

## **The primary aim of theology is knowledge of God (George Mantzarides, Professor Emeritus of the Theological School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)**

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

**On the occasion of the convocation of the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church, we are publishing a text by George Mantzaridis, Emeritus Professor of Theology at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, which deals with the manner in which Orthodox Theology is produced. This text is a contribution to the more general dialogue which is preceding the discussions of the Pan-Orthodox Synod.**

If the primary aim of theology is knowledge of God and if this occurs as a consequence of the loving communion between God and people, hesychasm with tranquillity, as a practical means to and also as fruit of knowledge of God, confirms the authenticity of this knowledge of God meta-theologically, that is empirically and ontologically. The dogmas are of immeasurable depth, according the master of hesychasm, Saint John of the Ladder. The intellect of a hesychast is able to plumb these without danger. Any approach to them without previous liberation from the passions, however, is fraught with peril [27].

This danger was also noted by Saint Gregory the Theologian [28]. Theology presupposes purity in the relationship and communion with the hypostasized Word of God. John of the Ladder makes it clear that when the senses have not been purified and united with God, ‘dialogue with God is a parlous matter’. Anyone who theologizes in such a condition ‘is stating their own conjectures’ [29]. A requisite, and also an authentic state, of theology is tranquillity with purity: ‘Let the work of the apprentice theologian be performed in purity’ [30]. And theology as a state is experienced in mental tranquillity and the tranquillity of the heart. Saint Paul writes that ‘spiritual people judge all things, but are not examined by others., because they have ‘the mind of Christ’ [31]. Mental tranquillity clears the mind of the ascetic and allows familiarity with the mind of Christ. With this charisma, which always functions within the body of Christ, the Church, empirical theological witnesses positively to the transcendent truth of the Spirit, though always using appropriate human discourse.

It is particularly characteristic that in his discourse *On Tranquillity*, Saint Symeon the New Theologian restricts himself almost exclusively to noting cases of people who had forgotten the world and its cares and had devoted themselves to Christ and His gifts. Thus, he mentions the harlot who washed Christ's feet with her tears, entirely focused on Him Who could forgive her sins. He recalls the case of the three disciples who went up Mount Tabor with Christ and experienced the wonder of His Transfiguration, and also the astonishment of the Apostles who were locked in a room, 'for fear of the Jews' when they saw their risen Teacher, and so on.

He says that ascetics should not take these examples merely as narratives, but should see them taking place within themselves. If this does not happen and ascetics depart from the commandments and cease to do bodily works while not knowing how to work spiritually, then they fail in both areas, and sin. Those who know spiritual work well are not prevented by it from completing practical commandments through bodily effort. In fact, they probably find it easier. But if people who have confined themselves to ascetic effort, stop making any, they cannot work spiritually [32]. Saint Gregory Palamas applies the distinction between intellectual and empirical knowledge of God by the use of the terms 'theology' and 'sight of God'. Saint Gregory says that theology is as far removed from the sight of God, which is effected within the light, as the knowledge of a thing is from that thing's acquisition: 'It is not the same for someone to speak about God and to enter into communion with Him'. Theology needs the spoken word, and even the art of speech, as it does the use of logical arguments and proofs, when we want to pass our knowledge to other people. This can be done by people with worldly wisdom, even if they are not spiritually pure. But for people to bring God into themselves and to mingle with His most pure light, insofar as this is possible for human nature, this cannot be done unless they move out of themselves, or rather surpass themselves. And this requires purification, which comes through the exercise of the virtues [33].

This ecstatic [in the sense of transcending the self. It does not mean a paroxysm of emotion] character of the knowledge of God is entirely consonant with ecstatic nature of the Christian view of the human person. People never really fulfil their potential unless they go beyond what they are. We were not created by God to remain as we are. We were created human by nature in order to become gods by Grace. The 'likeness of God' is the ecstatic parameter which was given to us from the time when our nature was formed, for our completion as persons and the achievement of the aim of our existence.

[27] See John the Sinaïte, *op. cit.*, 27, 9, PG 88,1097C.

[28] See Gregory the Theologian *Λόγος* 27 (Θεολογικός 1) ,7, PG 36,13D.

[29] See John the Sinaïte, *op. cit.*, 30,12-13, PG 88,1157C.

[30] *ibid.*

[31] See I Cor. 2, 15.

[32] See Symeon the New Theologian, *op. cit.*, 15, 94 ff., and p. 450 ff.

[33] See Gregory Palamas *Υπέρ των ιερώς ησυχάζόντων* 1, 3, 42, ed. P. Christou, Γρηγορίου του Παλαμά, *Συγγράμματα*, vol. 1, Thessaloniki 1962, p.453.

(To be continued)