

A Blessing of Love from St. Gregory Palamas

† *Bishop Klemes of Gardikion*
Secretary of the Holy Synod

The work and teaching of that great Church Father, St. Gregory Palamas, constitutes, as is well known, a second victory of Orthodoxy in the wake of the resplendent celebration of the Triumph of Orthodoxy on the First Sunday of Lent. St. Gregory articulated the Faith in an authentic manner, basing himself on the Tradition of the Fathers, and gave expression to a truly living theology. His testimony to the true Divinity of the Uncreated Energies of God, which are salvific for mankind, won Synodal approval and was confirmed by the Church. St. Gregory Palamas set forth an explanation of the God-befitting distinction between Essence and Energies in God and offered a powerful defense of the reality of the communion and union of man with God, that is, the deification (Θέωσις) of the whole man.

How are we deified? By putting to death the “old man” of the passions and seeking true communion by Grace with God and our neighbor. In a word, through love, as the Grace of God, as a gift of the Spirit of Truth.

Hesychasm, as a method for curing the human person—a method which St. Gregory Palamas practiced—is for all, since we are all in need of being cured of individualism and extroversion (social and personal externality), in order that we might be truly engrafted onto the Mysteriological Body of the Church, Christified, and saved.

* * *

The Triune God created us out of love and implanted in our souls, which exist in His image, a capacity for Divine love and knowledge, in order that man might have constant remembrance and vision of God and, being inflamed with His love, thereby attract His Grace and acquire His likeness. Man’s soul would thus have abided in love for God “more than for himself” and in love for his neighbor “as himself,” and true love for himself.¹

However, we did not fulfill our mission, nor did we preserve our gifts and capacities, but under the influence of the “God-opposing,” “pernicious,” and “most beligerent” enemies of our race, the demons,² “we rebelled,” acting like those deranged people who rend their own flesh, since we mutilated “our innate beauty.”³

We disobeyed God and met with death, were riven from dwelling with God, and were stripped of the garments of “incorrupt light.”⁴ Moreover, we were overtaken by night and became shrouded in darkness; we sullied the “image of God” and lost our “likeness” to Him.

* * *

God, through His Son and Word, refashioned us out of love—and out of love alone—and restored us to our primal dignity. And more than this, He came down to us and endured the Cross and death, and thus despoiled Hades and revealed to our nature once again the Light of Immortal Life, the Light of the Resurrection.⁵

This Light exists in the Church, the “Communion of deification,” and is freely bestowed on us as the Grace of Truth and Love through the Mysteries and the virtues. A struggle is necessary if one is to assimilate these, since our “sin-loving mentality,” our self-love, and our impassionedness put up vehement resistance.

Since we were created “in the image of Him Who is good,” after the Fall we maintained intact and unalloyed our love for ourselves and our desire and need to be loved by others; however, we thenceforth found it very difficult to love others in a self-sacrificial way, ministering to their needs “unselfishly,” on account of our self-love and egotism.⁶

For this reason, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is Love itself and Truth itself, gave the commandment of love for God and neighbor as the highest of all the commandments⁷ and as their “summit.” They all depend on this one commandment.

To be sure, love exists in us “naturally” and “createdly,” as an “echo” of our original creation. But if it is not transformed charismatically, it is easily sullied, is employed for passionate ends, and is rendered useless. Thus, the capacity for love falls away from the soul and is dissipated “by desires for superfluous foods, dishonourable bodies, useless objects, and empty, inglorious glory.”⁸

In this way, the mind “becomes fragmented,” rebels against God, and “fights against its neighbours, rages against its fellow-countrymen, and hunts down those who do not agree with its own absurd desires. Such a man, alas, becomes a murderer. He is not only like a [mindless] animal, but like a reptile or some venomous creature: a scorpion, a snake, one of the viper’s brood, though he was appointed to be a son of God.”⁹

