Lossky's family at the end of 1922. Like them, he had also moved first to Prague and soon after to Paris where he came to head the *Saint Sergius Institute of Theology* (Institut de théologie orthodoxe Saint-Serge).⁴ Bulgakov died in 1944, the year of Lossky's publication of the *Mystical Theology*.

In 1923 some students of *Saint Sergius Institute* founded a Christian society, the *Fellowship of St Photius* (La Confrérie Saint Photius) to promote Orthodoxy in France and to promote its universality against nationalistic tendencies.⁵ Lossky, who had at the time begun studies at Sorbonne University became involved. This proved consequential, especially after Metropolitan Sergius (Stragorodsky) of Nizhny Novgorod, who headed the Moscow see at the time, had declared in July of 1927 after a few months of imprisonment that Orthodox Christians should "recognize the Soviet Union" as their "civil fatherland."⁶ While metropolitan Evlogy (Georgievsky) of Paris consequently subjected himself together with the leadership of the Saint Serge and the larger part of the Russian Orthodox community in France to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1930, the *Fellowship of St Photius* remained faithful to the spiritual leadership of Moscow.⁷

That the schism between the fellowship and Saint Sergius Institute also had theological roots became obvious especially after Bulgakov's publication of a major theological work, *The Lamb of God* (Агнец Божий), in 1933. In it he returned to the theme of his earlier work of 1917, *Unfading Light* (Свет Небесный), namely the divine Sophia, i.e. wisdom, which the philosopher Vladimir Soloviev (d. 1900) had introduced into Russian religious and philosophical thought. The latter had in reference to Boehme suggested that the Sophia is the cosmological-ontological principle of the Trinity, its *Urgrund*. Likewise he had suggested in reference to Hegel that Sophia, in order to avoid non-existence ($\mu\eta\ \delta\upsilon\nu$), both initiated and directed a

⁴ See Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal's article on Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

⁵ See the section "La Confrérie Saint Photius" in the chapter "La fondation de la paroisse des trois saints hiérarques: les fondements théologiques et spirituels de retour à l'icône" of Emilie van Taack's monograph *L'icône de l'église des trois saints hiérarques et l'oeuvre de Léonide A. Ouspensky et du moine Grégoire Krug*.

⁶ Timothy Ware: *The Orthodox Church*, 152 (151–155). Matti Kotiranta: *Persoonan perikoreesina*, 31.

⁷ Matti Kotiranta: *Persoonan perikoreesina*, 32.

process in which deity as the “First Absolute” necessarily produced the world as the “Second Absolute” while she also lead history to its culmination in the all embracing union between herself and Logos i.e. Christ the Savior.⁸

Formally speaking, Bulgakov rejected Soloviev’s scheme. This was because it deviated from the Orthodox doctrine according to which the creation is a free act of a compassionate creator who is wholly distinct from what he has created.⁹ Yet since Bulgakov assumed that God could not “create anything outside of” himself, he embraced a form of panentheism suggesting that God himself is the “all-embracing unity” (*всеединство*) who as such overpasses the gap between himself and the world “in a voluntary act of kenosis.”¹⁰ In other words, he taught that “the world exists ‘in’ God in the sense that God is the eternal ground of the world’s existence.”¹¹

Although Bulgakov’s panentheism was already as such theologically exigent on the grounds that it seemed to presuppose that God is present in the universe not only because he chooses to be, but on necessary ontological grounds, his further views appeared to be even more challenging. I refer to his additional suggestion that the divine Sophia was the inner principle or idea of the all-embracing unity. According to Bulgakov she had two natures, divine and natural. These coincided with God’s nature and the world’s soul respectively, and their coming together was the culmination of salvation history, the very union of the Spirit and the Word.¹²

The members of the *Fellowship of Saint Photius* found it difficult to distinguish this interpretation of salvation history from that of Soloviev. Consequently, they decided to combat it.¹³ The task of formulating their critique fell on Lossky. It is in this situation he began to develop the patristic epistemology that conditions the way he ties together the Western theology of dark nights and the *filioque* in the *Mystical Theology*.

⁸ Matti Kotiranta: *Persoona perikoreesina*, 420–421. Kotiranta calls Vladimir Soloviev, Pavel Florensky and Sergius Bulgakov a “sophiological school,” see *Persoona perikoreesina*, 46. See also Andrzej Walicki’s article on Vladimir Sergeevich Soloviev in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

⁹ Paul L. Gavrilyuk: “The kenotic theology of Sergius Bulgakov,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58(3), 2005, 257. Kotiranta’s *Persoona Perikoreesina*, 140–2. See Sergii Bulgakov: *Toward a Russian Political Theology* (Texts edited and introduced by Rowan Williams), 183–227, for key passages in the *The Lamb of God*.

¹⁰ I quote Gavrilyuk’s article “The kenotic theology of Sergius Bulgakov,” 257.

¹¹ I quote Gavrilyuk’s article “The kenotic theology of Sergius Bulgakov,” 257–8. Gavrilyuk refers the concept of *vseedinstvo* to Bulgakov’s later book *Вечества Аница* from 1945. It has been published in English under the title *The Bride of the Lamb*.

¹² Matti Kotiranta: *Persoona perikoreesina*, 174–175.

¹³ See Gavrilyuk’s article “The kenotic theology of Sergius Bulgakov,” 265–266, especially footnote 52 on page 266, for more background. Lossky’s first publication *Спор о Софий* i.e. “Dispute on Sophiology” is fruit of this combat. There seems to be no translations of this book into other languages. See Kotiranta’s *Persoona Perikoreesina*, 31.

Three Patristic Distinctions

Lossky's patristic epistemology departs from three distinctions which reflect and explain the Christian conviction that although "a triple barrier of sin, death and nature" separates human beings from God, it is nevertheless possible to know, have communion and unite with him.¹⁴ The first of these distinctions is between theology and economy (*οικονομία*). According to him most Greek fathers used the word theology to denote "the mystery of the Trinity revealed to the Church."¹⁵ Simultaneously they used the word economy to signify the presence and actions of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the creation. This distinction indicates that there is a difference between the uncreated divinity as such and his actions in the creation. While it is possible to have certain knowledge of the latter, the former, God's Triune being, is a mystery.¹⁶

In explaining this matter Lossky also distinguishes between God's essence (*οὐσία*) and his activities (*ἐνέργεια*), especially in reference to the theology of St Gregory of Palamas (d. 1359).¹⁷ The first term, *ousia*, designates God's essence as it is in itself. The second term, *energeia*, designates God's activities of grace toward and within the creation.¹⁸ In addition, Lossky points out in reference to St Dionysius the Areopagite that the divine *energeiai* (plural) are as innumerable as God's various names and their corresponding characteristics and attributes such as for example "Wisdom [i.e. Sophia], Life, Power, Justice, Love, Being."¹⁹ They are "inseparable" from God's Triune nature yet without being this nature as it is in itself.²⁰ In this sense they are his "mode of existence" outside the divine nature.²¹ They "descend" or proceed from him making known the divine uncreated mystery to Christ's all disciples.²²

¹⁴ The expression is from p. 135 of Lossky: *Mystical*.

¹⁵ Lossky: *Mystical*, 67.

¹⁶ Lossky: *Mystical*, 67–70.

¹⁷ In the chapter "Uncreated Energies" of the *Mystical Theology* Lossky refers his interpretation of this distinction not only to St Gregory of Palamas, but also to St Dionysius the Areopagite, the Cappadocians, St Maximos Confessor and St John of Damascus. In contemporary theology this distinction is often called the Palamite synthesis. Rowan Williams has claimed that Lossky actually was the first to suggest this distinction which especially St Gregory of Palamas used actually summarizes the Alexandrine tradition. See Kotiranta's reference to William's doctoral dissertation *The Theology of Vladimir Lossky. An Exposition and Critique* from 1975 in footnote 28 on p. 33 of the *Persoon Perikoreesina*.

¹⁸ Lossky: *Mystical*, 69–71 (67–90).

¹⁹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 80 (67–90). Lossky could also have made explicit references to St Paul. See David Bradshaw's *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*, 120–125 for St. Paul's use of the concept of *energeia*.

²⁰ Lossky: *Mystical*, 76. See also p. 89.

²¹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 73.

This means that the *energeiai* point toward Christ. Lossky claims in reference to St Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) the Son to be the manifestation of the Father's *energeiai* which the Spirit in his turn dispenses.²³ In addition, he points out in reference to St Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394) that the Son also personifies the Father's wisdom and is as such the personal summa of the innumerable *energeiai*. It is in this sense his name, the Word, i.e. λόγος, recapitulates the "economic order."²⁴ Moreover, he quotes St John of Damascus (d. 749) and maintains that this order goes directly back to the Father in that "the Son is the image (εἰκὼν) of the Father, and the Spirit the image of the Son."²⁵ And he refers to St John announcing that "he that hath known the Son knoweth the Father also."²⁶

The third epistemological distinction is both an interpretation and an application of the two first. I refer to the way Lossky distinguishes between "two possible theological ways" in reference to St Dionysius Areopagite's short work *The Mystical Theology*.²⁷ These ways are the positive, i.e. cataphatic one and the negative, i.e. apophatic one.²⁸ The first way refers to knowing God through all those affirmative names, images, symbols and analogies etc which the Scriptures and the tradition use to say something about him. The Church knows on the basis of these, for example, that the creator God is Triune, good and all-powerful and as such involved in the affairs of the creation. Likewise she knows that he is different from and above what he has created.²⁹

This latter affirmation is crucial as it grounds the second theological way. Since all positive affirmations depend semantically on the created order they

²² Lossky: *Mystical*, 73, 82. According to a traditional patristic account sin, death and nature separates men from uniting with God. See Lossky: *Mystical*, 135ff.

²³ Lossky: *Mystical*, 82–83. Lossky reference is "De sancta Trinitate, dial. VI: PG 75. 1056 A."

²⁴ Lossky: *Mystical*, p. 83. Lossky's reference is "De Spiritu Sancto, adversus Macedonianos, 13: PG 45. 1317 A."

²⁵ Lossky: *Mystical*, 84. Lossky reference is "De fide orth., I, 13: PG 94. 856 B."

²⁶ Lossky: *Mystical*, 83.

²⁷ Lossky: *Mystical*, 25 (23–43). The Latin title of St Dionysius work in PG is *De Mystica Theologia* after the Greek original, *Περὶ μυστικῆς θεολογίας*. St Dionysius lived in the sixth century. He is known in the Orthodox tradition only by his writings and by the biblical pseudonym Dionysius the Areopagite which appears in Acts 17:34. For brief introductions to this author and his works and influence, see Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality;" Jean Leclercq, "Influence and noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages" and Karlfried Froehlich, "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century." For a more complete introduction see Andrew Louth's study *Denys the Areopagite*.

²⁸ *De Mystica Theologia*, ch. 2: PG 3. 1032 D – 1033 D and *The Complete Works*, 25. Lossky: *Mystical*, 25. The word apophaticism derives from "the Greek verb ἀπόφρασκω to negate, to deny, its opposite being καταφάσκω: to affirm to say yes." Christos Yannaras: *On the Absence and Knowability of God*, 117.

²⁹ *De Mystica Theologia*, ch. 2: PG 3. 1032 D – 1033 A and *The Complete Works*, 25. Lossky: *Mystical*, 25.

point to the one who is above this order, yet without being able to reveal him as he is in himself. To explain, Lossky refers to St Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* in which this church father interprets the biblical story of Moses' entering the darkness of Mount Sinai.³⁰ The lesson of this story is, according to Nyssa, that those Christians who really desire to know God must leave behind not only their earlier visions and experiences of God but also all other means of knowing him, their sensual and intellectual knowledge and whatever concepts they had previously formed of him.³¹ This is because the intellect's every guess of how and who God actually is, is in the final analysis merely a man-made "idol" of him.³² Consequently, true contemplation and knowledge of God begins only where natural human knowledge ends.

Lossky suggests that it is possible to view these two ways as aspects of one and the same reality. To explain he compares the different positive affirmations of what God is to a "series of steps" leading to contemplation.³³ Furthermore, he claims that various scriptural names of God in particular point to various manifestations or *energeiai* which descend from him toward the creation. Thus when the disciples meditate on these names they also accommodate themselves to knowing God in a way which transcends the discursive realm. More importantly, when they negate these names one after another, acknowledging that he is beyond whatever is said of him, they also ascend toward him in a union which knows no limits. In this process

Speculation gradually gives place to contemplation, knowledge to experience; for in casting off the concepts which shackle the spirit, the apophatic disposition reveals boundless horizons of contemplation at each step of positive theology.³⁴

St Dionysius himself explains the matter with an allusion to Plotinus, suggesting that to know God the disciples should work like sculptors who remove pieces of given material to reveal the image that they somehow intuit this material to contain.³⁵ Furthermore, St Dionysius claims that in this process of intuiting they must reach the silence which is beyond reason, speech and knowledge and recognize that God is even beyond the concept of negation itself.³⁶ This is "to really see and to know: to praise the

³⁰ Lossky: *Mystical*, 27–28.

³¹ *The Life of Moses*, 76–82.

³² *The Life of Moses*, 81.

³³ Lossky: *Mystical*, 40.

³⁴ Lossky: *Mystical*, 40.

³⁵ *De Mystica Theologia*, ch. 2: PG 3. 1025 A – 1025 B. See Plotinus: *Ennead* I.6.8–9.

³⁶ *De Mystica Theologia*, ch. 3: PG 3. 1032 B – 1033 C. "Beyond reason, speech and knowledge" is my rendering of the terms ἀλογία and ἀνοησία. See also *De Mystica Theologia*, ch. 5: PG 3. 1048 B.

Transcendent One (Υπερούσιος) in a transcending way, namely through the denial (ἀφαίρεσις) of everything.³⁷

According to Lossky, this does not mean that St Dionysius is a neo-Platonist.³⁸ He admits that the latter's thought resembles that of Plotinus in that both emphasize the necessity to leave behind the realm of the senses and to go beyond conceptual thinking when approaching God / the *One*.³⁹ However, while the One of Plotinus is absolute simplicity as opposed to the multiplicity of the material realm, the God of Dionysius is beyond this and all other distinctions. Consequently, while the first is knowable by nature, the second is not. This means to Lossky that although both emphasize ecstasy in their teaching on the ascent to and union with God / the *One*, they mean two different things. The philosopher promotes "the reduction of being to absolute simplicity" and the theologian the radical necessity of "going forth of being as such."⁴⁰

In other words, they differ from each in that while the first does not view the difference between God and the created order in absolute terms, the second does. The theologian presupposes in fact that since God created the world out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, and that since mankind sins, there are no natural means to union with God.⁴¹ Consequently, although both emphasize the necessity of purification (κάθαρσις), it means two different things to them. Plotinus seeks, in Lossky's words, "to free the understanding from the multiplicity which is inseparable from being" and to gain ecstatic insight into "the primordial and ontological union of man with God."⁴² Instead, Dionysius emphasizes the gradual change "from the created to the uncreated" i.e. union with God through deification.⁴³

This is according to Lossky the whole point of the distinction of the two theological ways. Positive theological affirmations arise from experiencing God and point to the same. Yet since it is impossible to know God naturally, those who want to know him must negate all initial affirmations of him and allow him to do what it takes to make the union possible. This means in his view that there is no true knowledge of God apart from experiencing him, becoming deified by him and being united with him. Consequently, "no one who does not follow the path of union with God can be a theologian"⁴⁴

It is also in this sense that he calls apophaticism a foundational theological "criterion" and "the sure sign of an attitude of mind conformed to

³⁷ *De Mystica Theologia*, ch. 2: PG 3. 1025 A. Transl. Luiheid, modified.

³⁸ Lossky: *Mystical*, 29.

³⁹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 29.

⁴⁰ Lossky: *Mystical*, 30.

⁴¹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 32–33.

⁴² Lossky: *Mystical*, 38.

⁴³ Lossky: *Mystical*, 38.

⁴⁴ Lossky: *Mystical*, 39.

truth.⁷⁴⁵ In addition, he even claims that this criterion characterizes the Orthodox theological tradition to the degree that

The question of the relations between theology and philosophy has never arisen in the East. The apophatic attitude gave to the Fathers of the Church that freedom and liberality with which they employed philosophical terms without running the risk of being misunderstood or of falling into a 'theology of concepts.'⁷⁴⁶

Trinitarian Personalism

Lossky's concept of personhood also plays a central role in his theological epistemology. Although St Gregory of Nyssa and St Dionysius suggest that knowing God presupposes ultimately the negation of natural means to such knowledge, they cannot follow Plotinus into suggesting that human beings must become assimilated into divine simplicity beyond personhood and nature. The reason to this is the Christian doctrine that since God created men in his image both nature and personhood actually originate in him.

In explaining this matter Lossky claims in reference to St Gregory that the divine image concerns the whole human person, body and soul.⁷⁴⁷ Likewise he suggests that all individual human beings actually share one common human nature.⁷⁴⁸ In this sense person is actually that "which distinguishes from nature."⁷⁴⁹ It is that something which can

only be grasped in this life by a direct intuition; it can only be expressed in a work of art. When we say 'this is by Mozart', or 'this is by Rembrandt', we are in both cases dealing with a personal world which has no equivalent anywhere.⁷⁵⁰

In further explaining the same matter Lossky points out that 'person' and 'individual' are two different and even "opposite things."⁷⁵¹ The word individual is a reference to a particular combination of characteristics which belong to the common nature: certain physical traits and mental capabilities.⁷⁵² Because of the fall human beings define themselves and each

⁷⁴⁵ Lossky: *Mystical*, 39.

⁷⁴⁶ Lossky: *Mystical*, 42.

⁷⁴⁷ Lossky: *Mystical*, 120.

⁷⁴⁸ Lossky: *Mystical*, 121.

⁷⁴⁹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 121.

⁷⁵⁰ Lossky: *Mystical*, 53.

⁷⁵¹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 121.

⁷⁵² Lossky: *Mystical*, 121.

other in such terms presupposing that their particular share in the common nature is their “own particular good.”⁵³ This approach to what it is to be a person is egoistic. It keeps men separated from each other and unable cooperate with God and each other for the common good. It also keeps individual persons from realizing “the fullness” to which God calls them, namely to become his perfect images by participation in his “uncreated bounty.”⁵⁴

Ontologically speaking human beings can cooperate with and participate in God and even each other on the basis that personhood has its ground in God’s Trinitarian mode of being. Thus personhood is not a part of the creation in the same sense that all various natural characteristics of an individual person are. In explaining Lossky points out that while created beings are “contingent by nature” on the basis that God willed them into being out of nothing, the same does not apply to his own Triune and uncreated person, the fellowship of the Father, the Son and the Spirit.⁵⁵

This means that human persons, whom God created in his own image, are fundamentally free. As individuals they share in the realm of contingent nature, but as persons they can participate in the lives of each other in ways that allow them to rise above nature. The ultimate such participation is the Trinity as being present in and revealed by the Church.⁵⁶ Lossky also points out that the ability to rise above nature marks human beings as “their actions’ true authors,” which is also the point with the patristic notion of self-determination (*αὐτεξουσία*).⁵⁷ Relationships of love are impossible apart from free choice.

Since the very possibility of love arises out of the way God is in himself, Lossky also critiques all attempts to suggest that something determines God’s actions. According to him there exists in Western thought a general tendency to “first consider the nature in itself” and then proceed “to the agent.”⁵⁸ As a consequence Western thinkers often define personhood as a “mode of nature,” and as such something which nature determines.⁵⁹ In Trinitarian theology this approach expresses itself for example as heretic modalism; the reduction of the Father, the Son and the Spirit to “three modes of manifestation” of the divine essence.⁶⁰

⁵³ Lossky: *Mystical*, 121 (121–123).

⁵⁴ Lossky: *Mystical*, 121.

⁵⁵ Lossky: *Mystical*, 45, 85.

⁵⁶ Lossky: *Mystical*, 114–115, 176. This is a somewhat free interpretation of what Lossky means with the human ability to raise above nature.

⁵⁷ Literally “the true author of his actions,” Lossky: *Mystical*, 115.

⁵⁸ Lossky: *Mystical*, 57–58. Lossky refers this summary of Latin thought to Théodore de Régnon’s magnum opus *Études de théologie positive sur la Sainté Trinite*.

⁵⁹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 58, 121.

⁶⁰ Lossky: *Mystical*, 48, 50, 52 f., 57. Lossky refers especially to Sabellius who was a Roman minister living in the turn of the second and third centuries. He claimed the Father, the Son

As distinguished from this approach Greek thought moves in the opposite direction. According to Lossky it “first considers the agent and afterwards passes through it to find the nature.”⁶¹ In Trinitarian theology this approach may express itself as heretic tritheism, the suggestion that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are “three distinct beings.”⁶² Similarly it may express itself as a tendency to suggest that the Son and the Spirit are lesser divinities.⁶³ Yet properly understood this approach highlights the Father’s role in the Trinity in a way that confirms the concerns that lie behind the above-presented epistemological distinctions and concept of personhood.

In explaining Lossky quotes St Athanasius of Alexandria saying “there is a single principle of the Godhead, whence there is strictly a monarchy.”⁶⁴ The point with this saying is that since the Scriptures indicate only that the Spirit proceeds from the Father who begets the Son without himself being begotten, these indicators of origin (paternity, generation, procession) are also the only way to distinguish the divine persons (hypostases) from their common nature (ousia) in theology.⁶⁵ Thus the Father, who is beyond all definitions, is the only principle of distinctions in the Trinity.⁶⁶ Consequently it is impossible to define the internal relationships of the Trinity on the basis of any other known principle or order.

According to Lossky such definitions are not only illegitimate but also spiritually perilous. This is because every attempt to define the Trinitarian relationships on the basis of what is lower than God amounts to suggesting that nature defines God’s person and human beings whom he has created to his own image. This would mean in other words that nature defines personhood in a way that makes relationships of love impossible.⁶⁷ It would

and the Spirit to be three different roles or modes through which the divine being reveals himself in time.

⁶¹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 58. Lossky refers this summary of Greek thought to Théodore de Régnon’s magnum opus *Études de théologie positive sur la Sainté Trinite*.

⁶² Lossky: *Mystical*, 48 (58). Lossky refers especially to Arianism. Arius was a fourth century Alexandrine minister who taught that Christ is not of the Father’s essence. Instead Christ is a created being among other created beings. He is unique on the basis that he played a central role in the creation, but unlike God his nature is not immutable. The fathers of the Council of Nicea (325) anathematized this doctrine by claiming that the Son is from the same *ousia* with the Father and *homoousios* with Him. See Pelikan, Jaroslav: *The Emergence of Catholic Tradition (100–600)*, 176–80, 196–9.

⁶³ Lossky: *Mystical*, 61–66.

⁶⁴ Lossky: *Mystical*, 58. Lossky refers this quote to St Athanasius “Contra Arianos, Oratio IV, I” in *PG* 15. 505 A.

⁶⁵ Lossky: *Mystical*, 45, 53–55. In explaining the matter Lossky refers especially to St John of Damascus’ *De fide orthodoxa* I, 8: *PG* 94. 812–813, 821–824, 828–829. See Pelikan, Jaroslav: *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)*, 193–198 for more background.

⁶⁶ Lossky: *Mystical*, 62 (57–66).

⁶⁷ See for example pp. 61–66 of Lossky: *Mystical* for his critique of theologically insensitive Trinitarian speculations.

not be possible to know God in person and become deified; which is contrary to what the Scriptures, the Church fathers and Christian experience bear witness to.

Deification

In Lossky's view the ultimate criterion of a theological epistemology is that it supports reaching union with God understood as *θέωσις*, i.e. deification. In the fathers' reading of the Scriptures this goes back especially to how Christ according to John 10:34 calls the recipients of God's word "gods" in reference to Ps 82:6. It also goes back to how St Peter claims in 2 Peter 1:3-4 that God's promises allow the believers to escape the corruption that evil desires cause and become "partakers of the divine nature (*θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως*)."⁶⁸ The most famous patristic summary of what these passages mean is in its turn the claim that "the Word of God assumed humanity that we might become God." While this specific wording is from St Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*, most central authors of the period express it in their own characteristic ways.⁶⁹

This naturally means that deification ultimately goes back to the Son's voluntary humiliation, the kenosis (*κένωσις*) of his Incarnation and of his sufferings.⁷⁰ In explaining it, Lossky points out that when the Son renounced his will at the expense of the Father's will, he actually acted according to God's own Trinitarian mode of being: the sharing of one nature and will by the Three. As a consequence God's nature permeated human nature in Christ's person.⁷¹ In his resurrection this deification subdued death making possible the subsequent creation of the Church on the day of Pentecost.

Lossky does not think of deification apart from the Church. In spiritual terms the Church is the body of Christ. As such it is "a created nature inseparately united to God in the hypostasis (i.e. person, my addition) of the Son" and has "two wills, two natures and operations which are at once inseparable and yet distinct."⁷² This union of the Church with God through

⁶⁸ See "The Index of References" under Ps 82:6 and 2 Peter 1:3-4 in Norman Russell's magisterial *The Doctrine of Deification in Greek Patristic Tradition* for references to pages where he quotes and discusses various patristic authors who interpret these passages. For a brief overview see Emil Bartos: *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 7-10. For deification in Lossky: *Mystical*, see pp. 9 f., 39, 126, 133 f., 154 f., 196.

