

St Gregory Palamas as a Hagiorite

1. The Importance of the Teaching of St Gregory Palamas

Nowadays there are many editions of the works of St Gregory Palamas, as well as many studies relating to his life and teaching. This is God's special blessing to our time. Although St Gregory lived in the 14th century, he has a great deal to say today, because, as we know, the same philosophical, theological and even social currents which prevailed in his epoch also predominate in our own. The 14th century has features in common with the 20th. The discussion between St Gregory Palamas and the philosophers of that time is therefore of considerable interest now. He has much to teach people today.

We can establish the great importance of St Gregory Palamas for Orthodoxy, for the triumph of the true faith, in monasticism and on the Holy Mountain.

1. For Orthodoxy

We see the great significance of his teaching for Orthodoxy most clearly with regard to the important question of epistemology. By epistemology we mean the knowledge of God and, to be precise, the way which we follow in order to arrive at knowledge of God. In St Gregory's time there was a possibility that Orthodoxy would be debased, and that the Orthodox faith would be secularised and changed into either pantheism or agnosticism. Pantheism believed

and taught that God in His essence was to be found in all nature, so by looking at nature we can acquire knowledge of God. Agnosticism believed and taught that it was utterly impossible for us to know God, just because He is God and man is limited and therefore completely incapable of attaining real knowledge of God.

In the face of this great danger St Gregory Palamas developed the fundamental teaching of the Church concerning the great mystery of the indivisible distinction between the essence and energy of God. We must underline that this is not the teaching of St Gregory Palamas alone, but of the Orthodox Church, and therefore this theology cannot be called Palamism. Many fathers have referred to the distinction between essence and energy. We find it in Holy Scripture, in the first Apostolic Fathers, in the Cappadocian Fathers, and especially in St Basil the Great and in that great dogmatic theologian of the Church, St John of Damascus. St Gregory Palamas, with his outstanding theological ability, developed this already existing teaching further, and presented its practical consequences and dimensions.

It is very characteristic that this distinction began to be noted in discussions about the Holy Spirit. The Calabrian philosopher Barlaam maintained that we cannot know exactly what the Holy Spirit is, especially what is meant by His procession or His being sent by the Son. In the face of the danger of agnosticism, St Gregory Palamas taught that the procession according to essence of the Holy Spirit from the Father is not the same as His being manifested and sent into the world according to energy through the Son. Although we do not know the essence of the Holy Spirit, we do know His energy.

The whole spiritual life is a result and fruit of the energy of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the saint taught, we cannot

participate in God's essence, but we can know and participate in His energies. As the great dogmatic theologian St John of Damascus teaches, we can see three unions: the union according to essence of the Persons of the Holy Trinity; the union according to hypostasis in the Person of Christ between the divine and human natures; and union according to energy between God and man.

In this way St Gregory preserves the true teaching of the Church. If in the time of St Athanasios the Great, people doubted the divinity of Christ, in St Gregory's time they had doubts about the divinity of God's energies. They said that His energies are created. Therefore in the dismissal hymn of the saint we sing: "Light of Orthodoxy, support and teacher of the Church, glory of monks, invincible champion of theologians ..."

2. For Monasticism

The teaching of St Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki, has great significance for monasticism as well. In the dismissal hymn referred to above, we sing: "glory of monks". In his time the philosophers, led by Barlaam, doubted the value of traditional monasticism and the monks' way of life, especially that of the so-called hesychasts. This was due to a difference of theological assumptions. Barlaam maintained that the noblest part of man, with the help of which he can acquire knowledge of God, is reason, and that reason is the only instrument by which one can attain knowledge of God. So he came to the conclusion that the ancient Greek philosophers, who used a great deal of reasoning, attained a greater knowledge of God than the Prophets, who were looking at external things, revelations and visions. He laid too much stress on the

value of the philosophers as against the Prophets, and the value of human thought as against the theoria of the uncreated Light which was granted to the three Apostles on Mount Tabor. This naturally had implications for traditional Orthodox monasticism. If Barlaam's teaching were right and had succeeded in prevailing in the Church, priority would have been given to reason and philosophy, traditional monasticism would have been disregarded and we would have arrived at agnosticism.