* * *

How are we to render our minds receptive to Grace and thereby to love? Outward

deeds of love are needful, but what is chiefly required is inner healing. First and foremost, we need to cease from sinning, to free our souls from their ruling passions, and to observe God's commandments with fear and profound, prayerful repentance. Persistence in these brings peace and serenity to the soul, and fear is gradually transformed into love within a man: "The pain of prayer" turns into "delight," "the flower of illumination dawns," and the Grace of love enlightens us.¹⁰

If we believe correctly and realize that without God we can do nothing, if we are overtaken, on the basis of the foregoing, by Divine yearning, then we make prayer our sustenance and our breath, such that God's gifts become fixed within us and increase, and we are warmed by a holy gladness. Thus is the heart purified and the mind illumined.

Mental prayer is accessible to all; more accurately, to the obedient and not to the disobedient and proud. The Hesychastic method, with watchfulness and prayer, is indispensable for the attainment of love and union with God. Through abstinence, the body is cleansed; through love, anger and lust are transformed into virtues; and through prayer, the purified mind stands before God and receives what our Lord has promised for the pure in heart;¹¹ that is, He indwells all who love Him, manifests Himself as Light to them, and loves them. This Light is not perceptible or material, but preëternal and unending.¹²

Our Lord revealed this Uncreated Light in advance on Mount Tabor during the Divine Transfiguration, and the nature of this Light was in a fundamental sense the object of the anti-heretical struggle of our Saint against those who blasphemed it. St. Gregory's struggle was a struggle of love and truth for the salvation of souls from the poison of heresy, and for this reason he waged it forcefully, but dispassionately, without departing from the ecclesiastical ethos of graciousness and charity.

Ineffable illumination by Divine Light signifies participation in the divinizing Energy and Grace, not in the Essence, of God, in which even the Holy Angels cannot participate. Vision of this Light, and participation in it, are attained through the Divine Power of the Holy Spirit. This deifying union shows the exceeding greatness of God's love for mankind. It is called "union" (σύμφυσις) and "blending" (ἀνάκρασις), and it joins God and man in "one Spirit."¹³ This is the true love of God for man and of man for God. And this is what is accomplished in the Divine Eucharist, in which we no longer have only spiritual, but also bodily conjunction and union with God. In Divine Communion we have—in a spiritual sense—a nuptial union of love and a blending of God and man in "one body" and "one spirit."¹⁴

* * *

What are the hallmarks of true love?

First, when one prays and his mind rejoices in the remembrance of God, without being distracted and without being discontented at the possible prolongation of such prayer; and second, when one prays with compunction and sweet pain of heart, both for himself and for every man, known or unknown, friend or enemy, whether or not he has grieved him.

These things cannot be achieved without practicing manifest deeds of love: firstly, the cutting off of one's own will in order to accomplish the will of his neighbor—when there is no sin involved, of course—since without this attitude we will not show patience in the face of what our neighbor brings upon us; and secondly, endurance with courage and forbearance of all the difficulties that come about for us from men, for otherwise we are not going to make progress in prayer for our enemies.¹⁵

It is well known that love is tested in the afflictions engendered by temptations and that we are assuredly in need of patience towards whatever woes befall us contrary to our will, so that our voluntary deeds might obtain Divine blessing.¹⁶

And indeed, practical deeds of love are indispensable, for whoever does not have deeds of love and compassion resembles the “foolish virgins”¹⁷ with their lamps extinguished, devoid of the oil of love. Whoever does not have deeds of love also resembles him who does not have a “wedding garment,”¹⁸ and hence is unable to take his place at the Supper of the Kingdom, even though he has been invited.¹⁹

At the future Judgment, we will be examined on the summit of all of the virtues, love and beneficence, as the roof atop the house of the virtues and as their seal and crown.²⁰

This is why the Saint, who loved God and man, filled with love and sympathy, exhorts us:

So let us love one another. Let us bear with one another, seeing that we are members one of another. As the Lord Himself said, the sign that we are His disciples is love. When He departed from this world, the fatherly inheritance He left us was love, and the last prayer He gave us when He ascended to His Father was about love for one another.²¹