⁶⁹ (Lightly modified) St Athanasius *On the Incarnation* (De incarnatione verbi), § 54: PG 25. 192 B). Lossky refers to this claim also to St Irenaeus' "Adv. Haereses, V:" PG 7. 1120; St Gregory Nazianzen, "Poem. Dogma, X, 5-9:" PG 37. 465; St Gregory of Nyssa, "Oratio Catechetica, XXV:" PG 45. 65 D). See Lossky: *Mystical*, p. 134, footnote 1.

⁷⁰ Lossky: *Mystical*, 144.

⁷¹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 144-145.

⁷² Lossky: *Mystical*, 187.

Christ means that God's Trinitarian mode of being is present in the Church as an "objective" deifying condition.⁷³

In commenting this condition Lossky reads St John, claiming that the Holy Spirit "takes of" what is Christ's and "makes it known" to the Church. These words are a reference to grace defined as "all the abundance of the divine nature, in so far as it is communicated to men."⁷⁴ In Lossky's view the latter is first of all a reference to everything that the Church does to commemorate the mystery of salvation.⁷⁵ In motivating he refers to St Maximus the Confessor according to whom such a commemoration (*ἀνάμνησις*) is both initiating and revelatory. It "manifests the whole of God's saving providence."⁷⁶ This concerns especially those "sacramental unions" which the Church administers.⁷⁷ The latter "render" all Christ's disciples "apt for the spiritual life in which the union of" their "persons with God is accomplished."⁷⁸

The latter applies especially to baptism.⁷⁹ All who have received God's Spirit in baptism also have God's grace present in them in an irreversible manner. This is according to Lossky also "the condition of our deification" which "cannot be lost."⁸⁰ In saying this he also points out that since "all sin, even most trifling" can deliver human nature "opaque and impenetrable to grace," the life of Christ's disciples is "an unceasing struggle" to acquire more of God's deifying grace.⁸¹ The outcome of this struggle depends "only upon" those who participate in it.⁸²

This amounts to saying that deification does not occur automatically. In explanation Lossky points out in reference to St Dionysius that God originally created the world by his *energeiai* and that he also sustains it by them. Since such a relation does not involve the created beings' will, it is not a personal relationship.⁸³ Analogously when the disciples receive God's Spirit in baptism this does not automatically deify them. Rather God only deifies those who make themselves worthy of it "by their struggles and labours."⁸⁴

⁷³ Lossky: *Mystical*, 187 (187–191, 216).

⁷⁴ Lossky: *Mystical*, 162. The second quotation is lightly modified.

⁷⁵ Lossky: *Mystical*, 189–191.

⁷⁶ Lossky: *Mystical*, 189.

⁷⁷ Lossky: *Mystical*, 183 (189–191).

⁷⁸ Lossky: *Mystical*, 183.

⁷⁹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 171, 179–180.

⁸⁰ Lossky: *Mystical*, 180 (179–180).

⁸¹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 182.

⁸² Lossky: *Mystical*, 183.

⁸³ Lossky: *Mystical*, 89–90.

⁸⁴ Lossky: *Mystical*, 178 (178–180).

On one hand this is a reference to spiritual exercises, which Lossky comments upon by the mouth of the Russian saint Seraphim of Sarov (d. 1833) saying:

Prayer, fasting, vigil and all other Christian activities, however good they may be in themselves, do not constitute the aim our Christian life, although they serve as the indispensable means of reaching this end. As for fasts, and vigils and prayer, and almsgiving, and every good deed done for Christ's sake, they are only means for acquiring the Holy Spirit of God.⁸⁵

On other hand this is also a reference to the renunciation of the disciples' personal will at the expense of God's will. In discussing this matter Lossky naturally refers to Christ's deed, but also to the above-mentioned difference between individuality and personhood. He writes:

Every person who seeks his own self-assertion comes in the end only to the disintegration of his nature: to a particular and individual existence accomplishing a work that is contrary to that of Christ: "He that gathers not with me, scatters" (Matt. 6:30). Now it is necessary to scatter with Christ, to abandon one's own nature (which is in reality the common nature), in order to gather, to acquire the grace which must be appropriated to each person and become his own.⁸⁶

This means differently expressed that as the disciples follow Christ into abandoning their own will, the Spirit permeates their whole nature, body and soul, just as he permeated Christ's human nature.⁸⁷ It is obviously in this sense that Lossky also links deification to Pentecost, calling it the divine economy's "object" and "final goal."⁸⁸ The Church as the body of Christ is not and cannot become "the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:23) apart from the Spirit's deifying work and the disciples' personal, i.e. voluntary, reception of it.⁸⁹

Finally, in discussing the nature of deification in the present conditions Lossky refers to Christ's two natures which remain "distinct and unmixed with one another" while at the same time permeating each other.⁹⁰ In a similar fashion the disciples' human nature remains human even in the state of union. In clarifying this, Lossky suggests that deified disciples are persons

⁸⁵ Lossky quotes St Seraphim's "Conversation with N.A. Motovilov" on p. 196 of the *Mystical Theology*. Since his quote is not complete, I quote the saint's "Spiritual Instructions," p. 79.

⁸⁶ Lossky: *Mystical*, 182 (lightly modified).

⁸⁷ Lossky: *Mystical*, 155.

⁸⁸ Lossky: *Mystical*, 155, 158–159. See also p. 179.

⁸⁹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 181–182 (185).

⁹⁰ Lossky: *Mystical*, 145.

“created in two natures: a human nature which is deified, and a nature or, rather, divine energy, that deifies.”⁹¹ Likewise he refers to the way St Maximus and other Greek fathers describe deification in terms of “iron penetrated by fire, becoming fire, though remaining iron by nature.”⁹² I will return to take a closer on St Maximus’s vision of deification in the beginning of *Part Three*.

Sophiology and the *filioque*

The principles above allow us to summarize Lossky’s critique of both Bulgakov’s Sophiology and the doctrine of *filioque* in the following way: Bulgakov’s suggestion that the divine Wisdom, which is properly speaking a divine *energeia* and as such an attribute of God, is also the divine nature’s governing “principle” violates the essence–*energeiai* distinction. In addition, when claiming to know what he knows of the Trinity he naturally also goes beyond what theology, properly speaking, can say. Furthermore, since his definition of the above-mentioned *vseedinstvo* borders on suggesting a measure of ontological necessity in Creator–creation relationship and even within the Godhead, they also amount to suggesting that nature defines personhood in way that excludes free relationships of love.⁹³ This means that Bulgakov actually attacks the very ground of knowing God personally and becoming deified.

Similarly when Latin theologians claim that the Spirit proceeds both from the Father and the Son they go beyond what theology actually allows for. The Father and the Son now appear to be the Spirit’s common source. And the Spirit appears to be the “connection” between the Father and the Son, their principle of unity.⁹⁴ The latter amounts to questioning the Spirit’s full personhood and consequently even his ability to be the Son’s and as such even the Father’s living personal icon. In other words it amounts to denying the Spirit’s ability to make the Father known by the Son and to deify. Indeed, this doctrine is an attempt to assess God by mere philosophy.⁹⁵

To explain further, Lossky refers especially to the above-presented principle of monarchy. According to him the neglect of “hypostatic characteristics (paternity, generation, procession)” automatically leads to the introduction of an alternative principle of distinguishing the Three from their common essence. In this particular case this alternative is Aquinas’

⁹¹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 155.

⁹² Lossky: *Mystical*, 146.

⁹³ See above and Lossky: *Mystical*, 45, 62, 80–81, 96 and 112.

⁹⁴ Lossky: *Mystical*, 62.

⁹⁵ Lossky: *Mystical*, 57–64.

“‘Persona est relatio’, inner relationship of the essence which it diversifies.”⁹⁶ Now since this principle does not lead “to the agent” confirming his full personhood, it fails to support human-divine relationships of love and freedom.⁹⁷ Rather, the application of this principle amounts to seeking to know God as mediated by a third party, and not by the above mentioned “direct intuition” of his divine *energeiai*. It is to reduce the Christian God “into a system of relationships within one essence” and as such even into the inaccessible “God-essence of the philosophers.”⁹⁸

This means that although Sophiology challenges the Christian notion of freedom more explicitly than the doctrine of the *filioque* does, they both have in common the undermining of the Christian notion of personhood and the related notions of knowing God personally and becoming deified through his *energeiai*. This means in turn that in Lossky’s terminology the doctrine of the *filioque* is actually a symbol for imposing on theology such cosmology, anthropology, and epistemology that describe the relationship of God and human beings in terms of necessity. It is, in other words, a symbol for defining God himself as a person, knowledge of God and the human self in a way that frustrates the possibility of freely denying one’s will for the sake of love and becoming deified.

I will return to discuss and evaluate St Symeon’s and St John’s mystical theologies in the light of Lossky’s patristic epistemology, and vice versa, after having allowed the first two to present their own theological epistemologies.

⁹⁶ Lossky: *Mystical*, 57. Lossky refers to *Summa theologica*, Ia, q. 29, a. 4.

⁹⁷ Lossky: *Mystical*, 57–58.

⁹⁸ Lossky: *Mystical*, p. 57.

6. FAITH, CHARISMS AND THE EUCHARIST

St Symeon does not discuss divine knowledge in terms of certain easily identifiable philosophical concerns. Instead, he claims that knowledge by faith is not ordinary conceptual knowledge. It arises out of the disciples' Eucharistic participation and contemplation, the Scriptures, and various charismatic graces.

Hope, Faith and Love

In the chapter “Two Baptisms” we saw that St Symeon ties together faith, fear and love, suggesting that the outcome of the first two is the third. Concurrently, when discussing on 1 Cor 13 he suggests faith (*πίστις*) and hope (*ἐλπίς*) to be the “foundations” (*θεμέλιοι*) of love (*ἀγάπη*).¹ Accordingly he claims that it is not possible to “find the love of God in a human soul which is without faith and sure hope.”² This is because hope mediates faith which in turn joins the disciples to Christ, who as love personified activates all the virtues.³ It is therefore impossible to benefit spiritually from other virtues without love.⁴ This in turn is because God manifests himself and gives his Spirit only to those who love him, and because all works are worthless and dead without this Spirit.⁵

In further motivation St Symeon compares love to that great pearl the merchant of the parable in Matt 13:35 sold his whole fortune to possess.⁶ His point is that this person did not come to possess the pearl only “in hope” but also in the reality of now.⁷ This means that those who think that possessing

¹ ETH 5:143 (136–148). See also ETH 4:515–661.

² ETH 5:144–145.

³ ETH 4:515–562.

⁴ ETH 5:146–147 (136–148). See also Hymn 24:298–301 where St Symeon points out that God gives the disciples his blessings according to the measure of their faith, hope and love and their “fidelity to the commandments.”

⁵ ETH 4:579–585. HYMN 17:474–494.

⁶ HYMN 17:533–653.

⁷ HYMN 17:559, 578.

love is only for the life to come actually show that they are unwilling to pay the cost of love.⁸ This cost is the disciples' acknowledgement that they actually possess nothing which is of value to God. It is when they do their very best to possess love that they nevertheless recognize that their actions, although necessary, do not bring love to them.⁹ Rather, they receive it simply by asking in faith and in humility.¹⁰

This does not mean that the disciples can remain inactive in the process of acquiring love.¹¹ According to St Symeon, those who rely on faith alone are either "unbelievers" or "completely dead."¹² The basis of this statement is the disciples' freedom of will. This means simply that the fact that God knows beforehand who will obey and who will disobey does not mean that he does the disobeying. Rather, since he "allies himself with those who choose to struggle" and actually accomplishes their victory over the demons and the passions by producing "strength" in them "mystically" (*μυστικῶς*), those who refuse to act on their faith actually produce their own misfortune.¹³ In other words, the disciples choose either salvation or damnation by the way they act on what they have heard.¹⁴

Knowledge of Faith and Charisms

Faith put into action is crucial since God allows the disciples to know him in proportion to it and also since knowledge of God comes to be confirmed through it. St Symeon writes:

But the knowledge he has granted us believers is proportionate to our faith, so that knowledge confirms faith independently of [other kinds of] knowledge, and that by this knowledge the man who has heard the word and believed may find confirmation (*βεβαιωθῆ*) that the teaching of the word has led him to believe in one who is truly God.¹⁵

In other words that since the knowledge of faith really comes from faith; it does not depend on any body of knowledge independent of faith, which could confirm it. Rather, since this knowledge has allowed the disciples to

⁸ HYMN 17:578–586.

⁹ HYMN 17:585–619 (585–653).

¹⁰ HYMN 17:620–653. See also ETH: 8:170–219.

¹¹ See how St Symeon contrasts faith and works in CAP 1:9–10.

¹² HYMN 50:218–220.

¹³ ETH 2.1: 97–102 (1–185). See also ETH 5:418–424.

¹⁴ This is implied in ETH 2.1. See also CAP 1:9.

¹⁵ THEOL 1:189–194 (1:114). *The Practical and Theological Chapters & The Three Theological Discourses*, 114. Translation is modified. See also CAT 2:208–228 and CAT 33:90–95.

know God through faith, they also know that the teaching they have received is true.

St Symeon claims that this kind of knowledge by faith is not ordinary conceptual knowledge. This is a reference to concepts (*νοήματα*) that arise out of “non-existent things” (*ἀνυπόστατα πράγματα*) such as for example the intentions and the principles men ordinarily devise to guide their future actions.¹⁶ Rather, knowledge of faith is visionary in the sense that the words that express it arise out of the disciples’ “contemplation” (*θεωρία*) and “vision” (*ὄρασις*) of “what truly exists (*τῶν ὄντως ὄντων*)” and of “what has already taken place, and will take place in the future.”¹⁷

To St Symeon the paradigm of this vision and contemplation is the Eucharist. In it the disciples participate “in the Lord’s divine flesh.”¹⁸ This means that they also receive “the revelation of the invisible divinity through the actual contact with it of their mind (*νοῦς*).”¹⁹ In the Eucharist the disciples do not merely “eat sensible bread sensibly (*αἰσθητῶς*)” but they also “eat and drink God intelligibly (*νοητῶς*)”²⁰ This double reception corresponds to Christ’s two natures and is possible since the human receptive ability is double as such.²¹ Thus the disciples become through the Eucharist “one body with Him and fellow communicants (*συγκοινωνός*) of his glory and his divinity.”²²

To further explain this character of the disciples’ receptive ability St Symeon points out that God created the disciples in his “image (*εἰκῶν*) and likeness (*ὁμοίωσις*)”²³ Thus in the same way as he “transcends incomparably and unalterably the whole visible world,” the perception (*αἰσθησις*) of the disciples’ souls (*ψυχῆ*) also transcends their entire selves moving freely between what is physical and intelligible.²⁴ On the one hand this perception is “divided up five ways according to the physical necessities of the body;” on the other it can discern things in the manner of the senses merely in the mind (*νοῦς*).²⁵ In other words, it is dual in the sense that it can hear, see, taste, taste and smell together with the body and apart from it, in the realm of the spirit.²⁶

This also corresponds to the way St Symeon points out that God has sanctioned the various symbols and celebrations of the Church and that he

¹⁶ ETH 5:215–219 (196–223).

¹⁷ ETH 5:213–214, 224–228 (224–286).

¹⁸ ETH 14:233 (224–246)

¹⁹ ETH 14:233–234.

²⁰ ETH 14:233–238. See also CAT 15:68–77.

²¹ ETH 14:238–241.

²² ETH 14:240–241 (224–247).

²³ ETH 3:153 (141–231).

²⁴ ETH 3:148–149.

²⁵ ETH 3:153–156. ETH 3:156–171.

²⁶ ETH 3:167–171. See also ETH 3:190–192.

provides knowledge of faith through them.²⁷ This applies when the disciples participate in such symbols intelligibly, i.e. when they recognize for example that the various fragrances the Church uses in her services actually point to the sweet smell which is supposed to come from themselves as the vessels of the Spirit and of his various gifts.²⁸ This is when they recognize that the liturgical room's various lamps point to all the virtues which their own lives should manifest "because of the divine fire" i.e. the Spirit himself.²⁹ As such these lamps signify Spirit-inspired thoughts and spiritual discernment.³⁰ Even the "future events" are present in the Church's celebrations.³¹ And the disciples' song of worship joins them mystically with those who celebrate in heaven, i.e. the angels.³² Their simple words of worship are the "true wisdom (*ἀληθῆ σοφία*)" which allows them to behold the Lord himself as being in their very midst.³³

St Symeon also claims that "the grace of the Holy Spirit" is "the key" to this kind of visionary and contemplative knowledge of faith.³⁴ This means in turn that disciples receive this knowledge not only through the above-mentioned means but also directly through "sacred dogmas and the Gospels themselves" and through various "signs (*σημεῖον*), enigmas (*αἰνίγμα*), mirrors (*ἐσόπτρον*), inexpressible mystic activities (*ἐνέργεια*), divine revelations (*ἀποκάλυψις*), veiled illuminations (*ἐλλαμψις*), contemplation of the spiritual principles of creation (*θεωρία τῶν λόγων τῆς κτίσεως*) and other means."³⁵ These communications actually make the disciples' faith and love grow, which allows them to know God better and better.³⁶

According to St Symeon some of these means to knowledge of God are known from the Scriptures, other "from experience (*πειρα*) itself."³⁷ In support he refers for example to 1 Cor 2:9 in where St Paul speaks of God having prepared good things that "no eye has seen, no ear has heard [...] for those who love him."³⁸ Accordingly, he refers to the apostle's experience of having heard in paradise unutterable speech (*ῥῆμα*) according to 2 Cor 12:4.³⁹ These are "illuminations of God the Word."⁴⁰ They are the speech

²⁷ ETH 14:1–293.

²⁸ ETH 14:68–71, 106–139, 198–200.

²⁹ ETH 14:93–100.

³⁰ ETH 14:100–106.

³¹ ETH 14:41–42

³² ETH 14:140–148.

³³ HYMN 9:46–52. CAT 13:95–100.

³⁴ CAT 33:90–95. THEOL 1:240–303.

³⁵ THEOL 1:244–246 and THEOL 1:194–198 (1:114–115). See also ETH 12:1–8.

³⁶ THEOL 1:198–200.

³⁷ ETH 4:240–243 (240–368).

³⁸ ETH 3:396–410 and ETH 4:280–311.

³⁹ ETH 3:272–278.

⁴⁰ ETH 3:284–285 and ETH 3:410ff.

through which the Spirit verbalizes the Son. This is also what the disciples receive in the “body” and the “blood” of the Eucharist.⁴¹

Effect of Faith and Charisms

When the Spirit verbalizes the Son to the soul he also reveals “every good thing” to it.⁴² Such revelation brings into being boundless and “eternal” life and joy in the disciples.⁴³ It augments their love of and faith in Christ and harnesses them with spiritual “charisms” (*χάρισμα*).⁴⁴ These are for example the ability to cast out demons, to speak in new tongues, to give words of wisdom and knowledge, to heal sicknesses and other similar things.⁴⁵

In addition, the disciples now bear spiritual fruits such as St Paul mentions in Gal 5:22: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faith, gentleness, self-control.”⁴⁶ They exercise “compassion, brotherly love, alms-giving and everything which follows from them.”⁴⁷ This amounts to saying that the disciples now become a spiritual light to those in the world who seek such light.⁴⁸ Through the Spirit’s work they now identify themselves as God’s ambassadors and have the boldness to act as such.⁴⁹

This means also that when the disciples need to test certain teachers’ knowledge of God they must look for these kinds of effects and fruits. In fact St Symeon actually tells his disciples to run away from teachers who lack them as if they were “madmen” or “demoniacs.”⁵⁰ Although certain teachers’

⁴¹ ETH 3:133–137 read in the light of ETH 3:426–437.

⁴² ETH 3:187–193.

⁴³ ETH 3:279–283. See also ETH 12:1–8 where Symeon admonishes his disciples to search the Scriptures claiming that “the meaning of the Holy Spirit’s grace is hidden in them. It fills a man’s spiritual perception with every pleasure, lifts it entirely from earthly things and the lowliness of what is visible, and makes it both angelic in form and a sharer in the angels’ very life.”

⁴⁴ THEOL 1:205–216 and EP 1:15.

⁴⁵ THEOL 1:205–216 and EP 1:15. In EP 1:15 St Symeon or the one who speaks for him in this letter interprets the gift of tongues to be the gift of “God-inspired and edifying teaching of the word” (lines 1–2 on p. 125). This is not the case in THEOL 1:205–216.

⁴⁶ EP 1:15, p. 125 lines 5–7.

⁴⁷ EP 1:15, p. 125 lines 7–11.

⁴⁸ EP 1:15, p. 125 lines 15–20. Holl omits the number 14 when dividing the letter in sections. Consequently, Golitzin numbers EP 1:15 as section 14. See *On the Mystical Life*, Vol. 3, 186–203.

⁴⁹ EP 1:15, p. 126 lines 13–14 (EP 1:15–16).

⁵⁰ THEOL 1:403–404 (399–407). The quoted nouns are originally in the singular. See also THEOL 2:30–62 where St Symeon claims that it is sin even to speak about God without really knowing him. In CAT 10:48–51 St Symeon claims: “The whole praise and blessedness of the saints consists of these two elements—their orthodox faith and praiseworthy life, and the

doctrines sound traditional, this is not enough. Even their deeds must also be in line with those of “the Lord, the apostles, and the holy fathers.”⁵¹

Knowledge of faith also has other effects. When the disciples discover that they now know God in a new manner, they also find themselves thoroughly known by God.⁵² As a consequence they now find it difficult to distinguish between vision and hearing and contemplation itself and its knowledge.⁵³ To explain this experience St Symeon refers to I Cor 13:12 and writes:

Paul himself says the same: “Now I know in part, then I shall know even as I am known” There! You see how, for those who are spiritual, knowledge and likeness, contemplation and recognition, are one and the same. Thus Christ becomes all things for us: knowledge, wisdom, word, light, illumination, likeness, contemplation, recognition. Even in this present life he gives to those who love him that enjoyment, in part, of his own good things.⁵⁴

This unity of knowledge and vision also affects the disciples’ soul. St Symeon explains the matter with a reference to the three powers or faculties of the soul. The first of these is “the rational faculty” (*τὸ λογιστικόν*) which distinguishes between good and bad and instructs “the appetitive faculty” (*τὸ ἐπιθημητικόν*) to attach itself to and love certain things and to hate and to avoid other things. The third is “the irritable faculty” (*τὸ θυμικόν*).⁵⁵ It is a kind of “servant” between the first two.⁵⁶ It is their common operative power which carries out whatever decisions the disciples have made, whether good or bad. In contemplation, however, the rational faculty no longer meets difficulties in choosing the good. This is because when the appetitive faculty gets filled with God’s good things it also draws the other faculties “into the contemplation (*θεωρία*) of the Triune unity” uniting them so that they can no longer be distinguished from each other.⁵⁷ In this state evil things no longer attract the disciples. Yet, since the irritable faculty remains in “motion” (*κίνησις*), they also remain attentive to what is not of contemplation.⁵⁸ This is naturally a reference to the disciples’ state of union with God, a theme to which I shall return in *Part Three* of the study.

gift of the Holy Spirit and His spiritual gifts.”

⁵¹ THEOL 1:422–426 (418–450). See also ETH 9:1–103 and EP 1:13.

⁵² ETH 3:187–197.

⁵³ ETH 3:198–309.

⁵⁴ ETH 3:300–307. *The Church and the Last Things*, 127.

⁵⁵ ETH 4:391–411.

⁵⁶ ETH 4:407–408.

⁵⁷ ETH 4:426–428 (412–435). According to Alexander Golitzin this passage that echoes St Augustine “is unique in Greek patristic literature.” For discussion, see pp. 131–133 of *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses*. Vol.3: *Life, Times and Theology*.

⁵⁸ ETH 4:435 (428–435).

Finally, the knowledge of faith and unity of vision and hearing also allows the disciples to know God through themselves. To explain, St Symeon points out that when the disciples have arrived at the right knowledge of God through faith and the Spirit's illumination they also know of themselves that God is one and three simultaneously and that none of the three has preceded or produced each other, but are "from eternity."⁵⁹ Likewise they know that that the Triune God is of "one glory, essence and power."⁶⁰ This knowledge is partially a part recognition of how their own soul together with intelligence and reason forms a trinity of three inseparable and yet distinct faculties, none of which preexisted or produced each other.⁶¹ It is also recognition that the soul's nature is one and that it has one will which makes itself known through speech.⁶²

Contemplation and God

The fact that the disciples now contemplate God and know themselves to be his image does not mean that they have circumscribed God in any way.⁶³ Rather, St Symeon reminds his disciples that Scripture "reveals to us that he is, not who he is."⁶⁴ Accordingly even in contemplation the disciples can only know God "in the manner of a man who stands at night on the sands and holds out a lighted lantern to peer at the boundless immensity of the ocean's waves."⁶⁵ They see very little of this immensity from their position on the beach. Yet at the same time the part that they see distinctly allows them to form an accurate picture of the rest.⁶⁶ Similarly, St Symeon compares God to fire and the contemplative disciples to lamps that share this fire. Despite the sharing, the fire does not change its character but remains one and is the same. Consequently, to know one fire is to know fire, although it is not to know it in its entirety.⁶⁷

The fact that God and the knowledge of him exists in this way means also that the disciples should not try "to seize" him "with the hands of" their "mind" (*νοῦς*).⁶⁸ He is "ungraspable" (*ἀληπτος*).⁶⁹ When the disciples imagine that they somehow "hold him," he will immediately "disappear

⁵⁹ THEOL 1:239 (217–239). THEOL 2:1–209. ETH 3:358–362.

