

The Approach to God: The East versus the West

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

On the Second Sunday of Great Lent, the Holy Church commemorates St. Gregory Palamas, one of the great fathers of the Church who lived in the fourteenth century and actively contributed to one of the most contentious theological debates of his time. St. Gregory defended the notion of theosis (divinization) and the uncreated grace of God that sanctifies humans. His defense was confirmed by two church councils, held in 1341 and 1351, which are ranked in the conscience of the Church as ecumenical councils for the importance of their teachings for the salvation of man, his role and his freedom.

In fact, it is in that century that the effects of the Great Schism between the Christians of the East and the West started to become manifest in major faith issues. For that Great Schism—in which faith and liturgical differences played a small role among political, social and intellectual disputes—was hiding within itself an equally important cause: the difference in mentality between the East and the West in regard to understanding religious matters, especially in what relates to their approach regarding how to understand God.

The Western Latin understanding, after the Schism, leaned towards Greek philosophy, which became the intellectual foundation for explaining the Faith. This method led to what later became known as scholastic theology: the method of approaching and understanding faith matters based on the rules of logic and rational deductions. This method gives a bigger importance to the human mind in explaining religious topics at the expense of the living divine experience. This opened the door for new teachings to penetrate Western theological teaching.

The East, on the other hand, remained dependent on the divine grace that is given to the righteous and purifies those who are pure and leads them to know God through a personal ontological knowledge, for they live in God and He in them. As for the mind, its role is to absorb this divine experience and articulate it in human language in order to explain it and transfer it to those who have not experienced it yet.

The dispute between these two mentalities, or two methods of approaching God, exploded in the fourteenth century around the topic of divine grace and its work in humans. The West maintained that unity with God is unachievable since He is incomparably transcendent above humans. In addition to that, the West affirmed

that the light experienced by the spiritually advanced is a created light and, thus, not itself the light of God. Furthermore, the West affirmed that the grace bestowed by God on humans is a gift from Him—something He gives to humans—and consequently is not a direct manifestation of the living God. On the other hand, the East continued affirming the experience of the divine revelation, as given to humans in the scriptures and continued in the life of those who were sanctified and illumined. And thus, the East taught that this light is an uncreated divine light—that is, the light of God Himself—and that the divine grace is the presence of the work of God Himself in humans and not merely the presence of a gift emerging from Him.

The role of St. Gregory Palamas, who was a great scholar and an experienced spiritual man, stood out in the distinction he offered between God's essence and God's energies. He taught that God remains unapproachable in His essence, while He can touch and sanctify humans through His divine energies.

Orthodox theology bases this teaching on the apostles' experience in the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28). The Gospel tells us that Christ's face shone like the sun and that the three apostles (Peter, James and John) saw that divine light with their physical eyes and experienced Him personally. The divine grace, according to the Orthodox understanding, is the full richness of the divine nature in its connection to humans. The illumined person is graced with the energies of God yet remains unable to see His essence.

The importance of this teaching—which might appear to some as a mere theoretical and intellectual dialogue—lies in man's journey towards holiness and divinization (theosis), which are the goals of the Christian life.

There is a big difference between knowing God through working our mind in what relates to Him and knowing Him through what He reveals to us from His divine energies. Knowing Him only intellectually puts us in danger of creating an image of Him that is very far from reality, because we would have deduced it through our human energies only. God is not known except through living with Him and in Him. He is a living person with Whom we share an experience of meeting, communion and life.

Western theology took an intellectual tendency to approach God and thus philosophy became the main foundation of studying theology; intellectual effort became the focus in the quest for divine knowledge. In the East, however, approaching God remained dependent on experience and unity with Him; the focus remained on the effort to be purified and cleansed.

The notion of the divinization of man remained distorted in the West, and thus, its theology faced many problems such as considering the body impure and a prison for the soul. Therefore, asceticism became a mortification that is based on torturing the body, insulting it, depriving it and contempt towards it. The East, however, continued in the spiritual tradition which taught that the experience of divinization is lived through the presence of divine grace in humans. Thus, asceticism and abstinence are seen as tools for humans to transcend spiritually and to sanctify their bodies and souls, in addition to transfiguring them and the world with them.

The West reduced the Christian life and the way for humans to transcend into legalistic instructions and rules based on reward and punishment — “what is permissible and what is prohibited” — in addition to contempt towards the material and the sanctification of the mind. The East, on the other hand, focused on purification as the means to attain illumination. In addition, it demonstrated the spiritual life as three successive phases that can overlap at times. The first phase is that of the “servant” that works out of fear of punishment; the second phase is that of the “hireling” who seeks the reward; and the third phase is that of the “son” who aims to resemble his father out of love for him. Throughout all this, the focus should always remain on attaining the phase of “sonship.”

The notion of divinization remains unknown to many, even in the East. Humans tend to be satisfied in their religious experiences with what is between their hands—that is, what eases their conscience. It is easier to be a servant or a hireling than to become a son and acquire our father’s attributes. The latter gives us a unique responsibility and requires from us a great love for the Lord and a longing to unite with Him. We can achieve that when we rise above the delights of the world. As St. Sophrony of Essex says, “Our longing and affectionate attraction to the celestial world is our joy, and it is what transforms a painful aging into a bright, dignified one that anticipates the mercies, consolations and embraces of the Father.”

Our religious life is not limited to rules, duties and moralities that we must follow to build a better world. It is rather a love and a longing for God, having realized that we are created in His image. We experience the movement of the remnant of God’s image in us, no matter how distorted it is, toward its origin. That movement is one that we are unable to resist unless we are drowning in ego and selfishness. God will visit us in diverse manners until He is able to open the eyes of our hearts to Him, yet He does not force us. He stays at the door knocking until we open for Him, and

then He enters and dines with us (Rev. 3:20). He shall reveal Himself to humans “as He is,” leaving for us the freedom to interact with Him as we wish.

A French poet once said: When God plays His harp, mountains dance. Who then can stop them?

Originally published in 2016.