We conclude with the following “Blessing of Love” from St. Gregory Palamas, an exhortation which is similarly salutary:

Let us show loving deeds towards our brethren in Christ by being merciful to the poor and restoring those who have gone astray; whatever their poverty or error may be, by obtaining justice for the wronged; by encouraging those laid low by sickness, whether their suffering be due to visible enemies and physical ailments or to invisible evil spirits and dishonourable passions; by visiting those confined in prison; and even by bearing with those who injure us, forgiving one another

any cause for complaint we may have among ourselves, as Christ forgave us. In a word, let us show love to one another by all our actions and words. So may we attain to God's love, receive His blessing, and inherit the eternal heavenly kingdom promised to us and prepared for us from the foundation of the world. May we all attain to this by the grace and love for mankind of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom, together with the Father and also the Holy Spirit, be honour and glory unto the ages of ages. Amen.²²

Second Sunday of Great Lent, 2012

Notes

1. *One Hundred and Fifty Chapters on Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life, Intended as a Purge of the Barlaamite Scourge*, §40, in *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Ἄπαντα τὰ Ἔργα*, Vol. VIII, *Ἑλληνες Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας* (Thessalonike: Paterikai Ekdoseis "Gregorios ho Palamas," 1994), p. 122.

2. *Ibid.*, §27, p. 104.

3. *Ibid.*, §40, p. 122.

4. *Sixth Refutatory Discourse Against Akindynos*, ch. 10, §28, in *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Ἄπαντα τὰ Ἔργα*, Vol. VI, *Ἑλληνες Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας* (Thessalonike: Paterikai Ekdoseis "Gregorios ho Palamas," 1987), p. 366.

5. "Homily XXIII," §3, in *Saint Gregory Palamas, The Homilies*, edited and translated from the original Greek with an introduction and notes by Christopher Veniamin (Waymart, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2009), p. 185.

6. "Homily XLV," §5, in *Saint Gregory Palamas, The Homilies*, pp. 355-356.

7. Cf. St. Matthew 22:37-40.

8. "Homily III," §5, in *Saint Gregory Palamas, The Homilies*, p. 20.

9. *Ibid.*, §16, p. 20.

10. *First Discourse on Behalf of the Sacred Hesychasts*, ch. 1, §7, in *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Ἄπαντα τὰ Ἔργα*, Vol. II, *Ἑλληνες Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας* (Thessalonike: Paterikai Ekdoseis "Gregorios ho Palamas," 1982), p. 74.

11. *Ibid.*, ch. 2, §22, p. 122.

12. *Second Discourse on Behalf of the Sacred Hesychasts*, ch. 1, §29, in *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Ἄπαντα τὰ Ἔργα*, Vol. II, p. 312.

13. *Seventh Refutatory Discourse Against Akindynos*, ch. 9, §§28-29, in *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Ἄπαντα τὰ Ἔργα*, Vol. VI, pp. 536-538.

14. "Homily LVI," §10, in *Saint Gregory Palamas, The Homilies*, p. 464.

15. "Homily XLIV," §9, in *Saint Gregory Palamas, The Homilies*, p. 351.

16. *To the Most Reverend Nun Xene, On Passions and Virtues*, §45, in Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ Ἄπαντα τὰ Ἔργα, Vol. VIII, p. 402.

17. Cf. St. Matthew 25:1-13.

18. Cf. St. Matthew 22:11-12.

19. “Homily XVIII,” §15, in *Saint Gregory Palamas, The Homilies*, pp. 150-151.

20. “Homily IV,” §14, in *Saint Gregory Palamas, The Homilies*, p. 29.

21. “Homily XV,” §12, in *Saint Gregory Palamas, The Homilies*, p. 114.

22. “Homily IV,” §§26-27, in *Saint Gregory Palamas, The Homilies*, p. 33.