⁶⁰ THEOL 2:136–137. See also lines 115–117.

⁶¹ THEOL 2:73–78, 84–89 136–164.

⁶² THEOL 2:191–209.

⁶³ THEOL 2:242–257.

⁶⁴ THEOL 2: 257–259.

⁶⁵ THEOL 2:263–265.

⁶⁶ THEOL 2:267–273.

⁶⁷ HYMN 1:30–40.

⁶⁸ ETH 11:201–202. See also HYMN 29:339–353.

⁶⁹ ETH 11:202. See also HYMN 22:50–59.

from” them.⁷⁰ If they consequently try to bring him back with tears and weeping, they will fail. This is because he himself is joy and does not “accept entry into a house of sorrow and grief.”⁷¹ Instead, the disciples should simply quieten their souls and “stand” (*ἵστημι*) both bodily and mentally “in silence and much fear” but also “in rejoicing and gladness of soul.”⁷² Consequently, the Lord will return and stay with them.⁷³ This corresponds to how St Symeon claims that the very purpose of the physical exercise of stillness (*ἡσυχία*) is actually the inner stillness that derives from the knowledge of God.⁷⁴

In this spirit St Symeon also speaks about the Lord’s continual disappearances as a test of the will. When he withdraws himself, the disciples should not begin to ask why, feel neglected or cease seeking him. Rather, they should continue as usual, knowing that the Lord will always appear again revealing more and more of himself each time according the degree of how much his light has succeeded in purifying them.⁷⁵ Similarly St Symeon also warns his disciples to be especially cautious about harboring any resentment in their hearts. They should not entertain any negative emotions or suspicions whatsoever against anyone. This would hinder them from contemplating God.⁷⁶

While St Symeon mentions the theme divine withdrawals more or less in passing, the same does not apply to the way St John discusses his disciples’ further spiritual growth in faith and in divine knowledge, as the chapter that follows will demonstrate.

⁷⁰ ETH 11:203–205.

⁷¹ ETH 11:206–206.

⁷² ETH 11:220, 225–227, 236–238 (220–238).

⁷³ ETH 11:236–295.

⁷⁴ ETH 15:120–153.

⁷⁵ HYMN 48:132–140 (132–167).

⁷⁶ HYMN 55:119–129.

7. THE NIGHT OF THE SPIRIT

In St John's view true knowledge of faith does not relate to the realm of the senses. This is because the same applies to God's wisdom. To receive more of this wisdom the disciples need to experience a yet another spiritual night, the night of the spirit. Likewise they need to refuse all of his communications and graces that stimulate their senses. Such a refusal helps God to unite with them.

The Active Night of the Spirit

St John's speaks about two fundamental nights which the disciples need to pass in order to reach union with God. The first of them is the night of the senses already presented and the second is the night of the spirit.¹ The disciples leave behind the first of these nights when infused contemplation begins. They now acquire "substantially and habitually, the spirit of meditation" and leave behind the state of beginners and become proficient.² In this new state they no longer benefit spiritually from discursive meditation. Rather, God now prepares them for the union of love directly by the divine inflow of contemplation.³

The disciples now experience much freedom and spiritual delight in whatever they do for God.⁴ One reason for this is that their previous entry to the night of senses and their attempts to practice the virtues generated profound "knowledge of self and of one's misery."⁵ This knowledge made them approach God "more respectfully and courteously."⁶ In response God, who loves the humble, drew them to a closer and more spiritual communication with himself.⁷ This communication also added to their self-

¹ 1S 1:3.

² 2S 14:2 and 1S 1:3.

³ 2N 5:1. In 2S 15:1 St John defines proficient as "those whom God begins to place in this supernatural knowledge of contemplation."

⁴ 2N 1:1-2.

⁵ 1N 12:2.

⁶ 1N 12:2.

⁷ 1N 12:2.

knowledge. To explain St John refers for example to Is 58:10 where the prophet speaks about how the light of God illumines the darkness and he refers to the philosophical principle that “one extreme is clearly known by the other.”⁸

These things mean, differently expressed, that self-knowledge is “the most excellent and necessary virtue.”⁹ It is excellent since it generates humility which in turn frees the disciples from pride which is the worst of vices. In their new humble state they love to obey and receive direction from others. They love and highly esteem their neighbors.¹⁰ In fact they now “exercise all the virtues together.”¹¹ This means for example that instead of anger they display meekness, instead of envy charity, instead of sloth power to persevere.¹² They even display the cardinal virtues, i.e. wisdom, temperance, courage and justice and the theological ones, i.e. faith, hope and love.¹³

Accordingly, St John claims that the disciples in this state have victory over “the three enemies,” i.e. the devil, the world and the flesh, and that they have calmed “the four passions,” i.e. joy, hope, fear, and sorrow.¹⁴ And he maintains that “insofar” as they have become “purged of their sensory affections and appetites,” they also “obtain the freedom of spirit in which they acquire the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit,” i.e. love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, righteousness, lowliness, and patience.¹⁵

Yet these positive changes do not mean that the disciples in this state are already able to cope with “the height of the divine wisdom” and receive the kind of “vigorous spiritual communications” which make the union with God possible.¹⁶ In part this problem has to do with the character of wisdom and communications in question. Thus St John points out with reference to St Paul that the former is unsearchable (Rom 11:33), and he points out with reference to “Aristotle and the theologians” that “the higher and more sublime the divine light, the darker it is to our intellect.”¹⁷ In addition, the disciples’ problem also has to do with how they still suffer from a certain

⁸ 1N 12:4–5

⁹ 1N 12:2. See also C4:1.

¹⁰ 1N 12:8.

¹¹ 1N 13:5.

¹² 1N 13:7–9.

¹³ 1N 13:5.

¹⁴ 1N 13:11, 14–15. In 3S 16:6 St John refers to Boethius and points out that this philosopher “claimed that if you desire a clear understanding of the truth, you must cast from yourself joys, hope, fear, and sorrow.”

¹⁵ 1N 13:11.

¹⁶ 2N 1:2 and 2N 5:2.

¹⁷ 2S 14:13 and 2S 8:6. Kavanaugh refers this maxim to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* 2.1–2.

hebetudo mentis which St John defines as “the natural dullness everyone contracts through sin.”¹⁸

The disciples’ lack of perfection expresses itself for example as an inability to remain focused on what is within.¹⁹ Similarly it expresses itself in how they occasionally come out of the state of contemplation and need to return to their earlier discursive meditations to enter into contemplation again.²⁰ In fact their problems indicate that they are not yet able to receive and keep God’s wisdom “in the way it is given.”²¹ And they indicate that the disciples are not yet able to “lay aside their natural active mode” as completely as needed.²² To explain why it is necessary to lay aside this mode, St John asserts with reference to “the Philosopher” that “whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver.”²²³

Thus although the disciples have already gained many spiritual victories, they need, in order to unite themselves with God, to reach a yet deeper level of the kind of receptive passivity that makes it possible for them to receive and keep God and his communications as they are in their own mode.²⁴ To explain the full implications of this St John claims that the disciples first need to “darken and blind themselves in that part of their nature that bears relation to God and spiritual things.”²⁵ This is a reference especially to their intellect, but also to their other two spiritual faculties, the memory and the will.

Furthermore, he asserts that the three above-mentioned theological virtues, faith, hope and charity, actually have these three spiritual faculties as “their proper supernatural objects.”²⁶ This entails the ability of virtues to “perfect” the faculties: faith perfection the intellect, hope the memory and charity the will.²⁷ They have the ability to place the faculties in “darkness and emptiness” as regards those things in them that are in conflict with God. In this way they prepare the faculties to receive God’s supernatural life.²⁸

¹⁸ 2N 2:2.

¹⁹ 2N 2:2.

²⁰ 2S 15:1

²¹ The expression is from 3L1 34.

²² The expression is from 3L1 34.

²³ 1N 4:2 and 3L1 34. In a footnote to this passage Lucino Ruano de la Iglesia refers this maxim to Aquinas’ *Summa* 1 q.79 a.6 corp.: *Contra Gent.* 1 c.43 and *Quadlibet.* 3 a.9 ad 2. Similarly Kavanaugh refers the maxim to Aquinas and not to Aristotle in his footnote to 1N 4:2. See also 2N 16:4.

²⁴ I refer to how St John motivates the passive night of the spirit in especially 2N. For explicit references to “lack of activity” or “passivity” see for example 2S 14:6, 2S 15:2, C 14&15:14 and 3L1 33–34. See also 2N 16:7 and 2L1 30.

²⁵ 2S 4:2.

²⁶ 2S 6:1.

²⁷ 2S 6:1.

²⁸ 2S 6:6.

This implies finally that the disciples need learn how to “denude and govern themselves” with the help of these virtues.²⁹ They need to

...lead the faculties of the soul, [...] to these three virtues and inform (*informar*) each faculty with one of them by stripping and darkening it of everything that is not conformable to these virtues.³⁰

Since this “stripping and darkening” presupposes that the disciples do whatever they can to make it possible, St John calls the first part of the disciples’ night of the spirit “active.”³¹ In the following we will take a closer look at how St John defines the faculties and the virtues, what he says about what the latter accomplish when “informing” the former and what he teaches on related complications.

Faith and Intellect

Active and Passive Intellect

The disciples’ intellect (*entendimiento*) is their faculty of knowing. It has both an active and a passive part or function. The active function abstracts information from the senses and turns it into “forms and phantasms of things” (*las formas y fantasía de las cosas*).³² It is in use for example in discursive mediation, when the disciples use their “two interior bodily senses: imagination and phantasy” to simulate “forms, figures, and images.”³³ Through it the disciples receive “natural knowledge,” which St John often also calls “distinct” and “particular.”³⁴ The passive function of the intellect is in turn spiritual. This means that God can activate it and use it to infuse in the soul knowledge “which is divested of images and given without any work or active function of the intellect.”³⁵ St John also calls this knowledge “substantial,” “supernatural” and “general loving.”³⁶ It is, in other

²⁹ 2S 6:7.

³⁰ 2S 6:6.

³¹ 2S 6:6 and 1S 1:2.

³² 2S 8:4. Kavanaugh points out in a footnote to this passage that “the Aristotelian-scholastic theory that knowledge comes through the senses by way of abstraction” is axiomatic in John’s theology. See also 2S 3:2 where St John suggests that *ab ojecto et potential paritur notitia* (Knowledge arises in the soul from both the faculty and the object at hand).

³³ 2S 12:3 and 2S 14:2. This is as we saw previously what happens in discursive mediation.

³⁴ 2S 10:2 and 2S 16:15.

³⁵ C39:12.

³⁶ C39:12 and 2S 10:2. In 2S 10 St John seeks to distinguish between more than two categories of knowledge. Yet when teaching he generally distinguishes only between

words, the knowledge that arises when faith “informs” the intellect in contemplation.³⁷

Faith and Knowledge

When St John reads Rom 10:17, where the apostle Paul claims that faith comes through hearing, he defines faith as “an assent of the soul to what enters through hearing.”³⁸ Similarly in reference to Aquinas he calls faith “a certain and obscure habit of soul” through which the disciples assent to things that “transcend every natural light and infinitely exceed all human understanding.”³⁹ Furthermore he refers to Heb 11:1 where the author of this epistle describes faith as “the substance of the things to be hoped for” and points out that since faith allows the disciples to assent to this substance intellectually without sensual manifestations, it darkens the active function of the intellect.⁴⁰ This is crucial since the disciples can’t see “the object of faith” without becoming darkened in this way.⁴¹

According to St John the reason why faith is capable of both darkening the intellect and “showing” God is that the

likeness (*semejanza*) between faith and God is so close that no other difference exists than between believing in God and seeing him. Just as God is infinite, faith proposes (*proponer*) him to us as infinite. Just as there are three persons in one God, it presents (*proponer*) him to us in this way. And just as God is darkness to our intellect, so faith dazzles and blinds us.⁴²

This means in other words that the reason why knowledge of faith darkens the intellect is ultimately that God is, “pure,” “simple” and “without mode.”⁴³ Another related reason is that when the disciples experience God and his wisdom by faith in contemplation they loose all interest in what pertains to the senses. In support St John refers to a “frequently quoted spiritual maxim that runs: *Gustato spiritu, desipit omnis caro* (Once the taste and savor of the spirit is experienced, everything carnal is insipid).”⁴⁴ From this he also derives the principle that if the senses “grasp” a thing it is not

knowledge of faith in contemplation and natural discursive forms of knowledge.

³⁷ C39:12 and 2S 10:4. See also 2S 8:4–6 and 2S 9:1.

³⁸ 2S 3:3.

³⁹ 2S 3:1. Kavanaugh refers the expression to *Summa Theologiae* 2–2.1–4; 6.1, *Contra Gentiles* 3.40 and *De Veritate* 14:1.

⁴⁰ 2S 6:2.

⁴¹ 2S 3:3–4.

⁴² 2S 9:1. See also the way St John praises faith in the poem *Cantar del alma que se huela de conocer a Dios por fe* (Song of the soul that rejoices in knowing God through faith).

⁴³ 2S 16:7,15. 2S 4:5.

⁴⁴ 2S 17:5.

“purely spiritual.”⁴⁵ A third related reason is that the general character of the knowledge that derives from God does not support particular or distinct knowledge.⁴⁶ To explain St John identifies the object of faith as *el Sumo Principio* (the Supreme Principle).⁴⁷

The fact that knowledge of faith and of contemplation is of this kind means also that there is a conflict between it and other more distinct faith-related forms of knowledge that also reach the intellect in an immediate manner. This is a reference especially to the kind of supernatural communications that the disciples receive through the senses, i.e. visions of saints and, audible voices, pleasant smells etc and the knowledge that comes through them.⁴⁸ It is also a reference to those “nobler, safer and more advantageous” intellectual communications; i.e. revelations, visions, locutions and spiritual feelings, which present themselves to the intellect in a manner that resembles ordinary sensual reception of information.⁴⁹

Reception of Supernatural Communications

St John asserts that the disciples should generally speaking always refuse and reject God’s supernatural communications. One reason for this is that while these communications are “true and certain in themselves,” the disciples will necessarily misinterpret them, err and “become confused.”⁵⁰ To exemplify the problem St John mentions for example the misguided messianic expectations of the ancient Israelites and the early disciples.⁵¹ Likewise he mentions for example how Jonah the prophet found it almost impossible to cope with what God thought of the city of Nineveh and how he dealt with it.⁵² One reason for the problem is naturally that the disciples’ mode of reception and understanding is low. Another reason is that the communications themselves are minimalist in character. God uses them to say and to reveal only as little as is needed to attain a certain purpose.⁵³

The disciples should also reject these communications on the grounds that becoming attached to them automatically makes one deviate from “genuine renunciation and nakedness of spirit” i.e. imitation of Christ.⁵⁴ In this way the

⁴⁵ 2S 17:5.

⁴⁶ St John seems to describe the “experience” of this kind of general knowledge in the poem *Coplas hechas sobre un éxtasis de harta contemplación* (Stanzas concerning an ecstasy experienced in high contemplation).

⁴⁷ 2S 26:5 and 3. See also 2S 29:7 where St John points out when the disciples pay attention to any particular things in God’s communications they deviate from faith.

⁴⁸ 2S 11. 2S 16–17.

⁴⁹ 2S 23:4(3). 2S 16–17.

⁵⁰ 2S 19:1 and 2S 19:5. 2S 20:6.

⁵¹ 2S 19:7–9.

⁵² 2S 20:2 and 7.

⁵³ 2S 19:7.

communications diminish faith.⁵⁵ This is because all categories of “sensible experiences” counter faith.⁵⁶ They enhance possessiveness and consequently hinder the disciples from receiving more from God.⁵⁷ The communications also make the disciples to sin “contrary to humility.”⁵⁸ This is because they make the disciples feel that they are “important in God’s eyes.”⁵⁹ It applies in fact that the disciples’ desire “to accept” the communications exposes them to the devil.⁶⁰ This desire causes the devil’s communications to increase while those from God will decrease.⁶¹

Since this is the case, the disciples need to know that the manner in which the devil uses supernatural communications resembles God’s way of doing the same.⁶² The devil’s formidable intellectual capacities allow him to “know many past or future events through their causes” and to use this information to deceive.⁶³ In addition, he can simulate counterfeit humility and virtues. He can even induce a false “flow of tears.”⁶⁴ Thus it is important that the disciples know that one difference between the devil’s communications and God’s is that while the former produce “spiritual dryness” and augment pride, the latter enhance “mildness of humility” and “love of God.”⁶⁵ This means, differently expressed, that God’s communications have a more profound effect. He can move the disciples’ will “to love,” while the devil has nothing of this kind to offer.⁶⁶

It is clear that the good effect of God’s supernatural communications appears to be a reason to assent to them.⁶⁷ Yet St John claims that even the desire to do so is illicit. This is because such communications fall outside the scope of those “fixed natural and rational limits” which God has set for the rule of mankind.⁶⁸ Consequently, to yearn for and to seek them is the same as to “tempt” God.⁶⁹ In support of this St John refers for example to how God,

⁵⁴ 2S 11:7. Although St John distinguishes between sensual and intellectual supernatural communications, he rejects both categories for basically the same reasons. The difference is only that he is more detailed and makes exceptions when teaching on intellectual revelations, visions, locutions and spiritual feelings. Compare 2S 11 with 2S 16–17 and 2S 23–32.

⁵⁵ 2S 11:7.

⁵⁶ 2S 11:7.

⁵⁷ 2S 11:7.

⁵⁸ 2S 11:5.

⁵⁹ 2S 11:5.

⁶⁰ 2S 17:7.

⁶¹ 2S 11:8.

⁶² 2S 21:7.

⁶³ 2S 21:7 and 11.

⁶⁴ 2S 29:11.

⁶⁵ 2S 24:7.

⁶⁶ 2S 11:6.

⁶⁷ 2S 16:10.

⁶⁸ 2S 21:1.

⁶⁹ 2S 21:1.

according to the record of 1 Sam 8, became sad and angered when the Israelites asked him to provide a king to rule them. His point is that although God answers illicit petitions because of human weakness he has no pleasure in them.⁷⁰ In fact the only reason why God provides supernatural communications to the disciples is their weakness. He provides them only since they are still incapable of receiving “the stronger and more solid food of” Christ’s trials.⁷¹

Furthermore, St John asserts that to desire such communications and to trust them is the same as to make Christ to “undergo his life and death again.”⁷² The disciples should not forget that they live in “era” of grace in which “faith is established through Christ and the Gospel law made manifest.”⁷³ In this era only faith serves as “means of union with God.”⁷⁴ Likewise in this era God has already said everything he wants to say through his Son and has “no more to say.”⁷⁵ This means also that when the disciples desire God “to declare some secret truths of secrets” to them, they only have to “fix” their eyes on the Son.⁷⁶ Through him even the “incomplete” communications become “complete.”⁷⁷

Yet, since supernatural communications nevertheless occur, the disciples should know that “God’s chief objective” with them does not relate to their form.⁷⁸ Rather his objective is to allow the disciples to receive the incomparably rich and “plentiful” spirit” which the form encloses and which simultaneously transcends it.⁷⁹ This means that to benefit from the communications the disciples must live “in darkness and annihilation of themselves” in their regard.⁸⁰ By so doing they allow God to infuse more faith as well as hope and love into their souls.⁸¹ The infusion of love is significant especially since God always communicates his gifts through love.⁸² Therefore when the disciples center their wills “on God with love”

⁷⁰ 2S 21:3 (1–3). The prophet Samuel mediates God’s answer to the people in 1 Sam 12.

⁷¹ 2S 21:3.

⁷² 2S 22:5 (2–5). See also 2S 27:6 where St John claims that pure souls resist “revelations and other visions” in the same way they would resist “extremely dangerous temptations.”

⁷³ 2S 22:3.

⁷⁴ 2S 8:2. 2S 9:1. 2S 16:10.

⁷⁵ 2S 22:3.

⁷⁶ 2S 22:4 (4–6).

⁷⁷ 2S 22:5.

⁷⁸ 2S 19:5.

⁷⁹ 2S 19:5.

⁸⁰ 2S 24:8. See also 2S 6:1–2, 2S 11:5 and 2S 16:10 where St John compares the disciples’ souls to windows which God the sun shines through. The sun does not ask for the windows’ activity to shine through them. Rather, their cleanness is the only presupposition.

⁸¹ 2S 24:8. Here John also points out that this is because the “three theological virtues increase together.”

⁸² 2S 29:6 (6–11).

they allow God to commune directly with the immaterial substance of their spirits and infuse spiritual things (*lo espiritual*) directly into their souls.⁸³

Since it is not easy to actually practice these instructions, the disciples should always share with their spiritual directors whatever supernatural communications they have received.⁸⁴ This applies even when they have reason to dread their directors' reaction. To act in this way is a test of, and a lesson in, humility.⁸⁵ The directors in their turn should take the disciples' confessions in this regard seriously. They should be "calm," kind and encouraging and at the same time firm enough to make the disciples account for what they have received.⁸⁶ This is important since the disciples cannot receive the full "effect, light, strength, and security of many divine communications" until they have shared their communications with someone "whom God has destined to be spiritual judge over" them and "who has power to bind, loose, approve, and reprove."⁸⁷

To explain St John claims that since Christ has already revealed all the faith there is to reveal he now speaks primarily through those whom he has sent to proclaim this faith, i.e. "his Church" and "his ministers" which are human.⁸⁸ To him this means the Church's "human" proclamation of faith has precedence over any "supernatural communications."⁸⁹ In the present age God prefers the use of "natural reason" above any supernatural knowledge and he wants people to give direction to other people.⁹⁰ This is something that the disciples know of themselves: they cannot find spiritual satisfaction until they have heard another person to confirm whatever they themselves have heard supernaturally.⁹¹

St John also points out that although God "communes" (*tratar*) with the disciples "frequently and affably" through his Spirit, he "usually does not" provide them supernatural knowledge of things which they have natural means to discover.⁹² To exemplify, St John refers to Moses, who despite his ongoing conversations with God, needed the guidance of "his father-in-law Jethro" to discover that he could delegate his all too time-consuming duties as a judge to other capable men.⁹³ Indeed, he concludes that it is God's will

⁸³ 2S 16:11(9–11) and 2S 29:7. Kavanaugh and Rodrigues translate "que es lo espiritual que se le infunde" as "spirituality infused in the soul." See also 2S 17:5(1–9).

⁸⁴ 2S 22:16 and 2S 19:11.

⁸⁵ 2S 22:18.

⁸⁶ 2S 22:19.

⁸⁷ 2S 22:16.

⁸⁸ 2S 22:7.

⁸⁹ 2S 22:7, 9.

⁹⁰ 2S 22:9, 13.

⁹¹ 2S 22:9, 11.

⁹² 2S 22:13.

⁹³ 2S 22:13. Ex. 18:13–23.

that “all matters must be regulated by reason save those of faith, which though not contrary to reason transcend it.”⁹⁴

Revelations, Visions, Locutions and Spiritual feelings

When St John discusses the above-mentioned most “nobler, safer and more advantageous” intellectual communications, i.e. revelations, visions, locutions and spiritual feelings, he makes certain limited exceptions to his general rule of rejection. Thus he points out that God discloses hidden truths in revelations to the disciples and he claims that they exist in two categories:

First, the disclosure of truths to the intellect, these are properly called intellectual notions or concepts (*noticias intelectuales o inteligencias*); second, the manifestation of secrets. The term revelation is more properly applied to these latter than to the former. The first kind cannot strictly speaking be called revelations, since in them God bestows clear and manifest understanding of naked truths (*verdades desnudas*), not only of temporal but of spiritual objects as well.⁹⁵

The knowledge of naked truths as regards God himself “brings intense delight to the soul.”⁹⁶ Only the disciples who have arrived to the union with God can receive it. This is because this knowledge “is itself that very union.”⁹⁷ Through it the disciples “experience and taste” (*sentir / gustar*) God himself.⁹⁸ The same does not apply to the knowledge of naked truths concerning temporal objects. The disciples should reject this knowledge on the basis that it is distinct and on the basis that the devil is able to “meddle” in it.⁹⁹ The same advice applies to all ordinary kinds of revelations whether of God himself or of other things.¹⁰⁰

There also exist two categories of *visions*. The first is visions which have “corporeal substances” as their object.¹⁰¹ To exemplify, St John refers to “the heavenly Jerusalem” which St John the evangelist saw according to the Book of Revelation or “the entire world” which Benedict saw.¹⁰² The second category relates to “incorporeal substances” like angels and souls.¹⁰³ St Paul’s vision of the third heaven in Cor 12:4 belongs to this category. According to

⁹⁴ 2S 22:13.