St Gregory, however, showed in his teaching that the Prophets and Apostles were higher than the philosophers, that the instrument for acquiring knowledge of God is not the rational faculty, but the heart in its full biblical meaning. He taught that God is not discovered through human reasoning, but reveals Himself to the pure human heart, and that the real way of knowing God is the hesychastic way, which is described in Holy Scripture and experienced by all the saints. Thus he made it very clear that the monks' way of life, that is to say, the method of prayer which they followed, leads to true knowledge of God.

It is characteristic that one of St Gregory's first writings, his major work entitled *In Defence of the Holy Hesychasts*, refers to the three basic topics which were being pondered at that time. The first is the wide subject of education, and confronts the question of whether the philosophers are higher than the Prophets, and whether philosophy is the real path to the knowledge of God. The second is the theme of noetic prayer, and deals with everything connected with it, while the third topic is that of the uncreated Light. The crucial theological view is expounded that the Light which the saints see is uncreated. It is not something created, but the uncreated energy of God. The basis of this work is traditional Orthodox monasticism, which is why it is entitled *In Defence of the Holy Hesychasts*. Thus we see the great importance of St Gregory's teaching for Orthodox monasticism.

3. For the Holy Mountain

At the same time St Gregory's teaching has great importance for the Holy Mountain, as he himself was a Hagiorite. He lived on the Holy Mountain, experienced its life and then expressed it. Through his writings he showed that the Holy Mountain is not so much a place to live as a way of life. The Holy Mountain expresses the Orthodox tradition; it is an expression of the life which exists in the Orthodox Church. As we shall see in what follows, St Gregory went to the Holy Mountain as a disciple living in obedience, not as a teacher. He went in order to learn its Orthodox tradition. Day and night he prayed to God, crying "Lighten my darkness". He put himself under obedience to confessors and deified Elders. He gained many experiences of the spiritual life. He attained a high degree of holiness. He kept silence for many years. And when he was required to speak, he spoke and expressed his experience. Therefore his teaching is an expression of the life of the Holy Mountain, but in a wider sense it is an expression of the life of the Church, because the Holy Mountain is not absolute or autonomous. The Holy Mountain expresses the life of the Orthodox Church. Thus we can see its great importance.

We said at the beginning that the era of St Gregory Palamas was parallel to our own. This is an important point to which we wish to give particular emphasis.

In the first place we see that people's search for God increases day by day. Many are seeking to find and acquire real knowledge of God. Some, since they are not following the true path to knowing God, become discouraged and go so far as to deny God. Others, instead of finding the true God, find various idols of God, which they worship. Consequently idolatry is prevalent even in our time.

Then we notice that even among Orthodox Christians there are two major trends. People are divided into two large categories.

The first category includes those who can rightly be called followers of Barlaam, who give priority to reason and rely mainly

on human beings. They believe that in this way they will solve many problems, including of course the first and principal one, which concerns the knowledge of God.

The second category includes those who, like St Gregory Palamas, centre their spiritual life on the heart, in the full biblical and patristic sense of the word. They follow the method which has been followed by all the saints of our Church, and they are found worthy of attaining true knowledge of God and, of course, true communion with God.

Thus today there are two great currents, two ways of life. And since the Church recognises St Gregory Palamas as a great theologian, and his teaching is the teaching of the Church, we are called to walk this path.

Subsequent chapters will present the life and teaching of the saint: St Gregory's true way of life and his theology, which is actually the Church's theology. By following the teaching of St Gregory we shall solve many existential problems that torment us.

The Entry of the All-Holy Virgin into the Temple inspired hymnographers to compose wonderful hymns with profound theological meaning. One of these is the kontakion of the feast, which we often hear sung during the period of the feast of the Entry.

“The most pure Temple of the Saviour, the precious bridal chamber and Virgin, the sacred treasure of the glory of God, is brought today into the house of the Lord, and with her she brings the grace of the divine Spirit. Of her God's angels sing in praise: ‘She is indeed the heavenly tabernacle.’”