⁹⁵ 2S 25:2.

⁹⁶ 2S 26:3.

⁹⁷ 2S 26:5.

⁹⁸ 2S 26:5. Here St John also points out that the devil can produce nothing that resembles the most pure revelations.

⁹⁹ 2S 26:14 (11–18).

¹⁰⁰ 2S 27.

¹⁰¹ 2S 24:1.

¹⁰² 2S 24:1.

¹⁰³ 2S 24:2.

St John, these visions actually belong to the life to come. Their closest equivalent on earth is contemplation's "dark loving knowledge, which is faith."¹⁰⁴ Yet God sometimes gives such visions to the disciples who are as strong as Paul, Moses and Elijah "in the spirit of the Church and God's law."¹⁰⁵ At the same time the visions which relate to corporeal substances remind St John of how the devil according to Matt 4:8 showed Christ the entire world to tempt him. Consequently, the disciples should reject them and the knowledge they provide.¹⁰⁶

The *locutions* in their turn exist in three categories: "successive," "formal" and "substantial."¹⁰⁷ When the disciples are "recollected and attentively absorbed in some consideration" they themselves produce *successive* locutions with the help of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁸ This implies that they themselves formulate the truths which the Spirit helps and has helped them to comprehend. The risk with this process is that the disciples can easily imitate it even when the Spirit is not at work in this specific way.¹⁰⁹ If they have "lively" intellects they can even begin to think that what they themselves have formulated is actually from God.¹¹⁰

Formal locutions arise in the soul supernaturally even when the disciples are not recollected. Thus they experience these locutions as if someone else was speaking directly in their souls.¹¹¹ Their effect is stronger than that of the successive locutions.¹¹² The difficulty with them is that the evil spirits can also produce them easily.¹¹³ Thus since both successive and formal locutions are problematic, the disciples should reject them. Yet this does not apply to the third category of locutions, the substantial ones. This is because these locutions are God's words which "impress [their] significance *substantially* on the soul."¹¹⁴ This means in other words that when God says in this manner "be good" or "be wise," the disciples will immediately become that.¹¹⁵ Thus also the disciples should do nothing in their regard nor can they do so.¹¹⁶

In addition to these intellectual communications, God also grants *spiritual feelings* to the disciples at times. They arise when God touches their will or

¹⁰⁴ 2S 24:4.

¹⁰⁵ 2S 24:3.

¹⁰⁶ 2S 24:7.

¹⁰⁷ 2S 28:2.

¹⁰⁸ 2S 29:1.

¹⁰⁹ 2S 29:5.

¹¹⁰ 2S 29:8.

¹¹¹ 2S 30:1.

¹¹² 2S 30:4.

¹¹³ 2S 30:5.

¹¹⁴ 2S 31:1(1-2).

¹¹⁵ 2S 31:1-2.

¹¹⁶ 2S 31:1-2.

the very “substance” of their soul to prepare them for the divine union.¹¹⁷ The feelings that arise from such touches, especially of the latter kind, produce knowledge of God in the intellect.¹¹⁸ Their effects are always very good.¹¹⁹ Consequently, the disciples should not make use of their “natural capacities” as regards these feelings. Rather they should be passive in relation to them. In this way they do not hinder God’s work in the soul.¹²⁰

Hope and Memory

The memory is the disciples’ faculty of remembering, of having memories. It is spiritual in the sense that the theological virtue of hope has the ability to perfect it and it is physical in the sense that it is “seated” in the brain and relates to the senses.¹²¹ Accordingly St John asserts that the memory stores “natural, supernatural imaginative and spiritual” knowledge and that these forms of knowledge relate to “natural, imaginative, and spiritual” objects.¹²² When putting it in this way he uses the word “spiritual” to denote formless and as such beneficial knowledge of God. The expression “supernatural imaginative” denotes in its turn the knowledge of revelations, visions and locutions and the word “natural” denotes knowledge in the ordinary sense. St John also points out that when the disciples remember various objects they also activate their faculty of phantasy, the one they relied on in discursive mediation.¹²³

One problem with the faculty of memory is that the devil can access it directly and also through the phantasy. This is when he “adds” to the knowledge in the memory false “forms, ideas and reasonings” and he impresses “images” on their faculty of phantasy.¹²⁴ In this way he deceives and moves the disciples to act in a passionate manner.¹²⁵ Furthermore he attaches pleasant feelings to whatever supernatural communications the disciples have received. This is his way of trying to keep them emotionally involved in the knowledge of locutions, visions and revelations.¹²⁶ Such an involvement causes them to make wrong judgments of God, their neighbor and even other things.¹²⁷ In part this is because it is actually impossible to

¹¹⁷ 2S 32:2–3.

¹¹⁸ 2S 32:4.

¹¹⁹ 2S 32:2.

¹²⁰ 2S 32:4.

¹²¹ 3S 2:5 (1–16).

¹²² 3S 1:2.

¹²³ 3S 14:1 and 3S 3:3. See also 2S 12:3 and 2S 14:2.

¹²⁴ 3S 4:1.

¹²⁵ 3S 4:1.

¹²⁶ 3S 10:1–2. This is how the devil “transforms himself into an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14).

¹²⁷ 3S 12:1 and 3S 8:3–4.

evaluate one's own experiences and feelings apart from the spiritual director's assistance.¹²⁸ This is also because it is impossible to compare God with whatever has a form.¹²⁹

The memories also involve other emotional "disturbances."¹³⁰ To exemplify, St John points out how easily a memory of this or that natural object makes the disciples yield to "sorrow, or fear, or hatred, vain hope, vain joy, or vainglory and so on."¹³¹ Similarly, the memory of this or that supernatural communication can make them yield to pride and false self-content.¹³² In addition, when the disciples remember what other people have done and said they can easily become judgmental.¹³³ This means, differently expressed, that memories "engender" appetites, passions and vices.¹³⁴ Thus the memories themselves are "at least imperfections" and often "real venial sins."¹³⁵ It is therefore necessary to "darken" and "deny" the faculty of memory "as to all things."¹³⁶

In further support of this conclusion St John compares memories to possessions and claims with reference to Luke 14:33 that "whoever does not renounce all possessions cannot be Christ's disciple."¹³⁷ Similarly he refers to Heb 11:1 where the author of that epistle claims that "hope is for that which is not possessed" and claims that the disciples' possession of memories "is against hope."¹³⁸ Consequently, to gain hope the disciples need to actively forget and in this way dispossess objects "of hearing, sight, smell, taste, or touch" in their memories.¹³⁹ The same applies to "earthly" as well as "heavenly considerations."¹⁴⁰ In a certain sense it is the virtue of hope itself which makes the disciples act in this way. It is their "helmet of salvation."¹⁴¹ It comes with a visor which directs the disciples' eyes toward their heavenly hope only.¹⁴² It makes them lose interest in everything that is not God.¹⁴³

God himself may also intervene more directly to assist the darkening of the memory. This is for example when he produces certain "touches (*toque*) of union" in it. The disciples experience these touches as "sudden jolt[s]" in

¹²⁸ 3S 8:5.

¹²⁹ 3S 13:1.

¹³⁰ 3S 5:1.

¹³¹ 3S 3:3.

¹³² 3S 9:1–2.

¹³³ 3S 3:3.

¹³⁴ 3S 3:3 and 3S 5:1.

¹³⁵ 3S 3:3.

¹³⁶ 3S 3:3–4.

¹³⁷ 3S 7:2.

¹³⁸ 3S 7:2.

¹³⁹ 3S 2:14 (13–14).

¹⁴⁰ 3S 2:14. For an exception see 3S 13–14.

¹⁴¹ 2N 21:7(6–7). This is in reference to 1 Thess 5:8.

¹⁴² 2N 21:7(6–7).

¹⁴³ 2N 21:7(6–7).

the brain. These jolts cause “great oblivion,” “loss of” both “sensibility” and awareness in the memory.¹⁴⁴ Thus the disciples in this state may behave strangely from time to time. They may forget to eat, drink and even to complete their tasks.¹⁴⁵ This is because their memories now “fail entirely in their natural operations.”¹⁴⁶ Yet since “God does not destroy but perfects nature,” this is merely a passing state. After a while God allows the disciples to gain “the habit of union.”¹⁴⁷ As a consequence their memories begin to function in a new supernatural mode which is much better than anything they have previously experienced in this area.¹⁴⁸ I shall return to this theme in the chapter “Spiritual Marriage.”

The annihilation of the memory’s knowledge also has other advantages. One of them is that it leaves the devil without tools of access. When the memory is void it is not longer possible to influence it.¹⁴⁹ Another advantage is that this annihilation disposes the disciples “to be moved by the Holy Spirit and be taught by him.”¹⁵⁰ Their annihilated memories are like that closed room which the Lord entered after his resurrection without opening the doors to give his first twelve disciples “peace” and tranquility.¹⁵¹ Such disciples can now receive “substantial understanding and love.”¹⁵² In fact, this is the very purpose of God’s communications: “to assimilate lovers to one another in their spiritual faculties.”¹⁵³

Will and Charity

According to St John the disciples use their faculty of will to govern their “faculties, passions and appetites.”¹⁵⁴ To signify its central role he writes,

The entire matter of reaching the union with God consists in purging the will of its appetites and emotions so that from a human and lowly will it may be changed into the divine will, made identical (*una misma cosa*) with the will of God.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁴ 3S 2:5.

¹⁴⁵ 3S 2:8.

¹⁴⁶ 3S 2:8. See also 3S 2:3.

¹⁴⁷ 3S 2:8.

¹⁴⁸ 3S 2:8.

¹⁴⁹ 3S 6:2.

¹⁵⁰ 3S 6:3. See also 3S 13:3.

¹⁵¹ 3S 3:6. See also 3S 4:2 and 3S 6:1, 3.

¹⁵² 3S 13:4.

¹⁵³ 3S 13:5.

¹⁵⁴ 3S 16:2.

¹⁵⁵ 3S 16:3. See also 2S 5:3.

Ultimately, only love changes the disciples' will. This is because it "effects a likeness between the lover and the loved."¹⁵⁶ Similarly, other disoriented loves hinder the disciples' from reaching the union with God. St John explains:

When the will is attached to an object, it esteems that object higher than any other, even though another, not as pleasing, may deserve higher admiration. And if people desire pleasure from two objects, they are necessarily offensive to the more deserving because through their desire for both they equate the two.¹⁵⁷

An equation of this kind offends God and divides the disciples' will.¹⁵⁸ Since a divided will is also a weak will the disciples lack the necessary power to command themselves in a way that reaching union presupposes.¹⁵⁹ St John claims that such disciples are "useless."¹⁶⁰ They lack the kind of "freedom, solitude and purity" that would position them to become united with God.¹⁶¹

To keep their will undivided, the disciples need above all to withdraw their joy from all objects that divide it. To explain, St John points out at first that joy is one of those four central passions that I have mentioned already in the chapter "The Night of the Senses" (The three others are hope, sorrow, and fear.)¹⁶² He defines it as "a delight (*contentamiento*) of the will in an object esteemed and considered fitting."¹⁶³ Thus it is directly involved in igniting, supporting and directing love.¹⁶⁴ Secondly St John also identifies various categories of objects that the disciples can have joy in and he discusses how exactly they need to deal with them so that their faculty of will "may be changed into the divine will, made identical (*misma cosa*) with the will of God."¹⁶⁵

Thus according to him the central source of joy in the will is "temporal," "natural" and "sensory" objects.¹⁶⁶ The first adjective denotes things such as wealth, relatives, personal and family reputation. The second refers to

¹⁵⁶ 1S 4:3 and 2S 5:3.

¹⁵⁷ 1S 5:5 (slightly modified).

¹⁵⁸ 1S 5:5 and 1S 11:6. See also 1S 5:7–8, 1S 6:1–3, 2S 6:4 and 3S 16:1. This is how St John interprets the first command [Deut 6,5: You shall love the Lord, your God, ...]. The disciples should not allow any competing loves. There are no grey zones in this regard.

¹⁵⁹ 3S 16:2. See also 1S 10:1.

¹⁶⁰ 1S 10:1.

¹⁶¹ 1S 11:6.

¹⁶² Pp. 46–47. In the 3S St John actually intends to teach on how each of these four passions or emotions relates to the faculty of will. In reality he focuses solely on joy. See also 3S 16:2.

¹⁶³ 3S 17:1.

¹⁶⁴ In this sentence I make explicit what St John presupposes.

¹⁶⁵ 3S 16:3.

¹⁶⁶ 3S 17:2.

individual characteristics such as “beauty,” “elegance,” “bodily constitution” and “intelligence,” and the third signifies objects of “sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch,” whether in phantasy or in physical reality.¹⁶⁷ Although these categories of objects are not bad in themselves, the disciples’ joy in them is.¹⁶⁸ St John compares this joy in fact to getting “drunk from wine” which immediately obscures reason, bringing “dullness of mind,” “darkness of judgment” as well as “vainglory,” pride, sexual sins, “disgust for the poor” etc.¹⁶⁹ Contrarily, when the disciples refuse this joy they become able to concentrate their joy “entirely (*solo*) on God.”¹⁷⁰ As a consequence, they receive many blessings. These are freedom, humility, charity, self-control, awareness of God, joy, satisfaction, strength, and divine glory; in other words, moral and spiritual excellence.¹⁷¹

The disciples can also find joy in various objects and places of devotion. This is no wonder; God uses such things to inspire devotion.¹⁷² He works for example miracles through certain images and statues.¹⁷³ Some disciples are more receptive to objects of devotion than others. Thus such objects can also ignite devotion in them.¹⁷⁴ At the same time since the objects (and places) also provide “recreation of the senses,” there is reason for caution.¹⁷⁵ The disciples should only rejoice in them in the measure that these objects help them to center their will on God. They should never allow their senses to become “absorbed” in the object in question.¹⁷⁶ Rather, they should only use them to “immediately raise the mind to what is being represented.”¹⁷⁷ This means also that they should never become so attached to particular objects or places that they become “sad” when they no longer have access to them.¹⁷⁸ They should rather remember that even the devil uses physical things to work marvels through them.¹⁷⁹

Furthermore, the disciples can also find delight in objects that relate to God’s power in a more immediate manner, i.e. “moral” and “supernatural goods” (*bien*).¹⁸⁰ The first term is a reference to virtues and to virtues habits such as “the practice of works of mercy.”¹⁸¹ The second is a reference to

¹⁶⁷ 3S 18:1. 3S 21:1. 3S 24:1.

¹⁶⁸ 3S 18:1. 3S 21:1. See also 3S 19, 3S 22, 3S 25.

¹⁶⁹ 3S 19:3. 3S 22:2–3, 5. 3S 25:3.

¹⁷⁰ 3S 24:3.

¹⁷¹ 3S 20:2, 4. 23:1, 3–4. 26:3–7.

¹⁷² 3S 36:2. 3S 39:1–2. See also 3S 30:1–2 and 3S 44:4.

¹⁷³ 3S 36:2.

¹⁷⁴ 3S 35:2–4.

¹⁷⁵ 3S 35:2–4.

¹⁷⁶ 3S 37:2.

¹⁷⁷ 3S 37:2. See also 32:2.

¹⁷⁸ 3S 35:5. 3S 39:3.

¹⁷⁹ 3S 36:5. 3S 37:1.

¹⁸⁰ 3S 27:1 and 3S 30:1.

¹⁸¹ 3S 27:1.

supernatural gifts like “the grace of healing,” “prophecy, “gift of tongues” etc.¹⁸² Since especially the virtues are “the noblest” thing the disciples can possess, it is natural to have joy in them.¹⁸³ Yet they should rejoice in them only “if they do these things out of love for God alone, without any other motive.”¹⁸⁴ The same applies even more to miracles and signs. The disciples should rejoice in them only if they serve God by them “with true love.”¹⁸⁵ Such love rejoices only in “what is for the honor and glory of God” and stays detached in relation to everything else.¹⁸⁶ Indeed, it makes the disciples love “all rationally and spiritually, which is the way God wants them to be loved.”¹⁸⁷

Another reason to reject miracles and signs is that they easily lead to spiritual perversion. The disciples should not forget the biblical examples of Balaam, who used the gifts of God in a twisted manner, and Simon Magus whose attachment to the miraculous dimension turned him into the servant of the devil.¹⁸⁸ In addition, they should remember that God works miracles only when they are “a necessity for believing” and that he delights most in the kind of faith that comes from hearing alone.¹⁸⁹ This means also that he blesses the disciples who withdraw their will and its joy from “testimonies and signs” by augmenting their faith, love and hope “abundantly.”¹⁹⁰ Simultaneously, the disciples’ rejection of their joy in both moral and supernatural gifts makes them better at practicing them.¹⁹¹ This is since, being freed from “satisfaction” or “vainglory” or similar, they now know how to act according to the above-mentioned “true love.”¹⁹²

The Passive Night of the Spirit

The disciples cannot unite with God as completely as that is possible in this life unless their purification reaches the deepest regions of their spiritual faculties erasing from there the last “stains” (*mancha*) of their “old self” (*hombre viejo*).¹⁹³ This final purification, which St John calls the passive

¹⁸² 3S 30:1. In 2S 26:12 St John refers such gifts to 1 Cor 12:8–10 defining them as “infused habits that God grants naturally or supernaturally to whomsoever he wills.”

¹⁸³ 3S 27:2

¹⁸⁴ 3S 27:4.

¹⁸⁵ 3S 30:5.

¹⁸⁶ 3S 17:2. See also 3S 20:3 and 3S 22:6.

¹⁸⁷ 3S 23:1.

¹⁸⁸ 3S 31:4–5. St John refers to Num. 22–24, Jude 11 and Acts 8.

¹⁸⁹ 3S 31:8 (8–9).

¹⁹⁰ 3S 31:8. 3S 32:4.

¹⁹¹ 3S 29:1–2.

¹⁹² 3S 29:2; 3S 30:5; 3S 31:1–5

¹⁹³ 2N 2:1. 2N 16:4.

night of the spirit, may begin as soon as the disciples have become able to endure it. Usually this is possible after “many years” of exercising “in the state of proficients.”¹⁹⁴

Ultimately even this night is a direct result of the way the soul comes in immediate contact with God’s “majesty” and “grandeur” in infused contemplation and begins to “feel within itself the other extreme – its own intimate poverty and misery.”¹⁹⁵ It is also a result of the way the light of contemplation “overwhelms the intellect, and deprives it of its natural vigor” creating finally a spiritual condition which St John calls “thick darkness” (*tiniebla oscura*).¹⁹⁶

One difficult aspect of this darkness is it makes the disciples unable to receive consolation from other people. This includes even their spiritual directors. St John explains:

Instead of consolation they experience greater sorrow, thinking that the director’s doctrine is no remedy (*remedio*) for their evil. Indeed, it is not a remedy, for until the Lord finishes purging them in the way he desires, no remedy is a help to them in their sorrow.¹⁹⁷

Indeed, the disciples’ helplessness in this condition is so complete St John compares them to

one who is imprisoned in a dark dungeon, bound hands and feet, and able neither to move nor see nor feel any favor from heaven or earth. They remain in this state until their spirit is humbled, softened (*ablandar*), and purified, until it becomes so delicate, simple, and refined (*sutil y sencillo y delgado*) that it can be one with the Spirit of God, according to the degree of union of love that God, in his mercy, desires to grant.¹⁹⁸

In order to purify and soften the spirit the “dark contemplation” shifts between “assailing” (*embestir*) the soul “in a purgative mode” and “illuminatively and lovingly.”¹⁹⁹ According to St John this ‘assailing’ should take at least some years “to be truly efficacious.”²⁰⁰ The experience is so difficult that only few disciples are actually able to endure it in its more complete degrees.²⁰¹ To explain, he points out that although God wants to

¹⁹⁴ 2N 1:1.

¹⁹⁵ 2N 6:4.

¹⁹⁶ 2N 5:3. See also 3LI 34 where St John claims that “the supernatural does not fit into the natural mode.”

¹⁹⁷ 2N 7:3.

¹⁹⁸ 2N 7:3. See also 2N 1:1.

¹⁹⁹ 2N 7:4.

²⁰⁰ 2N 7:4. See also 2LI 27–28.

²⁰¹ 1LI 24. 2LI 28.

perfect all disciples, he only does it to the degree they desire and can endure it. This is the sense in which there exist different degrees of purification and union with God.²⁰²

In discussing God's purifying acts in contemplation St John points out that contemplation "consists of divine light (*luz divina*) and love."²⁰³ Sometimes this loving light "illuminates the intellect" leaving the will in "dryness (*seca*), other times it acts "upon the will" leaving the intellect in "darkness."²⁰⁴ The latter is commonly the case especially in the beginning of this final purification.²⁰⁵ This is because as long as the intellect has not become thoroughly purified, love is God's only means to mediate "naked and passive knowledge" to the soul.²⁰⁶

The relationship between love and will involves a problem that St John comments upon briefly. According to him the disciples can receive "divinely and spiritually" only such communications that come "from above the free will (*sobre albedrio*) and human appetite."²⁰⁷ Similarly he suggests that in order not to involve the faculty of will God's love does not "act upon" it "directly" (*derechamente*).²⁰⁸ Instead

The warmth of love wounds the substance of the soul and thus moves the affections passively. As a result the enkindling of love is called passion of love rather than a free act of will (*acto libre de la voluntad*).²⁰⁹

This passion of love is crucial also in the sense that it is the very motor force which makes the soul to move toward God in spite of every difficulty and unite with him.²¹⁰ Yet, when the disciples are still in the beginning of their final purification, the passion of fear seizes them. This passion arises out of love in the sense that love is both the reason why the disciples experience an immense desire to please God and become aware of their own lack of goodness.²¹¹

In this situation the disciples feel that do not deserve God's love. Worse still they even begin to think that God now abhors them and no longer loves

²⁰² 2L1 27–28.

²⁰³ 2N 12:7.

²⁰⁴ 2N 12:7.

²⁰⁵ 2N 13:2.

²⁰⁶ 2N 13:3.

²⁰⁷ 2N 16:5. In here St John also claims that "goods do not go from humans to God, but they come from God to humans."

²⁰⁸ 2N 13:3.

²⁰⁹ 2N 13:3.

²¹⁰ 2N 13:7. 2N 18:5.

²¹¹ 2N 13:4–5. St John's poem *Coplas del alma que pena por ver a Dios* (Stanzas of the soul that suffers with longing to see God) seems to describe this spiritual state.

them.²¹² This thought makes them reject his love, at least those forms of it that they have experienced previously. In so acting they become unable to enjoy the fruits of their earlier spiritual growth.²¹³ They even feel that they have lost God forever.²¹⁴ It is as they were “undone (*deshaciendo y derripiendo*) by a cruel spiritual death.”²¹⁵ They no longer believe that they can receive new blessings.²¹⁶ Indeed, they suffer “but a little less than” in purgatory.²¹⁷

In praising the experience of not being to benefit from their earlier fruits St John writes:

Similarly, people learning new details about their art of trade must work in darkness and not with what they already know. If they refuse to lay aside their former knowledge, they will never make any further progress. The soul, too, when it advances, walks in darkness and unknowing.²¹⁸

As the disciples’ soul continues to pursue God despite this darkness and unknowing, “His Majesty frequently gives it joy by paying it visits of spiritual delight.”²¹⁹ He even allows them to see the glory of their future way of knowing God. The intensive character of these moments makes them feel that their “trails” are over, although this is not yet the case.²²⁰ As their purification continues, and these moments repeat themselves, the disciples develop a better and better idea of what this future knowledge of God is all about. The insight intensifies their misery. They know that they cannot arrive at such knowledge at will and they cannot help but loving God more and more.²²¹ Indeed, St John suggests that “yearning” for intimate loving knowledge of God is actually “commensurate with suffering for him.”²²²

As this yearning continues God’s love causes the disciples’ soul to withdraw its “appetites, strength, and faculties” more and more from everything that is not God.²²³ In this way their intellect becomes maximally adapted to receiving knowledge “stripped of accidents,” (*desnuda de*

²¹² 2N 13:5.

²¹³ 2N 7:6–7. 2N 10:2.

²¹⁴ 2N 7:7.

²¹⁵ 2N 6:1.

²¹⁶ 2N 8:4,7.

²¹⁷ 1L1 21. See also 1S 4:3, 2N 6:6, 2N 10:5, 2N 20:5, 1L1 21 and 24.

²¹⁸ 2N 16:8.

²¹⁹ 2N 19:4.

²²⁰ 2N 8:4–6.

²²¹ 2N 19:5. C 6:4. C 11:11–12. C 12:9. I refer to passages from *Cantico* here on the basis that St John’s description of the state of spiritual betrothal has clear parallels to what he says when describing the disciples’ final stages of purification in *Noche Oscura*. I will present the states of spiritual betrothal and marriage in the chapter “Spiritual Marriage.”

²²² C 12:9.

²²³ 2N 16:14.

accidentes) i.e. God's wisdom.²²⁴ As a consequence God now touches the disciples' soul in a certain substantial manner. These touches produce indescribable "sweetness" and "delight."²²⁵ This sweetness is so complete that the disciples now feel wholly compensated for whatever sufferings they have experienced previously.²²⁶ God rewards them both bodily and spiritually for every "trial" they have gone through. St John even suggests that they now "obtain everything they desire."²²⁷

Before turning to present what this is all about in more detail in the chapter "Spiritual Marriage," I will close this section with the following summary of St John of the disciples' spiritual path up until this point:

For one cannot reach in this life what is attainable of these mysteries of Christ without having suffered much and without having received numerous intellectual and sensible favors (*mercedes intelectuales y sensitivas*) from God, and without having undergone much spiritual activity.²²⁸

In the following we shall compare this vision of what coming to know God means with the two preceding.

²²⁴ 2N 17:2. The expression "desnuda de accidentes" is from C 14&15:16.

²²⁵ 2S 26:7. 2N 20:3.

²²⁶ 2S 26:7. 2N 20:4-5.

²²⁷ 2L1 31 (30-31). 2N 20:5.

²²⁸ C 37:4. See also 2 L1 28.

8. ST SYMEON, ST JOHN AND VLADIMIR LOSSKY

The conclusion of *Part One* indicated that there exist both similarities and differences in St Symeon's and St John's mystical theologies. Both think of spiritual exercises in a fashion that relates both to the Scriptures and to the ancient Greek concept of spiritual exercises. Yet while St Symeon does not seem to be interested in singling out any particular exercise at the expense of others, St John and Plotinus share a somewhat similar emphasis on the matter, distinguishing between contemplation and other more preparatory exercises. Even the cosmologies and anthropologies of the two latter resemble each other to a certain degree.

In this part of the study we have seen that that St Symeon and St John also develop distinct theological epistemologies. I will first, before discussing this difference with a point of departure in Lossky's patristic epistemology, summarize and compare their positions in brief.

Knowledge of Faith according to St Symeon

According to St Symeon, faith is the most trustworthy source of knowledge of God. It proves itself epistemological by leading the faithful to its object. This takes place by grace, by the Scriptures and by various mystical *energeiai* and illuminations. God uses all these means to augment the disciples' faith, and even to equip them with ministerial gifts such as the ability to heal the sick and to cast out demons. Through them he also makes them loving, joyous, peaceful, kind, gentle and self-controlled and helps them to exercise almsgiving and do other good deeds. From this St Symeon also derives a principle of spiritual discernment; the disciples should only put their trust in Christian teachers who manifest such gifts, deeds and character.

Moreover St Symeon points out that there exist two kinds of knowledge, conceptual and non-conceptual. Conceptual knowledge arises when men formulate their non-faith driven intentions and purposes. It is illusory. Non-conceptual knowledge arises from existing spiritual realities by faith and by

contemplation. This knowledge is real.¹ The reason why the disciples can access this real knowledge is that their intellect contains in itself all the senses as a single intellectual sense which allows them to hear, feel, taste etc., i.e. to know God even apart from the natural senses. Thus they can in addition to receiving immediate mystical illuminations also receive the Eucharist by their physical mouth and simultaneously contemplate and receive it spiritually as that which it is according to faith. The same applies to all the Church's symbols and ceremonies. To explain how this harmony of the finite and infinite natures is possible, St Symeon refers to Christ's two natures, i.e. to the Incarnation.

This harmony does not mean that the disciples can control or somehow circumscribe God. To explain, he compares knowing God to how one knows the sea from one's limited vantage point on the seashore and he compares the same to how one knows what fire is by the single instance of fire one is familiar with. This means that the disciples should not try to hold or to seize God by their intellect. St Symeon points out that every such attempt causes him to disappear from them. In addition, he says that to contemplate him again they must wait with joy and harbour no resentment in their hearts.² This is because God himself is joy and thus responds to it. They should also know that God's disappearances test their will, the freedom of which St Symeon continuously emphasizes.

Knowledge of Faith according to St John

Before St John turns to discuss the details of his disciples' reception of divine knowledge, he defines their new spiritual state. It applies that although they have now acquired a measure of spiritual freedom and strength, they are not yet ready to cope with and receive what he calls "the height of the divine wisdom."³ Their habit of contemplation is not yet "perfect" and they must keep on pursuing further. The reason for this is their remaining spiritual impurities which infused contemplation continuously exposes. To explain what he means St John refers to Aristotle and claims that "the higher and more sublime the divine light, the darker it is to our intellect."⁴ In addition, he suggests that the disciples' three spiritual faculties, intellect, memory and will are a kind of life-container which the disciples must denude by applying the virtue-tools of faith, hope and love to them. This is also how they govern themselves and how they place themselves in

¹ See p. 86.

² See p. 91.

³ See p. 94.

⁴ See p. 94.

the active night of the spirit which allows them to advance to the passive night. Since such change cannot happen at once and without pain, it must take place gradually, in stages and with much torment.

The virtue-tool that denudes the intellect is faith. St John defines the latter as a “certain obscure habit of the soul.”⁵ There are two reasons why this tool is effectual. The first is that it presents God as he is: infinite, Triune, simple and without mode. The second is that this presentation is purely intellectual, i.e. it bypasses the senses. Therefore faith both provides right knowledge of God and darkens the intellect at least to the degree it depends on senses in one way or another. St John also explains the matter with a reference to the distinction between the active and the passive intellect. Normally the former intellect “abstracts information from the senses” and the latter organizes it into knowledge.⁶ Faith, however, has the ability to more or less wholly bypass the active intellect, leaving it in darkness. This is how faith makes infused contemplation and knowledge of God possible.

Although St John also teaches how the virtue-tool of hope denudes the memory and the virtue-tool of love the will, what he says in their regard also adds little to his teaching on faith. Thus the purpose of the Christian virtue of hope is to bring the faculty of memory into a state of not being able to attach itself to anything that has a form and therefore activates the senses. The same applies to what love accomplishes in the faculty of will. The disciples must be willing to do away with whatever raises their natural affections, i.e. their joy in whatever is not of God. As a consequence they now receive divine faith, hope and love.

St John’s concept of faith also determines the way he interprets all other supernatural communications and graces apart from infused contemplation. The general problem with the former is that they engage the active intellect and consequently also the senses. This in its turn allows the devil to meddle in this area. Accordingly, the best thing the disciples can do is to reject such communications and graces in the belief that this is the best thing to do. To explain, St John distinguishes between such substances’ form and their spirit. Since forms are sensual in their essence they also hinder the spirit. Consequently, when the disciples reject the form they also become able to benefit from the spirit.

At the same time St John also teaches that the disciples’ union with God presupposes substantial spiritual communications which relate immediately to God’s nature and which transform the disciples’ soul into the divine image. To benefit from them the disciples must enter the spirit’s passive night. This night is result of how God’s majesty in contemplation paralyzes the intellect and how God’s love simultaneously bypasses the disciples’ will

⁵ See p. 96.

⁶ See p. 96.

making them both yearn for God and suffer from their remaining impurities in a state of total helplessness.

In this state especially God's love causes the disciples' soul to withdraw its "appetites, strength, and faculties" from everything that is not God.⁷ When this process reaches a certain point the disciples finally become capable of receiving the above kind of communications, i.e. "knowledge without accidents."⁸ This knowledge unites them with God and fills them with such bliss that they forget all their former sufferings.

St Symeon and St John in Comparison

The accounts above imply that both mystical theologians emphasize faith as means to knowledge of God and confirm that the intellect cannot circumscribe God. Yet at the same time they also define the disciples' intellect and divine knowledge in a ways that seem to have little in common. St Symeon refers the ability of the disciples' intellect to know God both sensibly and spiritually to the Incarnation. Accordingly he is more or less equally positive to God's various means of communicating grace. St John emphasizes knowledge that is independent of the senses in a fashion that only favors those divine communications that do not seem to engage the senses. Likewise he seems to reduce the disciples' intellect to passive receptive device of a kind. This applies at least to the way he describes the intellect before the disciples have become united with God.

This difference appears to go back to their different cosmologies. In the chapter "St Symeon, St John, and Plotinus" I suggested that St John "seems to presume that the disciples' finitude as compared to God's infinity is in itself a major spiritual problem." The present comparison supports this observation. As Christian theologians St Symeon and St John naturally presuppose that not only sin and death but even nature separates humans in their present condition from God. Yet they approach the latter separation differently in formulating their epistemological and anthropological convictions. While St Symeon solves the problem of relating the disciples' finite intellect to God's infinite capacities explicitly in terms of the Incarnation and Eucharist, St John does not. Instead he emphasizes the disciples' cognitive lack of capacity in a particularly distinct fashion. I refer especially to the way he describes the soul as an elaborate tripartite container which in order to be filled with divine knowledge and love must first become totally emptied and annihilated. I also refer to the way he suggests that this process must bypass the disciples' free will.

⁷ See p. 111.

⁸ See p. 111.

Although it seems to be possible to refer St John's general emphasis on non-proportionality in human-divine relations, the consequent total annihilation of self, and contemplation to neo-Platonism, as we already did in the chapter "St Symeon, St John, and Plotinus," the same does not apply to these two aspects of his mystical theology. Unlike St John Plotinus develops no elaborate onto-psychology explaining away his disciples' ability to purify themselves and accomplish the return to their true spiritual origin. Consequently, I shall, before turning to discuss Lossky's patristic epistemology in the light of the two epistemologies above and vice versa, expand briefly on the question of what may lie behind St John's elaborate onto-psychology and non-emphasis on the role of the free will.

St John, St Augustine and Scholastic Aristotelian Principles and Terminology

In my view St John's non-emphasis on free will bears an echo of St Augustine's concept of original sin. I refer especially to how the latter interprets "the Stoic division between involuntary [and as such innocent] first movements and willed emotions" suggesting that "human emotional patterns" have become so corrupted that even such involuntary first movements of the human will are automatically misguided.⁹ In St John's theology this corresponds to the way he asks his disciples to refuse reacting to God's communications and graces on the basis that their reactions are bound to be wrong as long as their faculty of will have not become thoroughly annihilated. This corresponds also to the way he thinks that the acts of God's love in the passive night of the spirit must bypass the free will.

It is also plausible to suggest that St John's preoccupation with the task of defining how the disciples' soul catches and does not catch "a glimpse of God" also relates to St Augustine, who finds the Platonic idea of the soul as something hierarchically speaking more divine than the body a plausible notion, and who at the same time interprets this idea in terms of the Trinity.¹⁰ I refer to especially to how, as it would seem, he reclaims some of that proportionality which he denies when reflecting on volition by suggesting that the intellect, memory and will and even other similar Triune structures of the soul mark it as an image of the Trinity and that it is consequently possible to catch a glimpse of the Trinity itself through the soul.¹¹

⁹ These expressions go back to Simo Knuuttila's *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*, 172.

¹⁰ The expression goes back to Philip Cary's *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self*, 54.

¹¹ See especially the ninth book of St Augustine's *On the Trinity*.

While St Augustine seems to use this compatibility of the soul with God to more or less suggest that the soul can, through grace and repentance and without annihilation, to gain cognizance of God, St John emphasizes annihilation suggesting that this kind of knowledge transcends nature.¹² Yet despite this difference it is St Augustine's emphasis on the faculties and functions of the soul at the expense of its powers of self-determination which characterizes St John's theology. It is on this basis that he hypostatizes, i.e. personifies, the soul's different parts instead of being sensitive to the kind of concerns that lie, for example, behind the way Lossky defines personhood.

As I see it, this is one of the key roles scholastic Aristotelian principles and terminology have in St John's theology. He uses them to develop his conception of the soul and the divine-human encounter into a direction that further confirms his emphasis on human-divine non-proportionality. I refer especially to how he uses physical imagery to describe the intellect, memory and will as some kind of containers that are in the process of being both emptied and filled, and to how he presupposes the soul in this way to be a substance the states and relations which one can measure in terms of motion, space and form, i.e. in terms of inflow, activity, passivity, being full, being empty, being emptied, being filled, being higher, being lower, being tripartite etc.

It is possible to refer this language back to Aristotle's so called ten categories (*κατηγορίαι*), i.e. predications: "substance, quantity, quality, relationship, place, time, position, equipment, activity, passivity."¹³ Of these the first answers to the question what a thing is, for example "a man or a god," while the remaining nine define this first thing according to what is possible to observe of it empirically.¹⁴ Thus these latter categories express changeable qualities, while the first is that which does not change. Thus the nine are also called accidents, i.e. that which one adds to a substance when describing it.¹⁵

The interesting thing about this distinction is the vagueness of substance as a notion. As we already saw, Plato believed that the forms or ideas (*εἶδος, ἰδέα*) of all substances existed in an immaterial and as such more real reality.¹⁶ Aristotle was skeptical about this belief and pointed out that it was not possible to explain how this was possible and that those who tried nevertheless ended up describing the forms and ideas on the basis of empirical data.¹⁷ In his view it was more reasonable to think that each

¹² Philip Cary refers this trait of St Augustine's thought to Plato. See his *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self*, 57.

¹³ Anders Piltz: *The World of Medieval Learning*, 61

¹⁴ Aristotle uses these two examples in *Metaphysics* VII: 1.

¹⁵ Anders Piltz: *The World of Medieval Learning*, 61.

¹⁶ See pp. 30–32 of this study.

¹⁷ See *Metaphysics* VII: 16.

particular substance contained in itself or was its own particular “principle and cause” (ἀρχὴ καὶ αἰτία) which it also manifested by being in a certain way.¹⁸

Therefore Aristotle thought that to understand a certain substance one should study it empirically as it is in itself and functions in relation to other substances.¹⁹ Yet since he himself did not limit the use of the notion of substance to physically observable entities, the criterion for calling something a substance remained as open as it also is linguistically.²⁰ The fact that Aristotle himself considered for example the mind (νοῦς) to be as a substance both naturally physical and divinely infused added to the confusion.²¹ This seems to lie behind the way St John speaks of divine and human substances and uses physical imagery when describing the way they relate to each other.

It seems to me that although even St John’s mystical theology presupposes volition, such language runs the risk of depersonalizing the disciples in the sense that it does not confirm them as personal agents. Through such language the accent falls on what happens to or within them or even in a certain part of them as if by physical necessity or law. This stands in contrast to how St Symeon presupposes that the soul, which possesses the five senses in it as one intelligible sense, is as such spiritually receptive. It also stands in contrast to how he continuously emphasizes free will.

St Symeon, St John and Vladimir Lossky in Comparison

The theological epistemologies of St Symeon and Lossky have many common elements. Both deliberately emphasize the role of the free will and support more or less equally the Eucharist and God’s other known means of grace and divine knowledge. In addition, both refer the consummation of such knowledge to deification understood as a union of one’s whole person, body and soul, with the Trinity. The latter applies even to St John, as especially *Part Three* of this study will demonstrate.

Yet St Symeon does not share Lossky’s preoccupation with seeking to define the conditions of theological knowledge. Instead he presupposes that his monastic disciples arrive to becoming divinely illumined through faith, obedience and labors of repentance, and not by seeking to understand God in the context of academic theology. This corresponds to the way he

¹⁸ *Metaphysics* VII: 17, 1.

¹⁹ See *Metaphysics* VII: 17.

²⁰ Aristotle’s discussion in the *Metaphysics* VII is actually a good example of the impossibility of arriving at a universal definition of what a substance is. See S. Mark Cohen’s large article on Aristotle’s metaphysics in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* for more background.

²¹ Hadot, Pierre: *What is Ancient Philosophy*, 79. Russell: *Deification*, 38.

distinguishes between knowledge that arises out of non-faith driven intentions and purposes and knowledge that stems from the disciples' contemplative vision of God presupposing perhaps that the attempt to even discuss with those who insist on the former kind of knowledge in theology may not be worth the effort.

It seems to me that both St John and Lossky make this same distinction. This is when they follow St Dionysius' distinguishing between positive and negative theologies and emphasizing the latter. Yet St John's interpretation of this distinction differs greatly from Lossky's. While he uses it to negate those divine communications and graces that involve the senses, Lossky's emphasis on negative theology does not hinder him from also affirming the role of God's other physically concrete means of faith, grace and divine knowledge.

As already suggested, Lossky's interpretation of the doctrine of the *filioque* indicates that he would be critical of the above-mentioned depersonalizing tendencies in St John's theology. I refer especially to the way Lossky claims that natural necessity cannot ground relationships of love. At the same time the way he emphasizes the need to choose away one's individuality and individual will as a presupposition for becoming deified may apply here. It could be what St John is actually saying when he suggests that God's love must bypass the disciples' will in the passive night of the spirit. This possible similarity does not change the fact that while St John insists on the necessity of allowing one's cognitive nature, i.e. intellect, memory and will, to become annihilated in a more or less concrete physical sense of this word before it can become perfected in divine knowledge, the same does not apply to Lossky or to St Symeon.

The following account of St Maximus' doctrine of deification will cast further light on these similarities and differences.

PART THREE – DEIFICATION

9. ST MAXIMUS' DOCTRINE OF DEIFICATION

The chapter “Vladimir Lossky’s Patristic Epistemology” already provided a basic outline of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of deification. In this chapter we shall take a closer look at what St Maximus Confessor, who is also the Greek father Lossky refers to most frequently in the *Mystical Theology*, teaches on this same topic. This is fitting especially since St Maximus is theologically and ideologically somewhere between St John and St Symeon. He is more familiar with and influenced by neo-Platonism than the latter, and yet dealing with in ways that differentiate him from the former. This corresponds to how St Maximus is, to quote Jaroslav Pelikan, one of those relatively few “saints of the Church who belong almost equally to the Western and to the Eastern traditions of Christian spirituality.”¹ This also corresponds to how Jean-Claude Larchet calls him a “mediator between the East and the West.”²

Deifying Practices

St Maximus was born in the year 580 of noble parents in Constantinople. He received a broad education both in the tradition of the Church and Greek philosophy, studying, for example, the writings of Aristotle and the neo-Platonists Iamblichus (d. ca 325) and Proclus (d. 485). After having held a position at the imperial court for about three years, St Maximus chose the monastic pattern of life. When Avar, Slavic, and Persian troops set serious pressure on Constantinople in the spring of the year 626, he went to live in exile in North Africa.

In 653 the emperor Constans II ended the exile by ordering St Maximus to be arrested and brought to Constantinople. The reason was the latter’s firm public rejection of monothelism, i.e. the suggestion that Christ only had

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan: “Introduction,” 1.

² I refer to Larchet’s monograph *Maxime le Confesseur, médiateur entre l’Orient et l’Occident*.

one will, the divine.³ According to him this doctrine conflicted with “the ancient patristic principle that whatever was not assumed in the Incarnation was not healed in the Redemption.”⁴ It amounted to suggesting that Christ was incapable of redeeming the human will and, consequently, of saving human beings. While St Maximus position was to win the day in the Church after his death, it did not convince the most influential theologians of the day. He faced charges and was condemned to be silenced by cutting off his tongue and his right hand in the year 662. He died in the same year, earning “soon thereafter” the title “Confessor.”⁵

In discussing deification St Maximus often refers it to creation. This is especially so when he claims that Adam received from God both the ability and the task to deify man and creation.⁶ On the one hand this task is a reference to five fundamental divisions which characterize and limit creation. These are according to one of his definitions the divisions between “created and uncreated, intelligible and sensible, heaven and earth, paradise and inhabited world” and finally between male and female.⁷ The ability to deify is in turn a reference to how man is the only created being who combines all ten extreme ends of these divisions in his own being and is consequently capable of reconciling and uniting them.⁸

According to St Maximus the reason why Adam failed to complete this task was that he misused his natural power to unite “what is divided” in order to split “what is united,” i.e. himself and the creation, from God.⁹ This also amounts to saying that he succumbed to self-love (*φιλαυτία*).¹⁰ From him the task passed to Christ whose success in this regard St Paul compares with Adam’s failure in Rom 5:12-21. Since the disciples are in Christ they

³ See Jean-Claude Larchet’s *La divinization de l’homme selon saint Maxime le Confesseur*, 17–18, for explicit references to monothelism in St Maximus’ writings.

⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan: “Introduction,” 4.

⁵ This short biography of St Maximus goes back to Jaroslav Pelikan’s “Introduction” to *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, 2–5. See also Jean-Claude Larchet’s *La divinization de l’homme selon saint Maxime le Confesseur*, 7–19 and Andrew Louth’s *Maximus the Confessor*, 3–18.

⁶ Lossky: *Mystical*, 110. Lossky refers to *Amb. Io.* (= *The Liber Ambiguorum*): PG 91. 1308. Thunberg: *Mediator*, 144–146. Thunberg refers especially to *Amb. Io.* 42: PG 91. 1316 A, 1317 A and 1345 D.

⁷ Lossky: *Mystical*, 108. Thunberg: *Mediator*, 56–57. Russell: *Deification*, 281. I have followed Russell’s terminology for the divisions. St Maximus discusses the themes creation and deification in *Amb. Io.* 31 and 41 both in PG 91.

⁸ *Amb. Io.* 41: PG 91. 1305 A – D. Andrew Louth: *Maximus the Confessor*, 157–158.

⁹ *Amb. Io.* 41: PG 91. 1308 C. Quoted in Andrew Louth’s *Maximus the Confessor*, 158.

¹⁰ EP 2: PG 91. 397 C. *Cap. Car.* (= *The Chapters on Love*) 3:44. The complete *Cap. Car.*: PG 90. 959 – 1080. See Thunberg: *Mediator*, 232–248 for the concept of *φιλαυτία* in the thought of St Maximus and his predecessors. See also I. Hausherr’s article “*Philautie: De la tendresse pour soi à la charité, selon Saint Maxime le Confesseur.*”

also participate in his success by faith. This is when they devote themselves to virtues and contemplation in the context of the Church.

In this context we will only give a basic idea of what St Maximus teaches on such fundamental spiritual exercises. According to him there exist two basic categories of virtues, those of body and those of the soul. He writes:

Bodily virtues are for example, fasting, vigils, sleeping on the ground, service to others, manual labor done so as not to burden anyone or to have something to share, and so forth. The virtues of the soul are love, forbearance, meekness, self-mastery, prayer, and so forth.¹¹

Although the disciples may occasionally not be able to exercise the first category of virtues because of physical weakness there cannot be excuses for not exercising the second.¹²

Those who exercise the virtues lead what he calls the “active life.” It accomplishes many things in the disciples. First of all it leads to the acquisition of love as opposed to self-love. In this way it gives victory over all the passions.¹³ This implies that virtues separate “the mind from the passions.”¹⁴ They generate a “state of detachment (*ἀπάθεια*) which is removed from all evil.”¹⁵ In addition, virtues lead to what St Maximus calls “pure prayer.”¹⁶ This means that the disciples of the active life pray to God without distractions knowing that they have arrived at God’s presence.¹⁷ This is possible since virtues as such go back to scriptural commands in which “the Father is mystically present.”¹⁸ Their practice leads to “participation” in the divine life and to the reception of the “mystical possession of the Holy Trinity.”¹⁹

The practice of contemplation adds to the practice of virtues a cognitive dimension.²⁰ St Maximus writes:

Love and self-mastery [i.e. practice of virtues] free the soul from passions; reading and contemplation free the mind from ignorance, and the state of prayer places it with God himself.²¹

¹¹ *Cap. Car.* 2:57, transl. Palmer, Sherrard and Ware.

¹² *Cap. Car.* 2:57.

¹³ *Cap. Car.* 2:8 and 1:94.

¹⁴ *Cap. Car.* 3:44–45.

¹⁵ *Cap. Car.* 1:53.

¹⁶ *Cap. Car.* 2:8. See also *Cap. Theol.* (= *The Gnostic Centuries*) 2: 58. The complete *Cap. Theol.*: PG 90. 1083 – 1176.

¹⁷ *Cap. Car.* 2:8. See also *Cap. Theol.* 2: 58.

¹⁸ *Cap. Theol.* 2:71.

¹⁹ *Cap. Theol.* 2:69, 71.

²⁰ *Cap. Car.* 4:86.

²¹ *Cap. Car.* 4:86, transl. Palmer, Sherrard and Ware.

This knowledge comes in two stages as there also exists two main categories of contemplation: of visible and invisible “realities.”²² The first is a reference to how the Spirit helps the disciples to comprehend the meaning of the Scriptures, the Church’s commemoration of the mystery of salvation and the creation as they present themselves to the senses.²³ I will deal with this theme in the next section of this account in more detail.

To contemplate invisible realities the disciples must let go of their natural mental activities.²⁴ This does not mean that they can let go of practicing the virtues, but that they must cease from approaching the Word through the ordinary “bodily” sense of words.²⁵ This is a reference to how the disciples need to allow the Spirit to help them in making their minds so pure and naked from all forms that it can see the “pure Word as he exists in himself” and experience how this Word “clearly shows the Father in himself, as far as it is possible for men to grasp.”²⁶

This is ultimately a reference to knowing God’s Trinitarian life to the extent such knowledge is possible in this life.²⁷ In addition, this second contemplative state corresponds to how St Maximus claims that there exists a second state of pure prayer which is accessible only through contemplation.²⁸ This state is crucial since it helps the disciples to acquire love even more than virtues do.²⁹ This in turn is crucial since love is ultimately the power that raises them to deification.³⁰ It is also ultimately the power which enables the disciples to unite the five divisions of creation in their own being.³¹ I will return to this theme too later in this account.