We see three important points in this troparion. The first is that the All-Holy Virgin is the most pure Temple of the Saviour, the precious bridal chamber and Virgin, and the sacred treasure of the glory of God.

It is not only the place where God is worshipped that is a temple, but above all the person within whom worship is offered up to God. The Apostle Paul writes: “For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people’” (2 Cor. 6:16). In this temple God Himself dwells and walks. The word “dwell” means that Christ is resident, and that the grace of God acts within the human being; and “walk” means that He produces spiritual tremors and spiritual ascents.

The Christian’s entire body is a temple. It is the walls and roof of this temple. And his heart is the sanctuary where the sacred altar is and where prayer, praise and worship are unceasingly offered to God. From her infancy the All-Holy Virgin was a completely pure Temple of Christ the Saviour. She was full of grace from her conception, her time in the womb, and her birth.

As the living Temple of God, the All-Holy Virgin is also a spiritual bridal chamber, where the place is being prepared in which the Lord of heaven and earth will rest. The Virgin was the suitable person to become the bride of the great and demanding Bridegroom Who wants everything. The All-Holy Virgin is the treasure of the glory of God, that is to say, she is the great store of God’s glory. The glory of God is His light, the divine Light which some people with pure hearts are deemed worthy to see.

The second point is that the All-Holy Virgin, as the most pure Temple of the Saviour, the bridal chamber of the heavenly Bridegroom and the treasure of God’s glory, is brought into the Temple of the Lord, and at the same time she brings God’s grace with her into the Temple. The Temple where the daily rituals were performed was a blessed place, but the living Temple, the All-Holy Virgin, was more exalted. One might ask how they put a young girl in a place where no one went except the High Priest,

and he only once a year. The answer is that the All-Holy Virgin did not simply receive grace by entering the Holy of Holies, but the Holy of Holies received a blessing from this blessed little girl. The High Priest and the Virgin's parents received inner assurance from God that this young girl was to be made ready to become His mother.

The third point is that the angels who saw the All-Holy Virgin entering the Temple also sang her praises, calling her "the heavenly tabernacle". The heavenly tabernacle is the uncreated glory of God, the divine Light that is uncreated. The phrase "heavenly tabernacle" reminds us that, as he describes in the book of Revelation, St John the Evangelist saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God, from heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her bridegroom, and he heard a loud voice from heaven saying: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them" (Rev. 21:2-4). This is the uncreated tabernacle, the glory of God, the uncreated Light. This is the true tabernacle "which the Lord erected, and not man" (Heb. 8:2).

This event brings to mind another uncreated tabernacle that descended during the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor. When the Apostle Peter saw the glory of Christ's divinity, he expressed his wish to Christ that they should remain there and made three tabernacles, one for Him, one for Moses and one for Elijah. And at the very moment when he was asking for three created tabernacles, God revealed to him the uncreated tabernacle, because "a bright cloud overshadowed them" (Matt. 17:1-7). Such is the generosity of God. We ask for something small and He fills us with His great and uncreated gifts.

The All-Holy Virgin accepted this uncreated grace of God,

and so she too became a heavenly tabernacle. She was within the uncreated tabernacle, and subsequently she became the heavenly tabernacle who protects all those who call upon her.

Sacred iconography presents the whole scene of Mary's entrance into the Temple and the Holy of Holies. It shows her being offered to the High Priest Zacharias, and various phases of her ascent to the Holy of Holies. Sometimes she is seen being offered by both her parents or by one of them. Sometimes Mary walks in front of her companions and is led by her parents, whereas sometimes she is brought to the High Priest by virgins carrying lighted torches. Sometimes she is standing in front of the steps and sometimes she is climbing up them. Sometimes at the highest point a throne is depicted on which the Virgin is sitting, and an angel flies around her offering her bread.

All these aspects show the great event of Mary's dedication, but also the dedication of every human being to God. Each one has his own way of being led up to God. In every case, those who perceive the excellence of the dedication keep festival.