St Maximus also refers pure contemplative prayer to God’s divine light. In this state this light has taken such a hold of the disciples’ mind that it is no longer conscious of anything else but God and “receives impressions of him which are clear and distinct.”³² The disciples have willingly, i.e. because of

²² *Cap. Car.* 1:86, 97–98. Thunberg: *Mediator*, 349–352. See also St Maximus 10th *Ambigua*, (i.e. difficulty) ch. 19 for how he divides the contemplation of visible realities in five subcategories. Andrew Louth: *Maximus the Confessor*, 112–115.

²³ *Myst.* (= *The Mystagogia*) 23: *PG* 91. 697 C – 701 C. The complete *Myst.*: *PG* 91. 657 – 718. Thunberg: *Mediator*, 349–352. See also St Maximus 10th *Ambigua* (i.e. difficulty) ch. 20–51 for how he exemplifies scriptural contemplation. Andrew Louth: *Maximus the Confessor*, 115–154.

²⁴ *Cap. Theol.* 2:73–74.

²⁵ *Cap. Theol.* 2:74.

²⁶ *Cap. Theol.* 2:73. *Myst.* 23: *PG* 91. 700 C – 701 C.

²⁷ *Myst.* 23: *PG* 91. 700 C – 701 C. *Cap. Car.* 1:86, 97–98. Thunberg: *Mediator*, 348.

²⁸ *Cap. Car.* 2:6. Thunberg: *Mediator*, 366–368.

²⁹ *Cap. Car.* 1:11.

³⁰ See how Norman Russell quotes and comments upon St Maximus *Ep. 2.* (= St Maximus’ letter to John the Cubicularius): *PG* 91. 393 B in Russell: *Deification*, 265. See Andrew Louth: *Maximus the Confessor*, 84–93 for this letter in translation.

³¹ *Amb. Io.* 41: *PG* 91. 1304 D – 1308 B. Andrew Louth: *Maximus the Confessor*, 156–158.

³² *Cap. Car.* 2:6.

love, passed out from their own active capacities and from themselves into being deified in and by God.³³ They have arrived at the state of contemplating the Triune God himself, i.e. at *theologia*.³⁴

St Maximus' Doctrine of the Logoi

St Maximus suggests that the creation is in itself an incarnation i.e. the first turning of Logos into *materia* and as such something good.³⁵ This means in relation to Adam that he was created in God's image in that his being was by nature like that of God and that he was created in his likeness in that he had received by grace a measure of divine goodness and wisdom.³⁶ Together these properties had sufficed to help Adam to accomplish the task of deification, but he lost the likeness because of sin.³⁷

Creation according to Logos means also that the nature of everything in creation, including Adam himself, contains and in a certain sense is a little logos that connects it to the great Logos and to its plans and purposes, i.e. to the above-mentioned unification and deification of the whole cosmos. Because of his likeness Adam was originally able to read these *logoi* and, so to say, "do" deification. In explaining St Maximus refers to how St Paul claims in Rom. 1:20 that visible things allow one to perceive "invisible realities from the creation of the world" and he claims that³⁸

the whole spiritual world (*ὁ νοητὸς κόσμος*) seems mystically imprinted on the whole sensible world in symbolic forms (*συμβολικαῖς εἶδεσι*), for those who are capable of seeing this, and conversely the whole sensible world is spiritually explained in the mind (*γνωστικῶς*) in the principles (*λόγοι*) which it contains.³⁹

After the fall God initiated a second and even a related third incarnation to mend Adam's ability to read the *logoi* and act according to them. To St

³³ Thunberg: *Mediator*, 366–368, 422–425. See especially how Thunberg interprets St Maximus expression *ἐκχώρησις γνωμική* on p. 424.

³⁴ The term *theologia* goes back to St Evagrius whom St Maximus creatively interprets when teaching on spiritual exercises. For a short account of how the ascetic doctrine of St Evagrius relates to that of St Maximus, see Andrew Louth: *Maximus the Confessor*, 35ff.

³⁵ Thunberg: *Mediator*, 77–79.

³⁶ *Cap. Car.* 3:25.

³⁷ Thunberg: *Mediator*, 121 (113–132).

³⁸ *Myst. 2: PG* 91. 669.

³⁹ *Myst. 2: PG* 91. 669. Trans. Berthold. Ὅλος γὰρ ὁ νοητὸς κόσμος ὄλω τῷ αἰσθητῷ μυστικῶς τοῖς συμβολικαῖς εἶδεσι τυπούμενος φαίνεται τοῖς ὄραν δυναμένοις· καὶ ὅλος ὄλω τῷ νοητῷ ὁ αἰσθητὸς γνωστικῶς κατὰ νοῦν τοῖς λόγοις ἀπλουμένους ἐννύαρχων ἐστίν.

Maximus this is a reference both to Christ's incarnation as Jesus son of Mary and to the concrete sounds and letters of the Scriptures.⁴⁰ This means in terms of what we have already said that God not only sent his Son to restore Adam's lost likeness to God and ability to read the *logoi* of the creation, but he also gave him access to a set of written *logoi* to support this very restoration.⁴¹

This corresponds to how the saint claims that "no logos of that which transcends nature lies within nature."⁴² This means in other words that although the creational *logoi* point toward deification they cannot as such accomplish it. At the same time this also corresponds to how the saint identifies three categories of *logoi* which "pre-exist" in God and which condition the disciples' process of deification.⁴³ These are the logos of "being, well-being and eternal being (*εἶναι – εὖ εἶναι – ἀεὶ εἶναι*)."⁴⁴ The first of these relates to the disciples' natural birth and is in terms of the above a reference to their basic creational participation in God's being as divine image. This participation means that they are as such able to "move to the second state of well-being."⁴⁵

This second state relates in its turn to the disciples' birth in baptism and refers as such to Christ and the Scriptures. It re-establishes in them Adam's lost participation in divine "goodness and wisdom."⁴⁶ As a consequence the disciples are now able to develop divine likeness by choosing the life of virtues and contemplation. They are now in the position of becoming deified by the divine *energeiai* and participating in the state of eternal being as much as they can in this life.⁴⁷ This state in turn relates as such to the resurrection as the disciples' birth into life beyond this one.⁴⁸

Although this scheme suggests that the disciples' creational *logoi* relate harmoniously to the deifying *logoi*, St Maximus claims nevertheless that their participation in the latter presupposes their minds' becoming empty, formless and passive. First of all this is a reference to the forms of passions which disappear from the disciples' minds all the while the practice of virtue "plugs out self-love" and "all forms of virtue" come to be introduced.⁴⁹ This

⁴⁰ Thunberg: *Mediator*, 77–78.

⁴¹ Thunberg: *Mediator*, 77–79.

⁴² *Opusc.* (= St Maximus' works on Christological themes), I: PG 91. 33 A – 36 A. Trans. Russell. Quoted in Russell: *Deification*, 276.

⁴³ *Amb. Io. 7: PG 91. 1084.* Trans. Russell. Quoted in Russell: *Deification*, 275. See also Lossky: *Mystical*, 154.

⁴⁴ *Amb. Io. 7: PG 91. 1084.* Trans. Russell. Quoted in Russell: *Deification*, 275. See also Lossky: *Mystical*, 154.

⁴⁵ Thunberg: *Mediator*, 370 (368–373). Lossky: *Mystical*, 154.

⁴⁶ Thunberg: *Mediator*, 371.

⁴⁷ Thunberg: *Mediator*, 371–373.

⁴⁸ Thunberg: *Mediator*, 372.

⁴⁹ EP 2:397 D – 400A. Trans. Louth. *Cap.Car.* 3:44 (2:8, 1:94).

is also a reference to how “spiritual contemplation of visible realities [...] puts off impassionate thoughts of things.”⁵⁰

Another reference is to how “the power of love” consequently accumulates, drawing the disciples toward that “singleness and sameness” which characterizes “the one logos of being,” i.e. Christ, and to how this power makes them let go of everything that is present to them in a way that separates them from him and from their neighbor.⁵¹ This amounts to saying in terms of knowing God that in the final end the disciples must let go of the contemplation of invisible realities, i.e. the *logoi*, and this amounts to saying that they cannot let go of loving their neighbor.⁵² This corresponds in its turn to how St Maximus defines the state of dispassion (*ἀπάθεια*) both as a union with neighbor through equal love for all and as detachment from whatever hinders the mind from uniting with God through love.⁵³

Even the demand of formlessness in the mind goes in a certain sense back the doctrine of the creation *ex nihilo*. This is to say, since God does not have “anything included in him,” i.e. since he is outside the creation and the creation is consequently not a part of him, it is also impossible to know him as he is in reality “through the category of the relative.”⁵⁴ In other words, since he transcends the categories of subject and object, every attempt of the mind to gain true knowledge of him by comparing him with created objects fails.⁵⁵ Ultimately this applies even to all the images of him in the Scriptures.⁵⁶

This means in turn that when St Maximus presents emptiness, passivity and formlessness in the mind as presuppositions for true knowledge of God and deification, he refers to what the disciples must do to pass on from preparatory modes of knowing God to the real thing. To get an idea of what this means we could, on the basis of the saint’s thought, compare the *logoi* of creation and even of the Scriptures to a kind of path which leads the disciples to a place of encounter with that living stream of words and thoughts which initiated and maintains everything and which now streams in to transform everyone who chooses to let go of forms less powerful than those the stream itself contains.

⁵⁰ *Cap. Car.* 1:94.

⁵¹ *Ep. 2.*: *PG* 91. 400 A – B and *Amb. Io.* 10. 1197 A – B. Trans. Louth. See especially what St Maximus says of dispassionate contemplation.

⁵² *Cap. Car.* 1:94.

⁵³ Thunberg: *Mediator*, 304–309.

⁵⁴ *Cap. Theol.* 1:68.

⁵⁵ *Cap. Theol.* 2.2.

⁵⁶ *Cap. Theol.* 2:39.

St Maximus on Will and Love

Above I referred the division between the created and uncreated to those five creational divisions which Adam was supposed to unite and reconcile in his person. I mentioned also that this was possible because he had the divine likeness and because his nature connects with and combines all ten extreme ends of these divisions, i.e. “created and uncreated, intelligible and sensible, heaven and earth, paradise and inhabited world, male and female” in itself.⁵⁷ In other words, he relates to the greater cosmos as a kind of micro-cosmos.⁵⁸

Above we indicated also that when the disciples unite with Christ, whom the Scriptures call the second Adam, they themselves began to participate in doing what the first Adam failed to do. When St Maximus discusses this topic he suggests that the five the creational divisions form in reverse order a kind of ladder which the disciples can use to “ascend to ever greater levels of unity.”⁵⁹ This means in practice that as they conform their sexuality to the virginity of the Logos they overcome the division between male and female in themselves and in their part of the creation.

Furthermore, since the disciples’ practice of virtues manifests paradise on earth it also unites the two. Similarly, their practice of contemplation in turn gives heaven a window toward earth. As a consequence, even the difference between the sensible and the intelligible no longer appears as a division. When these divisions have been overcome, nothing hinders love from uniting the created with the uncreated, which is what deification is all about.⁶⁰

Although this brief glance at this scheme may give the impression that love, so to say, appears at the very end when the disciples have put all their energy into overcoming the divisions, this is not the case. Fundamentally the same love that deifies them also draws them to make all the movement involved. It is this respect one can ascribe movement to God. Although he is as such immovable, “outside space and time” and in “absolute repose,” he nevertheless produces love in the created beings which consequently move toward him.⁶¹ This, according to St Maximus, is because he himself loves and desires to love and to be loved.⁶²

Although this claim may sound in turn as if St Maximus did not believe in individual freedom, the contrary applies. Love as such presupposes divine

⁵⁷ Lossky: *Mystical*, 108. I have followed Norman Russell’s terminology on the divisions. See Russell: *Deification*, 281. St Maximus discusses the themes creation and deification in *Ambiguum* 31 and 41. See also Thunberg: *Mediator*, 56–57.

⁵⁸ See Thunberg: *Mediator*, 132–143.

⁵⁹ Russell: *Deification*, 281.

⁶⁰ Thunberg: *Mediator*, 143. Russell: *Deification*, 281–282. Russell refers especially to St Maximus’ *Amb. Io.* 41. See also *Cap. Car.* 2:30.

⁶¹ Lossky: *Mystical*, 98. Lossky refers to *Amb. Io.*: PG 91. 1260 C.

⁶² Lossky: *Mystical*, 98.

otherness. The fact that God is truly other to the disciples marks them as truly other in relation to him. As such they can say no to God's plans and to his love and as such their yes to him really means something.⁶³ This amounts to saying that the union of uncreated and created natures i.e. deification presupposes freedom of will.

The way St Maximus discusses the freedom of the will relates also to his doctrine of *logoi*. They are the reason why the disciples' nature as such wants only what is good and right.⁶⁴ It wants deification. This is their "natural will" (*θέλημα φυσικόν*). At the same time the disciples also have a "choosing will" (*θέλημα γνωμικόν*). On one hand this second will is a mark of personhood. It marks them as possessing the divine image.⁶⁵ Yet in their current state it also marks them as "limited" and bereft of the divine likeness.⁶⁶ Lossky explains this aspect of St Maximus teaching by pointing that while "a perfect nature" would recognize and choose its own good automatically, a limited one obviously does not.⁶⁷

Fundamentally this problem has to do with passions. The saint explains that it arises when the mind pays "less attention" to nature than it does to passions and consequently falls under their "tyranny."⁶⁸ To free themselves from this tyranny the disciples need to "imitate" God by virtues and contemplation.⁶⁹ In this way they make their choosing will "a partner of nature."⁷⁰ This means that it becomes "identical" with the will of the great Logos himself "by a union of relation" (*δι' ἐνώσεως σχετικῆς*).⁷¹

Ultimately the reason why virtues and contemplation unite and deify the soul is that they reveal God. St Maximus claims that God is both the truth (*ἀλήθεια*) and the good (*ἀγαθός*).⁷² The first is a reference to the divine essence and the second to divine *energeiai* (*ἐνέργεια*).⁷³ Thus when the Spirit helps the disciples to contemplate God's essence and when he helps them to unite with his *energeiai* by practicing the virtues they will also develop "an inward relationship (*ἐνδιάθητος*) to the truth and the good, that is to God."⁷⁴

⁶³ Lossky: *Mystical*, 125.

⁶⁴ *Or. Dom.* (=Commentary on the Lord's Prayer): PG 90. 904 C (under "And Lead Us Not into..."). See also *Or. Dom.*: PG 90. 901 (under "Forgive Us Our Trespasses...").

⁶⁵ Lossky: *Mystical*, 125. Lossky refers to St Maximus' *Opusc.*: PG 19. 48 A – 49 A.

⁶⁶ I quote Lossky's rendering of St Maximus' thought. Lossky: *Mystical*, 125.

⁶⁷ I quote Lossky's rendering of St Maximus' thought. Lossky: *Mystical*, 125. See Thunberg: *Mediator*, 211–213.

⁶⁸ *Or. Dom.*: PG 90. 905 A (under "And Lead Us Not into...").

⁶⁹ *Myst. 24.*: PG 91. 713 A – B.

⁷⁰ *Or. Dom.*: PG 90. 905 A – B (under "And Lead Us Not into...")

⁷¹ *Or. Dom.*: PG 90. 900 A (under "Give Us This Day..."). Trans. Berthold, modified.

⁷² *Myst. 5.*: PG 91. 673 C.

⁷³ *Myst. 5.*: PG 91. 673 D.

⁷⁴ *Myst. 5.*: PG 91. 680 B.

This inward relationship means that the disciples participate in God's nature without however uniting with him essentially.⁷⁵ To St Maximus this represents a wholly new mode (*τρόπος*) of being. To explain it he refers to how the Virgin became a mother in a way which transcended the nature's capacities and to how the Son is both God and man simultaneously.⁷⁶ And he points out how iron when penetrated by fire still remains iron by nature and how a sword when penetrated by fire retains its capacity to cut while shining like fire.⁷⁷

More specifically, he explains this relationship and union in terms of the mutual interpenetration (*περιχώρησις εἰς ἀλλήλας*) of the disciples' natural *energeia* and the divine *energeia* without confusing the two.⁷⁸ And he claims that this new mode allows for mutual exchange of created and uncreated qualities (*ἀντίδοσις ἰδιωμάτων* i.e. *communicatio idiomatum*) without however confusing the created *logos* with the uncreated one.⁷⁹ The natures unite while at the same time remaining "unchanged" in their own being.⁸⁰

One of the consequences of this union is that it opens the secrets of *theologia* to the disciples. Through their participation in the divine *energeiai* they are now able to contemplate the Trinity, which, in the light of what we have already said, amounts to saying that they have reached the state of pure prayer. In this state they also see all things through their unity with the one with whom they have become united and they see something of the "expected universal consummation" of the divine plan.⁸¹ As a consequence they also see themselves as more united to each other than to themselves.⁸²

St Maximus suggests in a rare reference to individual experiences and emotions that when this kind of love and knowledge join one has come to a "lasting experience of God" and to a share in his "full happiness."⁸³ At the same time he also claims whatever one has in this age of the Spirit is nevertheless only "in part."⁸⁴ This applies even if one has already reached perfection "in action and in contemplation."⁸⁵

⁷⁵ See Lossky: *Mystical*, 87, where Lossky interprets St Maximus in this fashion.

⁷⁶ This is the theme of *Amb. Io.* 5.

⁷⁷ *Amb. Io.* 5.1060A. Lossky: *Mystical*, 146. Lossky refers for example to St Maximus' "Disputatio cum Pyrrho:" *PG* 91. 337C. Patristic authors use this picture habitually.

⁷⁸ Larchet, Jean-Claude: *La divinization de l'homme selon saint Maxime le Confesseur*, 336 (333–346). See also Thunberg: *Mediator*, 21–36.

⁷⁹ Larchet, Jean-Claude: *La divinization de l'homme selon saint Maxime le Confesseur*, 333 (333–346). See also Thunberg: *Mediator*, 21–36.

⁸⁰ *Amb. Io.* 5: *PG* 91. 1060A.

⁸¹ *Myst.* 7: *PG* 91. 685 B – C.

⁸² *Myst.* 7: *PG* 91. 685 A – C.

⁸³ *Myst.* 5: *PG* 91. 680 C.

⁸⁴ *Cap. Theol.* 2:87.

⁸⁵ *Cap. Theol.* 2:87.

We shall return to discuss this vision of deification after the following two chapters that present and summarize St Symeon's and St John's versions of the same.

10. UNION WITH GOD

St Symeon claims that it is difficult to speak of how God divinizes the disciples. This is the whole issue concerns experiencing God. What is clear, however, is that the disciples become deified when they receive a full revelation of God's divine light which gathers them completely to itself.

Vision of the Divine Light

St Symeon often uses the term light ($\phi\omega\varsigma$) when describing God and the disciples' vision of him. According to him "God is light" and "the Father is light, the Son is light, and the Spirit is light."¹ Similarly "the vision ($\theta\acute{\epsilon}\alpha$)" of God is "as light" and everything that "is from" God is light.² The latter is a reference to things such as faith, grace, God's activities ($\acute{\epsilon}\nu\acute{\epsilon}\rho\gamma\epsilon\iota\alpha$), love, life, the saints' clothes, and the bread and the cup of the Eucharist etc.³ Thus there is no knowing God apart from knowing the divine light.⁴ To explain, he refers to the fact that even in natural reality only eyewitnesses of "visible and earthly things" are able to account for them in a trustworthy manner.⁵

The disciples' vision of the divine light is contemplative (as relating to $\theta\epsilon\omega\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$) and intelligible (as relating to $\nu\omicron\upsilon\delta\varsigma$) and it has to do with how the disciples receive the Eucharist.⁶ It is in these senses that St Symeon quotes Gregory of Nazianzus saying "what sun is to sensible things, so God is to things intelligible" and speaks of Christ revealing himself to the disciples as "a breast of light, placed in the mouth of their mind ($\nu\omicron\upsilon\delta\varsigma$) to suckle them."⁷

When the disciples are still beginners their mind sees the divine light "as if in a mirror."⁸ This partial vision is enough to make them "frightened" as

¹ ETH 5:276. THEOL 3:141–142. HYMN 33:1.

² ETH 5:276. THEOL 3:143–144.

³ THEOL 3:133–157. See also ETH 5:251–286.

⁴ ETH 5:240–250, 255–257. See also ETH 14:211–293 on the theme of the Eucharist and the divine light.

⁵ ETH 5:240–241 (240–250). See also CAT 22 for how St Symeon describes one of his own visions of the divine light.

⁶ ETH 14:211–293. ETH 3:525–553.

⁷ ETH 10:689–690. Darrouzès refers the quote to *Or.* 14. 8: *PG* 36. 69 A. ETH 4:271–273.

⁸ CAP 2:16.

they “realize that it is impossible to grasp or see what they see.”⁹ This vision also helps them to advance spiritually and, as they do so, to “receive an understanding of their own ignorance.”¹⁰ Finally, when this light “sees fit” to reveal itself fully and unite itself with the disciples, it gathers them completely to itself.¹¹ As a consequence, their mind becomes “motionless,” “empty” and “simple.”¹² It is now in “stillness of blessedness beyond all sensation” and “lives a life beyond life” while being “light within light, though not a light to itself.”¹³

St Symeon also describes this same process from a more tangibly experiential perspective. He claims that as beginners the disciples often experience the vision of the divine light after repenting “fervently.” Yet while they are in this stage this kind of revelation also disappears “immediately,” leaving behind so immense a longing that they become prepared to do whatever it takes to “share in the light as a lamp does.”¹⁴ This longing has to do with how the light generates “an immense joy, a sweetness surpassing the savor of any visible thing” in them.¹⁵ This joy is so strong that it may even cause them to forget “all the thoughts of this life” for a time.¹⁶ In addition, it generates such a strong “love” (*ἀγάπη*) and “desire” (*πόθος*) that the disciples cannot but let their tears flow “like streams.”¹⁷ This is especially when the light continues to appear and to disappear, making them fully aware of their own lack of virtue.¹⁸ In other words, the light generates compunction.

This means also that the transformation of the light concerns their whole person.¹⁹ It is in this sense that St Symeon asserts that the light “introduces” little by little into the disciples’ “heart an inexpressible activity (*ἐνέργεια*)” and “illuminations” (*ἐλλαμψις*) which “occur” in them causing Christ to take form in their souls and in their bodies.²⁰ This is like when a woman becomes pregnant and begins to cognize clearly how the baby moves in her.²¹

The activity of the light is also a reference to the disciples’ acquisition of virtues. This does not mean that the virtues themselves and the disciples’

⁹ CAP 2:16.

¹⁰ CAP 2:16.

¹¹ CAP 2:16.

¹² CAP 2:17–18.

¹³ CAP 2:18–19.

¹⁴ ETH 10:528 (526–532). The expression “share in the light as a lamp does” is from HYMN 33:131–132.

¹⁵ CAT 16:100–102.

¹⁶ CAT 16:102–103.

¹⁷ ETH 5:298–301, 308 (287–316).

¹⁸ EUCH 1:164–189. HYMN 23:394–414.

¹⁹ CAT 15:68–77. ETH 1.3:79–147.

²⁰ CAP 2:15. See also ETH 5:240–286 and CAT 14:94–107.

²¹ ETH 10:879–885 (868–926).

virtuous actions can be compared with, or are, the light. Rather, their role is to help the disciples to unite with the light.²² To explain, St Symeon compares the virtues to “a single candle” which “the soul projects toward the unapproachable light” hoping for it to catch fire.²³ When this takes place even the virtues themselves change character. Having become “melded with the light,” they also turn into it.²⁴ As a consequence, the disciples become illumined as if from within.²⁵ This can even take place in a sudden “wondrous transformation” (*ἄθροα μεταβολή*), the second baptism through which they become “as light in the light” (*ὡς ἐν φωτὶ φῶς*).²⁶ Through such an illumination even others become blessed.²⁷

Dispassion

St Symeon also claims that the disciples become like God and unite with him “in imitating” (*μιμέομαι*) Christ’s sufferings and “in imitating” (*μιμέομαι*) God’s works exactly.²⁸ This is naturally a reference to the disciples’ acts of repentance, their practice of the commandments and their obedience to their spiritual fathers.²⁹ The latter especially is a key to reaching freedom from the passions, or rather to allowing God to share his own dispassion (*ἀπάθεια*) with them and thus to deify them.³⁰

To St Symeon the fact that God is dispassionate means simply he is “not passionately inclined toward visible things.”³¹ This has to do with him being “uncreated,” “immovable,” “bodiless,” “simple,” “immaterial,” “without limit,” “incomprehensible,” “without a beginning,” “immortal,” “invisible,” “incorruptible,” “indestructible,” etc.³² At the same time the fact that God differs from the creation does not mean that he is not active in it or that he does not love it. To explain the issue, St Symeon claims for example that

²² HYMN 33:58–147.

²³ HYMN 33:130–133.

²⁴ HYMN 33:138–140.

²⁵ HYMN 33:140–147.

²⁶ HYMN 8:67 (41–101) read in the light of ETH 10:441–447.

²⁷ HYMN 33:140–147.

²⁸ HYMN 44:121–122 and HYMN 36:9, 12, 60. See also HYMN 5:15, HYMN 50:247–249, 327, CAT 6:300–700 and (CAT 26 (eller 7):268–checka detta)

²⁹ ETH 4:156–159 (65–191).

³⁰ This is the point in ETH 6:179–257.

³¹ ETH 6:192–193.

³² HYMN 31:64 “uncreated” (*ἄκτιστος*), HYMN 31:82 “immovable” (*ἀκίνητος*), HYMN 31:89–91 “bodiless” (*ἄσώματος*), “simple” (*ἄπλῶς*), “immaterial” (*ἄυλος*), “without limit” (*ἄπεριγραπτος*), “incomprehensible” (*ἄληπτος*), HYMN 31:115–116 “without a beginning” (*ἄναρχος*), “immortal” (*ἀθάνατος*), “invisible” (*ἀόρατος*), HYMN 34:3 “incorruptible” (*ἀφθαρτος*), HYMN 34:53 “indestructible” (*ἀνώλεθρος*). See also Hymn 22.

although God is “immovable” in himself he also possesses “unending movement” or “action” (*ἐργασία*) and is therefore “always in movement” in his “activities” (*ἐνεργεῖα*).³³ This term refers to everything that God does through the Spirit and the Son in the creation and through the disciples.³⁴

By analogy even the disciples’ dispassion is not merely freedom from passions, but also a high point of virtuous activity. The dispassionate disciples are uniquely qualified to do all kinds of good works among all people, bear their burdens and give spiritual leadership.³⁵ This is because they have become “joined and mingled wholly with love” and “participants of God and his charismata.”³⁶ The latter is a reference to the kind of spiritual gifts which we have already mentioned in the chapter “Faith, Charisms and the Eucharist,” for example the ability to teach, to discern other persons’ spiritual states and to conduct exorcisms.³⁷ Likewise it is also a reference to the disciples’ complete victory over their invisible enemies, i.e. the demons, and also to the effectiveness of their prayers.³⁸

These disciples are also uniquely humble. Many speak humbly, but the dispassionate even think humble thoughts.³⁹ Many do not allow “insults,” “temptations” and “trials” to destroy their peace, but the dispassionate are actually “pleased by” such things.⁴⁰ Many pray for their enemies, but only the dispassionate cherish the faces of their enemies in their prayers and “embrace them dispassionately (*ἀπαθῶς*) with tears of sincere love.”⁴¹

In the state they have attained the dispassionate disciples also find it easy to contemplate God. This is because their hearts have already become pure. Yet this does not mean that there is no development in this state. Rather, St Symeon applies the words of Jesus from Matt 25:29: “to everyone who has will more be given” to dispassion, suggesting that the disciples who possess it also grow by it continuously.⁴² Their stature is “complete yet incomplete.”⁴³ In fact, even the saints differ from each other with regard to their degree of dispassion.⁴⁴

³³ HYMN 31:75–76.

³⁴ HYMN 31:77–79. See also HYMN 29:157–170.

³⁵ ETH 4:447–484.

³⁶ ETH 4:700–701 (684–701). EP 1.15 p. 126 line 10 (check this).

³⁷ EP 1.15. ETH 4:662–665. See also EP 4:387–389.

³⁸ ETH 4:130–133, 764–788. In EP 1 and elsewhere St Symeon describes the dispassionate spiritual father as a mighty intercessor.

³⁹ ETH 4:85–88.

⁴⁰ ETH 4:97–99.

⁴¹ ETH 4:99–104. See also ETH 4:114–119.

⁴² ETH 4:18–21.

⁴³ ETH 4:616–620.

⁴⁴ ETH 4:61–64.

Union with God

According to St Symeon “the sweet love of God” dominates the dispassionate disciples’ will (*θελήματος*) completely.⁴⁵ They are wholly “joined (*συνάγω*) and mingled (*συγκρατέω*) with love” and have the mind (*νοῦς*) of Christ.⁴⁶ As a consequence they testify together with the apostle Paul (Gal 2:29): “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”⁴⁷ Indeed, they are “gods by adoption (*θέσει θεοί*)” and resemble “the Son of God.”⁴⁸ In the same way as Christ is completely one with the Father and the Spirit, the disciples in this state are also one.⁴⁹

The latter unity may express itself as visionary Trinitarian contemplation. By the divine light the disciples may behold “the one by (*δία*) whom, the one in (*ἐν*) whom, and the one to (*εἰς*) whom.”⁵⁰ In this vision the Spirit now presents himself to them as the one “by whom and in whom is the Son.”⁵¹ The Son in turn presents himself as the one “to whom is the Father.”⁵² And the Father in his turn asks the disciples to “behold” and “see” while the Son declares that he is also “in the Father” and the Spirit says that he is the one who makes the disciples see “beyond what is seen.”⁵³ This means that they somehow may now behold the Father’s “unique oneness” and his essence which “transcends essence and nature.”⁵⁴ In addition, the Father now makes them aware that he is “inseparable and indivisible in every way” and that he preserves this oneness and unity “even in the persons” (*ὑπόστασις*).⁵⁵ And he tells them that although he has become as if “circumscribed (*περιγραπτός*) and in a place” in the Son and through the disciples’ union with the Son, he nevertheless remains “uncircumscribed” and “formless” and fills all things while at the same time being “nowhere at all.”⁵⁶

This visionary description is comparable with one of St Symeon’s more precise Trinitarian statements:

If there is a need to state anything more precisely, that which the One is, the other two are as well. For the Three are in the same and are thought of as one essence and nature and Kingship. If a name is attributed to One, it is by nature applied to others, with the exception of the terms *Father*, *Son* and

⁴⁵ CAT 25:117–119 (109–121).

⁴⁶ ETH 4:599–600 (515–661). ETH 4: 515–661.

⁴⁷ ETH 4:608–609.

⁴⁸ ETH 4:586–588.

⁴⁹ HYMN 30:150–173.

⁵⁰ ETH 8:103 (99–123).

⁵¹ ETH 8:105.

⁵² ETH 8:105–106.

⁵³ ETH 8:106–111.

⁵⁴ ETH 8:111–114.

⁵⁵ ETH 8:114–115.

⁵⁶ ETH 8:115–123.

Holy Spirit, or the terms *beget*, *begotten* and *proceeding*, for these alone indisputably apply to the Holy Trinity by nature and in distinctive fashion. As for interchange of names, or their reversal, or their change, that we are forbidden to think or speak about. These terms characterize the three Persons, so that in this way we cannot place the Son before the Father not the Holy Ghost before the Son. We must speak of them together as “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” without the slightest difference of duration or time between them. The Son is begotten and the Spirit proceeds simultaneously with the Father’s existence.⁵⁷

Furthermore St Symeon compares God to a fire which “mingles” (*μίγνυμι*) its own essence (*οὐσία*) with that of the disciples’ soul and “unites (*ἔννυμι*)” with them “unspeakably” and states concurrently that this fire does not “merge” with them.⁵⁸ This corresponds to his assertion that God has united himself “essentially” (*οὐσιωδῶς*) with the disciples already in their baptism and to his simultaneous claim that God who dwells in them in this way is himself “superessential” (*ὑπερούσιος*).⁵⁹ The latter seems to correspond in turn to his declaration that it is “is absolutely necessary to believe to be orthodox” that the disciples’ union with God is not “by essence” (*οὐσία*).⁶⁰

To explain further the character of the disciples’ union, he claims that it is not a mere “word” or an “appearance” or an “idea.”⁶¹ Rather it is “an experience” (*πειρα*), “a reality” (*πράγμα*) and “a contemplation” (*θεωρία*) to which the disciples attain by grace and by their “participation” in (*μετουσία*) and “sharing” of (*κοινωνία*) God.⁶² This means also that the union is simultaneously “sensible” (*αἰσθητός*) and “intelligible” (*νοερός*).⁶³ In it the “immaterial Essence” first penetrates the disciples “entire” souls and later even their bodies until both become equally “resplendent.”⁶⁴ In it God “becomes for the body” what he has already “become for the soul.”⁶⁵ Both become altogether “divinized” (*τεθεωμένος*).⁶⁶ In this state the disciples remain men “by nature” (*φύσει*) while having become simultaneously gods

⁵⁷ CAT 33:176–192. Translation slightly modified.

⁵⁸ HYMN 30:155–158.

⁵⁹ HYMN 29:170 (157–170). See also HYMN 30:456–486.

⁶⁰ HYMN 50: 200–203 (177–202).

⁶¹ HYMN 50:232.

⁶² HYMN 50:200–201, 234.

⁶³ HYMN 30:460–461.

⁶⁴ HYMN 50:240–244.

⁶⁵ ETH 6:133–134. According to Darrouzès St Symeon refers to Gregory of Nazianzus’ *Or.* 2. 17: PG 35. 428 A.

⁶⁶ HYMN 30:467–471.

“by participation” (*μεθέξει*) and “by grace.”⁶⁷ As Christ, they are now simultaneously one and yet “double.”⁶⁸

The Disciples in Union with God

St Symeon asserts that it is very difficult to speak of how God unites himself to the disciples divinizing them or of the union itself. This is because the whole issue concerns “experiencing God.”⁶⁹ One aspect of this experience is a certain unknowing. To explain, he points out that when the divine light “sees fit” to reveal itself fully to the disciples and to allow them to participate in it, then it also “gathers” them “completely into itself.”⁷⁰ As a consequence their mind (*νοῦς*) becomes as simple and pure as the light itself is.⁷¹ In this state the disciples feel as if being “dropped into a bottomless abyss of illuminated waters”⁷² Their mind becomes “stripped of all conceptions” (*ἐννοια*) and it transcends “all knowledge” and rises “ineffably into perfect unknowing” (*ἀγνωσία*).⁷³ It has become a “light within light” and finds no other object than God to focus on.⁷⁴ It now sees God “invisibly” and “comprehends” him “incomprehensibly” in a “form (*μορφή*) without form (*ἄμορφος*)” and in a “shape (*ἰδέα*) without shape (*ἀνιδέα*).”⁷⁵ This seeing also lets the disciples see the rest of reality from God’s point of view. By it they contemplate “all things.”⁷⁶ They see themselves, “all men and all reality” and at the same time see “nothing of” them.⁷⁷

This duality of seeing corresponds to St Symeon’s claim that the disciples in this state are “being held between incorruptible and corruptible things” and to his claim that their mind is now “motionless” and yet “in motion.”⁷⁸ This state as such makes them utterly aware of their continuous creaturely state.⁷⁹ They recognize that is impossible for them to become God by nature, to completely comprehend his “existence” (*ὑπαρξις*) and even to see him.⁸⁰ At the same time they marvel at what God has accomplished with them. St

⁶⁷ HYMN 30:457–458, 484. ETH 4:588.

⁶⁸ HYMN 30:450–453 (450–487).

⁶⁹ HYMN 29:287–293.

⁷⁰ CAP 2:16 (lines 17–21).

⁷¹ CAP 2:17 and HYMN 40:6–18.

⁷² CAP 2:16 (line 22).

⁷³ CAP 2:16 (lines 23–24). CAP 2:17 (line 25). CAP 2:18 (lines 2–3).

⁷⁴ CAP 2:18:12. CAP 2:17:27–28.

⁷⁵ ETH 10:888–889.

⁷⁶ CAP 1:51.

⁷⁷ CAP 1:52.

⁷⁸ HYMN 38:91 and CAP 2:18 (lines 3–4).

⁷⁹ HYMN 38:85–105.

⁸⁰ HYMN 31:31 (1–44). HYMN 20:1–31. See also HYMN 42:1–9.

Symeon describes for example that when they now see themselves “adorned with ineffable glory, with a divine robe of shining splendor” they even become shocked to the point of seeking deliverance from “the great weight of their glory.”⁸¹ In addition, they even recognize every part of their bodies, even the seemingly more shameful ones, as belonging to Christ and divine. God who is “indivisible in His divinity” is completely present in them.⁸² This recognition fills them with awe.⁸³

In addition, the disciples have a reason to marvel at their own happiness. Since the good master gives himself to his “true servants” completely, he also fills “their every desire and longing, as much as they want and beyond.”⁸⁴ Their lives with God, their “converse” with him and their “contemplation of those good things that flow out of him” generate “joy and festivity” that far exceeds everything “which is supposed to be good in the present life.”⁸⁵ In this joy there is no room for fear in the same way as there is no room for fear in love. This is because “full joy” is actually love in that love exists in and expresses itself as joy.⁸⁶ And love is really the Spirit Himself.⁸⁷

St Symeon declares that the disciples in this state experience their participation in the Eucharist and the Church’s celebrations as a lifelong “feast” and “Pascha.”⁸⁸ They have entered into “the passage and emigration from what is seen to what is sensed by the intellect (*τά νοούμενα*), to that place where every shadow and type, and all the present symbols, come to an end.”⁸⁹ Being pure, they will now

rejoice eternally in the most pure sacrifice, in God the Father and the co-essential Spirit, always seeing Christ and be seen by Him, ever being with Christ, reigning with Christ, than Whom nothing is greater in the kingdom of God, and to Whom is due all glory, honor and worship, together with the Father and His all-Holy and life-creating Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages without end. Amen.⁹⁰

Before concluding this part of the study we will at first take a look on St John’s vision of the disciples’ union with God.

⁸¹ ETH 4:264–269.

⁸² HYMN 15:145 (125–264).

⁸³ Such awe is the theme of the HYMN 15.

⁸⁴ ETH 4: 254–256.

⁸⁵ ETH 8:142–149.

⁸⁶ HYMN 17:207–211 (194–217).

⁸⁷ HYMN 17:236.

⁸⁸ ETH 14:282–283 (281–293).

⁸⁹ ETH 14:283–285.

⁹⁰ ETH 14:286–293.

11. SPIRITUAL MARRIAGE

When the purification of St John's disciples is complete, their natural light so unites with the divine light that only the supernatural light is shining. This is their spiritual marriage, their union with God and their deification.

Passive Night of the Spirit, Spiritual Betrothal and Marriage

As we have already seen, the passive night of the spirit continues until the disciples' spirit has become "humbled, softened, and purified" and "so delicate, simple, and refined that it can be one with the Spirit of God."¹ St John suggests that this union of spirits arrives in two stages. The first is spiritual betrothal (*desposorio*) and the second spiritual marriage (*matrimonio*).²

The betrothal takes place when God first places the soul in the state of union, communicating to her

great things about himself, beautifies her with grandeur and majesty, adorns her with gifts and virtues, and clothes her with the knowledge and honor of God, as the betrothed is clothed on the day of her betrothal.³

As a result, the disciples enter into a state of "peace and delight and gentleness of love."⁴ Yet since they cannot immediately rid themselves of every sensual inclination and bring all the soul's "energies into subjection," the peace they now experience relates only to *la parte superior*, the soul's outer realm.⁵ In other words, their union with God is not as deep and complete as it is in the state of spiritual marriage.

¹ 2N 7:3.

² St John's poem, *Cántico Espiritual* (The Spiritual Canticle), describes the process of advancing from the state of betrothal to the state of spiritual marriage.

³ C 14 & 15:2.

⁴ C 14 & 15:2. See also C 18:1.

⁵ C 14 & 15:30.

Hence there still is a measure of suffering in the disciples' lives.⁶ To explain, St John uses the kind of expressions he used when describing their sufferings in the last stages of the passive night of the spirit. He says for example that their remaining imperfections still expose them to a degree to the devil. In addition, God himself still departs from them from time to time.⁷ Indeed, their "presence in the body makes" them "feel like a noble lord held in prison."⁸ As such they are still "subject to a thousand miseries."⁹ This is especially since they have already tasted their coming spiritual riches, yet without being able to enjoy them fully.¹⁰ Indeed, they cannot reach full satisfaction "until God's glory appears."¹¹

St John also points out that to attract the divine glory the disciples should imitate Mary the sister of Martha, who unlike the latter remained still in the Lord's presence "doing nothing" according to Luke 10:39-41.¹² To him this story shows that while it previously was necessary for the disciples to "practice love in both the active and contemplative life," they should now devote themselves solely to the solitary and interior exercise of love in God and "attentiveness" (*asistencia*) to him.¹³

In support of this St John claims that love is the very purpose of the disciples' lives.¹⁴ It is in itself the greatest and most "necessary" of all works.¹⁵ It applies in fact that if those people "who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works" and who do not even know high forms of prayer would use a half of their active time praying according to their ability, however low, would in fact achieve much more with "less labor" than ever before.¹⁶ Applied this means that the disciples in the state of betrothal should not hesitate to withdraw totally from all exterior activities, and to become for a time as if "lost" to everything apart from their interior life in God.¹⁷

The purpose of their withdrawal is to make their final "transformation of love" possible.¹⁸ Through this transformation they will become wholly dead to themselves and alive to God in way which ends their sufferings and makes

⁶ C 14 & 15:30.

⁷ C 14 & 15:30.

⁸ C 18:1.

⁹ C 18:1.

¹⁰ C 18:1.

¹¹ 1L127. St John refers to Ps 17:15.

¹² C29:1.

¹³ C29:1. See also C28:10.

¹⁴ C29:3.

¹⁵ C29:1.

¹⁶ C29:3.

¹⁷ C29:7 (5-11).

¹⁸ The expression *transformación de amor* is from C 13:1. See also C 14 & 15:30.

it impossible for them not to please God.¹⁹ In the following we will take a closer look at a few of St John's major ways of describing the disciples' entry into this transformation of love i.e. into their spiritual marriage, and at how he describes the state itself.

Transformation by Divine Light

As we have seen, St John calls infused contemplation a "ray of darkness" with reference to St Dionysius.²⁰ In this expression the word "ray" refers to what God infuses in contemplation and what we have previously called loving general knowledge but what St John also calls "divine light" (*divina luz*), "divine spiritual light," "excessive light of faith," "God's pure and simple light," "the supernatural light of God," etc.²¹

When St John discusses this theme he calls the soul's natural cognitive ability her "natural light" and claims that it cannot "show" the disciples the soul's "object" i.e. God.²² Consequently, this natural light actually prevents the disciples from uniting with God. To explain, he refers to St Paul's doxology on God's unsearchable judgments in Rom 11:33.²³ Likewise he refers to Aristotle, suggesting that the "clearer and more obvious divine things are in themselves, the darker and more hidden they are to the soul naturally."²⁴

This means that the disciples must somehow arrive at a state of being able to see God's light. As we have seen, St John is clear that contemplation and the divine inflow cannot as such cause pain.²⁵ Yet at the same time he also describes the disciples' reception of the divine light in contemplation as the meeting of "two extremes."²⁶ The light as such is pure, simple and "independent of time."²⁷ Thus when it comes in touch with the disciples' nature it "strikes" (*embestir*) it in order to renew it.²⁸ In this way the light dissociates their intellect from its "customary, lights, forms, and phantasies."²⁹

¹⁹ 2L134.

²⁰ 2N 5:3. 2S 8:6.

²¹ 2N 5:3. 2N8:4 (*divina luz espiritual*). 2A3:1 (*la excesiva luz de la fe*). 1S 4:1 (*la pura y sencilla luz de Dios*). 3L171 (*la luz sobrenatural de Dios*).

²² 2N 8:4. 3L170. See also 2N 5:3 and 3L171.

²³ 2S 8:6.

²⁴ Kavanaugh refers the principle to *Metaphysics* 2.1. St John expresses it in various ways for example in 2N 5:3, 2N 8:2, 2S 8:6 and 2S 14:13.

²⁵ 2N 9:11.

²⁶ 2N 6:1.

²⁷ 2S 14:11. The original Spanish expression is *que no esta en tiempo*. See also 2S 14:10.

²⁸ 2N 6:1. See also 2N 8:4. 2N 9:3.

²⁹ 2S 14:10.

To explain further St John also compares the disciples' reception of the divine light to how rays of sunlight shine through a window. Although the latter are invisible in themselves they make obstacles they encounter visible. In this way the rays actually create darkness and make clear that one must remove the obstacles in order to wholly lighten up the room.³⁰ In addition, he suggests that as fire "transforms the wood by incorporating it into itself" so also the divine light transforms the disciples' soul.³¹

This means, in other words, that when the disciples' purification is complete their natural light so unites with the divine light "that only the supernatural light is shining."³² They are now able to know, love and remember without the involvement of their senses and appetites.³³ They are even able to "perceive and penetrate" all things "with universality and great facility."³⁴ This is because the divine wisdom which the light gives "touches everywhere because of its purity."³⁵ It is "not particularized by any distinct object of affection."³⁶

Naturally the light also influences the way the disciples see its very source, God. St John compares the disciples' vision of him through the light to seeing "lamps of fire."³⁷ According to him this is a reference to how God's attributes, such as his "omnipotence, wisdom, goodness, mercy and so on," give forth "light" and "warmth of love."³⁸ It is in this way that he "communicates himself to" them "according to his attributes and powers" (*virtudes*).³⁹ This communication "inflames" and "places" their soul "in the exercise (*ejercicio*) of love, in the act of love."⁴⁰ The soul "becomes god from God through participation in him and in his attributes."⁴¹ To explain, St John refers these attributes, i.e. the lamps, to the Holy Trinity. Since they are God they also are as he is: one and many simultaneously in one *suppositum*.⁴² This amounts to saying that the lamps' light and love allow the disciples' to participate in the very being of God.⁴³ I shall return to this theme later in this chapter.

³⁰ 2N 8:3.

³¹ 2N 10:3.

³² 3L171.

³³ 2L134, 2N13:11, C14&15:23–24, 2S2:1.

³⁴ 2N 8:5.

³⁵ 2N 8:5. This is a reference to Wis 7:24.

³⁶ 2N 8:5.

³⁷ 3L11–2.

³⁸ 3L11–3. See also the poem itself, *Llama de amor viva: Canciones del alma en la intima comunicaci3n de uni3n de amor de Dios* (The Living Flame Of Love: Songs of the soul in the intimate communication of living union with God).

³⁹ 3L16.

⁴⁰ 3L18.

⁴¹ 3L18.

⁴² 3L1 2,15,17. See also 3L180,82.

⁴³ 2L134. In 2A 2:1 St John calls the divine light "the principle of the perfect union."

When St John expresses the whole matter in more explicitly biblical terms, he compares the lamps' fire that "inflames" the soul by love to how the Spirit descended on the apostles according to Acts 2:3.⁴⁴ Likewise he refers to the prophecy in Ezek 36:25-27 according to which God will sprinkle the Israelites with clean water and pour his Spirit upon them. To explain how these passages relate to each other, he suggests that God's Spirit is like water which, when hidden in "the veins of the soul," fully "satisfies" the disciples' spirit and when it descends on them is as fire which makes them act sacrificially for love.⁴⁵ He also refers the latter to how the Song of Songs uses the term "lamps of fire" to designate the jealousy of love.⁴⁶

Although this way of putting the issue may seem to emphasize the divine initiative, St John is clear that these things presuppose cooperation.⁴⁷ To explain he suggests that it is as if the divine fire of the lamps would cause the disciples' souls to be "like the air within the flame" and like moving air and flames. Although this may look like as if God was moving, it is actually the soul who does the moving together with the Spirit.⁴⁸ This movement expresses in different ways the common response of the Spirit and the soul to how the lamps' immovable centre, i.e. God himself, draws both of them to him.⁴⁹

When discussing this St John also points out that as long as the disciples' "carnal life" continues, they cannot fully assent to this drawing. They cannot completely unite with the lamps' light, love and fire.⁵⁰ Consequently, St John suggests that its union with God and his attributes is according to "shadow."⁵¹ To explain, he refers for example to how the Spirit "overshadowed" the Virgin according to Luke 1:35.⁵² This is not a reference to natural physical shadow. It is rather that God and his attributes cast instead of an ordinary shadow a kind of splendor on the disciples' soul.⁵³ This splendor produces in them new living versions of God's various attributes.⁵⁴ It is in this way they have in their soul "God himself in shadow."⁵⁵ This is their union with God in this life.

⁴⁴ 3L18.

⁴⁵ 3L18.

⁴⁶ 3L18.

⁴⁷ 3L110–11. This is part of how St John comments on the words "in whose splendors" of the poem itself.

⁴⁸ 3L111.

⁴⁹ 3L111, 3L110.

⁵⁰ 3L110.

⁵¹ 3L112–15.

⁵² 3L112.

⁵³ 3L113, 15.

⁵⁴ 3L114.

⁵⁵ 3L114.

Transformation of the Faculties

St John also discusses the disciples' transformation by the light and into the light from the perspective of their intellectual faculties, memory, intellect and will.⁵⁶ He claims for example that the eradication of natural "forms and knowledge" from the memory perfects it.⁵⁷ This principle applies to other spiritual faculties as well. When the faculties' reception of the divine inflow, i.e. the light becomes habitual and as they consequently "fail entirely in their natural operations," their mode of functioning changes from natural into supernatural.⁵⁸ This means that they "lose their natural imperfection and are changed to divine."⁵⁹

More specifically the memory no longer generates negative memories and images. Instead, "God's Spirit makes" it "to forget what is to be forgotten" and "to remember what ought to be remembered."⁶⁰ The memory is now divinely converted.⁶¹ Divine knowledge now fills it and it is dead to its own memories and alive to those of God.⁶² Differently expressed, it now has "in its mind the eternal years mentioned by David (Ps 77:5)" and shares in "divine possession of glory."⁶³

The intellect's conversion into divinity means in turn that the disciples now share in the divine knowledge the object of which is "the supreme principle" (*el sumo principio*).⁶⁴ This kind of knowledge is not "knowledge a posteriori" (*conocimiento trasero*) but is "essential (*esencial*)."⁶⁵ This means that the disciples now know "the effects through their cause" and not vice versa.⁶⁶ In other words, they know "creatures through God and not God through creatures."⁶⁷ Thus they know and experience divine things "as they are in themselves."⁶⁸ Even in business matters and in the "sciences" the Holy Spirit simply "impresses" on them a "suitable" manner of proceeding.⁶⁹

⁵⁶ 2L134. 2N13:11.

⁵⁷ 3S 2

⁵⁸ 3S 2:8. See also C14&15:26.

⁵⁹ C20&21:4. See also C 26:14.

⁶⁰ 3S 2:9.

⁶¹ 2N 13:11.

⁶² C35:5. 2L1 34.

⁶³ 2L1 34. John refers to Ps 76:6 in Jerome's Vulgata: *cogitavi dies antiquas et annos aeternos in mente habui*. C19:4.

⁶⁴ 2S 26:5.

⁶⁵ 4L1 5. See also C19:4 and C37:4 for *conocimiento trasero*.

⁶⁶ 4L1 5.

⁶⁷ 4L1 5. *Y éste es el delate grande de este recuerdo: conocer por Dios las criaturas, y no por las criaturas a Dios; que es conocer los efectos por su causa y no la causa por los efectos, que es conocimiento trasero, y es otro esencial*. See also C 7:2-4.

⁶⁸ 2N 17:6. 2N 17:3.

⁶⁹ I have read together 3S 2:11 and C 26:16.

Simultaneously they remain in unknowing as regards evil things and whatever else is not spiritually speaking profitable.⁷⁰

At the same time St John also points out that

Those who understand God more understand more distinctly the infinitude (*lo infinito*) that remains to be understood; those who see less of him do not realize so clearly what remains to be seen.⁷¹

As a consequence the disciples may experience an intuitive unwillingness to try to mediate what they experience in contemplation.⁷² And they often speak “in figures, comparisons ... similitudes ... secrets and mysteries” instead of giving “rational explanations.”⁷³ In this regard they resemble stammering little children.⁷⁴

As regards the disciples’ faculty of will the divine light now informs it so that it now loves and wills what God also does.⁷⁵ It is now changed “into the life of divine love.”⁷⁶ This applies even to its “first movements.”⁷⁷ Thus the disciples no longer mix their own pleasure in their joy of divine things.⁷⁸ Rather, when “exterior” things bring them joy, they immediately turn to rejoice in what they already have because of their union with God. In this way their joy is now completely in him.⁷⁹ Differently expressed, they delight in God “by means of himself.”⁸⁰

Love, the Trinity and Virtues

Although St John has a great deal to say on how faith and hope transform the disciples’ intellect and their memory, his emphasis falls on love. He points out that it is God’s main interest to exalt the disciples’ soul and to make her his equal.⁸¹ To explain, he refers to the already mentioned principle of how love equalizes the lovers and he adds that love also subjects the lovers to each other.⁸² Hence he writes concerning the soul,

⁷⁰ C 26:14–15.

⁷¹ C 7:9

⁷² 2N 17:3,5–6.

⁷³ C prol 1.

⁷⁴ C 7:10.

⁷⁵ 2N 13:11.

⁷⁶ 2L1 34.

⁷⁷ 3S 2:9. C27:7. C28:5. 2L1 34. See also C20&21:4.

⁷⁸ 3L183. 2L134.

⁷⁹ C20&21:11–12. See also C26:14–15.

⁸⁰ 3L183. 2L1 34.

⁸¹ C28:1.

⁸² C28:1. C27:1.

O wonderful thing, worthy of all our awe and admiration!—that the Father himself becomes subject to her for her exaltation, as though he were her servant and she his lord. And he is as solicitous in favoring her as he would be if he were her slave and she his god. So profound is the humility and sweetness of God!⁸³

Furthermore, he refers to St John's mention of God giving "grace for grace" in John 1:16, and explains that as God makes the soul attractive he becomes so pleased with her that he continues making her more attractive still.⁸⁴ It is actually his characteristic to "give more to whoever has more."⁸⁵ This divine generosity naturally inspires the disciples to further yield themselves to God.⁸⁶

St John further points out that to subject himself to the disciples God must first place them, so to say, in himself.⁸⁷ This takes place when God breathes his love through the Spirit into the disciples and when they simultaneously breathe in God.⁸⁸ In this way they participate in the same love that exists between the Father and the Son.⁸⁹ This participation makes the disciples "partakers (*compañeros*) of the divine nature" and as such "deiform" (*deiforme*).⁹⁰ They become, in other words, "God through participation."⁹¹ As a consequence they now "understand, know and love" [...] in the Trinity, together with it, as does the Trinity itself!⁹² They perform "in him, in company with him, the work of the Most Blessed Trinity."⁹³ They are his "equals" and his "companions" (*compañeros*).⁹⁴

To specify the nature of this union St John calls it simultaneously both substantial (*sustancial*) and non-substantial. When he uses the former term he points out that the union now is not as perfect as it will be in the life to come.⁹⁵ And when he denies the possibility of a substantial union, which for him is the same as to convert the substance of the disciples' soul into the divine substance, he simultaneously indicates that their participation in God

⁸³ C27:1.

⁸⁴ C33:7. See also C33:2.

⁸⁵ C33:8. This is reference to both Matt 13:12 and Luke 19:26.

⁸⁶ C27:2. See also C6:4.

⁸⁷ C32:6.

⁸⁸ I have read together C32:6 and C39:4. See also C38:3.

⁸⁹ 3LI82.

⁹⁰ C39:6, St John refers to 2 Pet. 1:2–4. C39:4.

⁹¹ C39:4.

⁹² C39:4. See also C28:5 where St John claims that the disciples now know what they know "through love" and with great delight.

⁹³ St John refers to 2 Pt. 1:2–4 in C39:6. See also St John's poem *Romance sobre el Evangelio 'In principio erat Verbum,' acerca de la Santísima Trinidad* (Romance on the Gospel text 'In principio erat Verbum,' regarding the Blessed Trinity).

⁹⁴ C39:6. See also C32:6.

⁹⁵ C39:6.

both unites them with and “absorbs” them into him.⁹⁶ In addition, he also specifies the nature of this union by claiming that while the Son possesses divine “goods” (*bienes*) by nature, the disciples possess them “by participation.”⁹⁷

The “goods” in question are both to the divine attributes but also their corresponding virtues. To participate and to receive them the disciples had to perform works. Even the latter was a matter of cooperation. This was when they when with God’s help they resisted their own passions and appetites by did what perfection demanded.⁹⁸ In this situation he provided his perfect gifts, but they had to do the receiving.⁹⁹ In other words, he provided “the movement toward good,” but they themselves had to do the moving.¹⁰⁰

When discussing the disciples’ works St John emphasizes both that God greatly values them but also that they lack value apart from love. The latter is because it is impossible to acquire something from God in the absence of love.¹⁰¹ Only “love fastens and sustains the virtues in the soul.”¹⁰² Without love they “not only fail to flower but will all wither and become valueless in God’s sight.”¹⁰³ Thus when the disciples unite with God in love they also reap the fruits of their previous works.

To explain what this reaping is all about St John compares the disciples to a bride who is made beautiful for her wedding and to a queen made worthy to appear together with her husband and king.¹⁰⁴ The difference is only that the disciples’ adornments are the virtues and divine gifts which love now binds into a “garland of perfection.”¹⁰⁵ Clothed in it the disciples are not only extremely beautiful but also spiritually powerful and mighty. This is because when the virtues are joined together in this way they also “impart strength by their substance.”¹⁰⁶

The Disciples in Union with God

This amounts to saying that in the state of union the disciples’ works are perfect.¹⁰⁷ Thus they for example praise God “with God himself” and

⁹⁶ 2Ll34. “...estando unida come está aquí con El y absorba en El...”

⁹⁷ C39:6. See also C39:4–5.

⁹⁸ See for example 1Ll 22.

⁹⁹ C30:6.

¹⁰⁰ C30:6.

¹⁰¹ C1:13. C30:8.

¹⁰² C30:9.

¹⁰³ C 30:8.

¹⁰⁴ C30:6–7.

¹⁰⁵ C30:6. C30:3. C30:9.

¹⁰⁶ C30:11. St John refers to Sg. 6:4. See also C30:10.

¹⁰⁷ C39:9. See also 3S 2:10.

consequently please and delight him greatly.¹⁰⁸ Likewise they contemplate “without the help of any bodily or spiritual faculty” receiving consequently “only substantial knowledge” as it becomes produced in their passive intellect.¹⁰⁹ They are as close as possible to having in this life the beatific vision, i.e. the vision of God’s essence.¹¹⁰ In addition, since God himself now prays in them their prayers “always produce their effect.”¹¹¹ Indeed, St John compares the disciples in this state to the Virgin who was “always moved by the Holy Spirit.”¹¹²

This perfection means from a different perspective that the disciples’ natural passions, “joy, hope, sorrow and fear,” are now wholly directed to God and that they have wholly mortified all the appetites that can be mortified.¹¹³ Their reason now controls their soul’s “two natural powers (*potencias*), the irascible and the concupiscible” which otherwise cause many problems.¹¹⁴ Thus their “sensory part” is as conformed as possible to the spiritual part so that it can, according to its own mode of reception, participate in spiritual blessings.¹¹⁵

One of such blessings is healing. St John points out in fact that God’s love also heals both the disciples’ soul and their body.¹¹⁶ In this it applies that “God usually does not bestow a favor on the body without bestowing it first and principally on the soul.”¹¹⁷ These favors are a part of how God in this state rewards the disciples in both a bodily fashion and spiritually for every “trial” they have gone through.¹¹⁸ They now “obtain everything they desire” and can no longer suffer.¹¹⁹ Their soul and even their body now resemble “a paradise divinely irrigated.”¹²⁰ Even the devil can no longer disturb them.¹²¹

These things mean in other words that the disciples now delight in God habitually. Such a “sweetness” has taken hold of them that “nothing painful can reach” them.¹²² Thus St John claims that

¹⁰⁸ C39:9.

¹⁰⁹ C39:12. This amounts to saying that the disciples now receive “everything according to the mode of the spirit” (1N 4:2) and that they have a “perfect vision of God” (C38:5).

¹¹⁰ C39:12.

¹¹¹ 3S 2:10.

¹¹² 3S 2:10.

¹¹³ C40:1. In this passage St John contradicts himself. In 1S 11:12 he claims that it is neither possible nor necessary to mortify natural passions such as hunger and thirst, but here speaks explicitly of the mortification of the natural appetites. My wording interprets him positively.

¹¹⁴ C20&21:4. See also C28:7.

¹¹⁵ C40:6.

¹¹⁶ C 10:1. C11:11–12. 2 LI 30–31.

¹¹⁷ 2 LI 13.

¹¹⁸ 2LI30.

¹¹⁹ 2LI 30 and 31 (quotation). 2 LI 24 See also C 22:7, C36:1, 2LI31, 3LI7.

¹²⁰ 3 LI 7.

¹²¹ C40:1–3.

¹²² C 20&21:16.

In this state of life so perfect, the soul always walks in festivity, inwardly and outwardly, and it frequently bears on its spiritual tongue a new song of great jubilation in God, a song always new, enfolded in a gladness and love arising from the knowledge the soul has of its happy state.¹²³

This happiness in the state of union, of spiritual marriage, does not mean that the disciples lose their creaturely awareness. One reason for this is that their union with God is “not as essential and perfect as in the next life.”¹²⁴ This means in turn that although the substance of their soul is now constantly united with God, their faculties are not. Rather, they participate in the union “frequently.”¹²⁵ Differently expressed they constantly feel “the lack of beatific transformation.”¹²⁶

St John points out that even in this state the disciples should not *wholly* forget their “former sins.”¹²⁷ Such knowledge allows them both to avoid “presumption” and to believe that now when they have reached perfection they may receive even more from God than what they received when they still were imperfect.¹²⁸ In addition, this awareness allows them to remember that God has “exalted” them by grace and not because of their own merits.¹²⁹

The following discussion compares this vision of spiritual perfection with St Maximus’ and St Symeon’s visions of the same.

¹²³ 2L1 36. *En este estado de vida tan perfecta siempre el alma anda interior y exteriormente come de fiesta, y trae con gran frecuencia en el paladar de su espiritu un jubilo de Dios grande, come un cantar nuevo, siempre nuevo, envuelto en alegría y amor en conocimiento de su feliz estado.*

¹²⁴ C26:4.

¹²⁵ C 26:11. See also C 26:18.

¹²⁶ C39:14.

¹²⁷ Quotation C 33:1. See 33:2. See also C 31:4 where St John refers to the scholastic doctrine about the connection and interdependence of virtues and points out both that “all the virtues are present where one is” and that they all “fail where one fails.”

¹²⁸ Quotation C 33:1.

¹²⁹ C 33:2. The quoted predicate is originally in the present tense.

12. ST SYMEON, ST JOHN AND ST MAXIMUS

As we have seen not only St Maximus and St Symeon describe their disciples' union with God in terms of deification, but that the same applies even to St John. These descriptions differ from each other in a way that allows us to make new observations and see some of our earlier observations in a new light.

St Symeon and St John on Deification

As to be expected, St Symeon and St John refer much of their teaching on union with God to certain already familiar and easily distinguishable patterns of thought. Thus St Symeon continues to mention tears of compunction, the Eucharist, the Church's celebrations and symbols, service to others etc. when teaching about union. Similarly St John continues to return to already familiar themes and emphases such as passivity, the transformation of the three intellectual faculties, the principle of non-proportionality, body as a prison, positive evaluation of what is "interior" at the expense of what is "exterior," and virtues as adorations, etc. In addition, even when he introduces the states of spiritual betrothal and marriage he does so in continuity with his tendency to think of the disciples' spiritual development in terms of more or less distinguishable phases or states.

Yet their doctrines of union also coincide in several respects. The most fundamental similarity is that both expect their disciples to become deified and united with God through participation in his Triune life and that they define this union in terms that correspond to each other. I refer, for example, to the way St Symeon assumes the disciples' union with the divine light allows them to more or less see into God's Triune life, and I refer how St John describes the divine union in terms of the disciples' being able to understand, know and love in and together with the Trinity. I also refer to the way both find it so difficult to define the exact character of the divine union that they call it both essential and non-essential at the same time, and to how both describe the consequences of the union in terms of happiness, joy, deep

identity with Christ, positive bodily changes and awareness of being adorned with God's glory.¹

In addition, although St Symeon and St John describe two different kinds of experiences of God as light, the fact that they emphasize this theme is naturally a similarity. The former describes this experience in terms that correspond to his positive reception of divine *energeiai* and to the strongly visual and concrete material character of Orthodox worship. He expects his disciples both to see the divine light and to experience more and more of its transforming activities in their whole selves. He even expects them to experience everything that has to do with God as light. St John in turn expects his disciples to become fully aware of the character of God as light after they first have experienced the nights and become wholly purified and detached from their senses. He compares this experience to how the Spirit overshadowed the Virgin at the Conception and descended later on the apostles at Pentecost enabling them to bring forth divine life on earth.

Furthermore, although St John does not discuss *apatheia* as such and although his explicit emphasis does not lie in service to others when teaching on the transformation of his disciples' spiritual faculties, it is evident that even he presupposes that his disciples to arrive at a state in which they are motionless in a way which corresponds to how God is in himself and simultaneously at a movement in analogy with how his love toward creation makes him move. I refer especially to how St John claims that the divine light now informs the disciples' will so that it now loves and wills in the same way as God.

The following extended comparison reveals more similarities between St Symeon's and St John's mystical theologies. Likewise it casts new light on some central differences.

St Symeon, St John, and St Maximus on Deification

Reading St Symeon and St John in the light of St Maximus reveals that all three discuss deification in related terms expecting their disciples' life of virtue and purification to lead to mystical participation in God's Triune life. This reading also reveals previously unseen similarities in St Symeon's and St John's mystical theologies. One similarity is a certain shared boldness. While St Maximus discusses deification in terms that merely open up the possibility of interpreting it in terms of a manifest Trinitarian participation; both St Symeon and St John boldly refer their deified disciples to the inner life of the Trinity in the manner described above.

¹ See pp. 136–140 and 147–150.

Another related and common trait is a certain individualism. While St Maximus does seem to be only vaguely interested in exemplifying deification by using emotive experiential terms such as happiness, joy and pleasure etc, both St Symeon and St John obviously do. As we have seen, the former, for example, marvels at his own body being completely Christ and the latter speaks of the disciples' aesthetic pleasure of being able to see themselves being adorned with divine attributes. Although only St Symeon uses the first person singular, both obviously feel that it is normal and perhaps even necessary to exemplify deification in such subjective terms. Ultimately such a sentiment may also lie behind St John's focus on describing sufferings.

The fact that all three lay their accent on love as the key unifying factor naturally balances whatever subjectivism and individualism they give expression to. Yet the approach of both St Symeon and of St John stands in contrast to how St Maximus describes deification in terms of a cosmic task and to how he claims explicitly that the disciples in contemplation see themselves as "as more united to each other than to themselves." In comparison with this not only St John's mystical theology but even St Symeon's more church-oriented appear as rather individualistic.

St Maximus' doctrine of deification also casts light on the differences between St Symeon and St John as regards epistemology. Previously I referred the fact that the latter claims that the disciples' spiritual faculties must become empty and annihilated before they can see God in a deifying way to Plotinus and to Augustinian-Aristotelian principles and axioms, and, negatively speaking, to the fact that St John unlike St Symeon does not depart explicitly from the Incarnation and the Eucharist when discussing the possibility of knowing God. Now St Maximus helps us to see that this problem goes back fundamentally to interpreting the doctrine of creation.

As we have seen even he considers the basic Platonic emphasis on the incompatibility of the sensible realm with the spiritual one and the consequent emphasis on reaching beyond the senses. Yet while St John seems to lack the means to reconcile the latter emphasis with the scriptural affirmation of the goodness of created nature, St Maximus does not. His doctrine of the *logoi*, which goes back to the Alexandrian theological tradition and even to Dionysius, allows him, for example, to identify simultaneously the necessity of reaching a state of emptiness and formlessness in the mind and the concrete physical sounds and letters of the Scriptures, as ways to true knowledge of God.

This doctrine also lies behind the way St Maximus describes the fall and its consequences in the human soul. While St John seems to think that every movement of the will toward whatever awakens the senses is corrupted at least before his disciples have reached perfection, St Maximus suggests that the natural human will has the ability to recognize and wants only what is

good and right. The corruption of human nature lies in another will, the one that arises when the mind pays less attention to nature than it does to passions. This second will marks humans simultaneously as possessing personhood and as fallen beings.

This means on one hand that the disciples' nature cannot be in conflict with God's nature, which is what St John seems to suggest when claiming that God's love cannot directly "act upon" and must bypass the disciples will in the passive night of the spirit. This means also that the annihilation of the will or nature is not the solution to the problem of corruption. Rather, St Maximus suggests that the disciples need, by practicing virtues and contemplation, to make their corrupted will "a partner" of their natural will.²

² See p. 130.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Part One of the study suggested that both St Symeon and St John are in continuity with the early Christian tradition of interpreting the Pauline exhortation to “discipline” one's body (1 Cor 9:24-27) in terms of the ancient concept of spiritual exercises. Together with early church fathers they explain the problem of sin in terms of various passionate attachments which various spiritual exercises help to uproot, making possible a substantial spiritual transformation. Likewise they emphasize the role of spiritual directors and the importance of acquiring the virtue of humility, which allows one not only to recognize that true transformation presupposes God's and human help, but also to receive such help.

This part of the study also conveyed that St Symeon's and St John's approaches to the common Greek heritage differ from each other in that neo-Platonism has exercised more influence on the latter. While both reckon with a difference between created and uncreated natures, St John emphasizes their non-proportionality in a way that corresponds clearly to how Plotinus emphasizes the difference between material multiplicity and divine simplicity. His language of spiritual annihilations echoes Plotinus' insistence on the necessity of letting go of one's inborn sense of matter and self. The philosopher and the theologian describe the human soul similarly suggesting it to be something like a piece of art in the process of being made beautiful. In addition, they distinguish sharply between spiritual exercises that lead to contemplation and contemplation itself.

Part Two of the study indicated that the way St Symeon and St John define faith reflects this initial difference. While the former thinks that faith arises out and is consonant with a wide range of divine communications and graces, the latter defines faith in terms of the above-mentioned emphasis on non-proportionality, asking his disciples to refuse all those divine communications which seem to involve the senses. This is because he presupposes that the responses of the soul to such communications are bound to be sensual at least before its spiritual part has become thoroughly annihilated. This corresponds to the way he also finds it necessary to suggest that God's love must somehow bypass the free will when touching the soul in the dark night of the spirit.

While St Symeon refers the inborn ability of the soul to cope with divine knowledge to Christ's two natures and the Eucharist, St John presents a far more complex doctrine. The soul is, according to him, a created substance consisting of three spiritual faculties, intellect, memory and will, which resemble three separate containers which must become annihilated and emptied before God can fill and restore them to health, filling them with divine knowledge. While it is possible to refer the concrete physicality of this language to Aristotle's ten categories, the way St John uses this language to convey how the soul catches a glimpse of God reflects St Augustine's theology. The latter influence may also lie behind the manner St John deems the soul to be so corrupted such that one must question its every response to God's communicative graces.

Part Two showed also that both St John and Vladimir Lossky distinguish between positive and negative theologies emphasizing the latter in reference to the theology of St Dionysius. Yet while St John interprets this distinction in terms of his general emphasis on non-proportionality and spiritual annihilations, the same does not apply to Lossky who follows St Symeon and other Greek fathers in presupposing that a harmony exists between God's various more and less physical means of faith, grace, and divine knowledge, and the disciples' ability to cope with them. In addition, the Russian theologian also follows St Symeon and the fathers in defending the free will. I refer especially to his concept of personhood.

Part Three implied that St John's mystical theology lacks means to defend the scriptural affirmation of the essential goodness of the creation when discussing various philosophical and theological ideas. This became visible especially in the light of St Maximus' doctrine of the *logoi* which grounds the patristic cosmology, anthropology and epistemology of this theologian.

In addition, *Part Three* showed that St Maximus, St Symeon and St John describe their disciples' union with God in terms of deification and that the descriptions of especially the two latter resemble each other. I refer particularly to the way both expect their disciples to become deified and united with God through participation in his Triune life and to how they describe the consequences of this union in terms of experiencing God as light and love, concrete positive spiritual and physical changes, and experiences of utter happiness.

This study as a whole shows that St Symeon, Vladimir Lossky, and St Maximus Confessor, despite their differences, all emphasize the role of free will and evaluate the human cognitive capacity positively. The latter is especially the case when St Symeon refers his disciples' ability to taste and know God both spiritually and bodily in the Eucharist to Christ's two natures, when St Maximus suggests that the human nature and its will in themselves always recognize and want what is good, and when Vladimir Lossky, who confirms these theologians' emphases, adds to them his own

defense of the personal intuitive knowledge of God. Moreover, this study indicates that St John's theological preferences cause him to question his disciples' ability to cope with and positively assent to many of God's communications and graces. Yet this does not hinder him from believing in, confessing and defending deification in terms that correspond to the way Orthodox theologians present and formulate this doctrine.

This definition of how the mystical theology of St John relates to the Orthodox theological principles and emphases of St Symeon, St Maximus and Vladimir Lossky confirms the latter's observation that the question as to how Eastern and Western ways of sanctification resemble and differ from each other is subtle. It also lends confirmation to the way he points to the direction of neo-Platonism when identifying a key source of differences. In addition, the proposition gives certain support to the way he uses patristic theology to expose problematic cosmological, anthropological and epistemological ideas in Sergius Bulgakov's sophiology, projecting his discoveries onto Western theology of dark nights qua his own theologically sophisticated interpretation of the *filioque*-doctrine.

At the same time this study by no means supports Lossky's projection as such. There is nothing in St John's theology that would allow one to link it to the Western *filioque* in any direct theological sense. His theology does not depart from or circulate around theoretically advanced Trinitarian reflection. Rather it arises out of theology as the "impossible" experience of both dark nights of the soul and a deifying union with the Triune God: a mystery of faith for the reader to meditate upon.

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