

Saint Gregory Palama and the Education in God (Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos))

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Education is a widely discussed issue in our days. The problem is that we have very much distorted views on this important subject. We hear various things that are at least unorthodox. By this we do not mean humanists, that is, those who have a humanist education based mostly on the intellect and rationality, but rather we mean those Christians who identify man-centered education with Christian education. The identification and equality of these two wisdoms, these two types of knowledge is a heretical position and has been denounced by all holy Fathers.

The subject is very serious. In this speech we intend to elaborate on the great subject of education in God. Before proceeding to a precise analysis of education in God, I think it is worthwhile to see the differences between the two educations, in accordance to the teaching of a great Father of the Church, St. Gregory Palamas. St. Gregory lived in the 14th century when there was a strong humanist trend out of which humanist renaissance was born. The 14th century has many common features with our own era, so the reference to the debate between St. Gregory and Barlaam is very constructive.



1. The two types of education

Barlaam, being a bearer of a humanistic spirit, taught that there exists one and single truth. In other words, truth is single and was given by God to mankind by the prophets and the philosophers. Naturally, St. Gregory refutes this position. After presenting his whole teaching which is inspired by the Holy Spirit, which we will quote below, he ends with a question: "How is the truth one?" More specifically, Barlaam argued that what happens in philosophy is similar to what happens in health. There is no difference between the health offered by God and the health offered by medical care, and the same holds true of wisdom. "God gave it to the prophets and the apostles, and He gave it to us through the words of the divine workers ("theourgoi") and the lessons of philosophy, by which we seek and find wisdom" . Barlaam's teaching is revealed clearly in the question posed by Akindynos to St. Gregory Palamas. As is well known, Akindynos expresses Barlaam's view. He (Akindynos) says that he has heard some people saying that monks, too, should seek worldly wisdom, because one cannot be delivered from ignorance and false beliefs, nor attain perfect dispassion, nor achieve sanctity "unless he collects knowledge from everywhere, especially from Greek education". In other words, Barlaam argued that ancient Greek philosophy is God's gift given to philosophers by revelation, similar to the way it was given to the Apostles and the Prophets, and, therefore, this education provides the knowledge of beings as well as the knowledge of God . So Barlaam and many others like him argued about the singleness of truth and this was done to the detriment of Revelation and in favor of philosophy. It was truly a great danger for the Orthodox Church.

St. Gregory Palamas detected the risk of the secularization of the Orthodox theology and this is why he addressed this falsehood. I do not intend to include all arguments and the whole teaching by St. Gregory. I will mention only the central points which will illustrate his differentiation from Barlaam the philosopher.

First of all, in his writings the saint had to make a distinction between the two wisdoms and the two types of knowledge. There can be no confusion between these two wisdoms. A strong support for this teaching, apart from his own personal experience, is derived from the experience and teaching of St. Paul. Our saint uses the words of the Apostle repeatedly: "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1, 21). He also uses another quote by the Apostle: "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power. We do, however, speak a

message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2, 4-8). He also refers to the passage by St. James the Lord's Brother who says on divine wisdom: "Such wisdom does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic" (James 3, 15). He also mentions other passages from the Bible to show the difference between the two wisdoms and types of knowledge, but I am not going to cite them all. I think that what has been mentioned is sufficient to show that the teaching about the distinction of the two types of knowledge, the mental and the spiritual, is the Church's teaching and an experience of all saints.

Analysing the apostolic passage from the epistle to the Corinthians we mentioned above, St. Gregory states that there is abyssal difference between the wisdom of the philosophers and the wisdom of the Prophets and Apostles. He writes characteristically: "the mind of the worldly philosophers is God-given, having by nature intellectual wisdom, but has been diverted by the evil one's suggestions to foolish and wicked and senseless [wisdom], and transformed wisdom to dominating such ideas". Like sensual pleasure for child-bearing in lawful marriages cannot be called God's gift, but rather of the flesh and of nature, even if nature was created by God, we can say the same about worldly knowledge. Even if man uses it well, it is "a natural not a spiritual gift". If we add that there is a worldly education which is against God, then we can say that this wisdom is mental and demonic. This is why St. Gregory asks: "What is the relationship between a God-inspired teaching and vanity? And what does divine wisdom care about the truths of the stars?"

But very often humanistic wisdom is not simply different from divine wisdom. It is also opposite to it. Human wisdom "is contrary to the true and spiritual knowledge". In fact, St. Gregory argues that all human heresies have sprung out of human wisdom, whose center is rationality and human thinking. "And if you examine, you will see that all or most of the heresies have their origin here". The saint's observation is remarkable. If we examine church history carefully we will find out that all heretics originated from human thinking and a man-centered view of life. They always tried to explore and analyse the Church's truth through their reason. On the contrary, the holy Fathers were based on the method of orthodox piety, which is the purification of the heart and the illumination of the nous. After these two stages of spiritual life, they attained the knowledge of God and theologized inspired by God and unerringly within the Church.

But St. Gregory Palamas does not limit himself to this general point. He goes deeper. He stresses that there is a huge difference between the Prophets-Apostles and the philosophers. If it is true that human wisdom and knowledge brings sanctity to man and guides him to the knowledge of God, then those who have this education would be “more God-like” and “more God-seers” than the Fathers and the Prophets during the times of the Law of Moses. He brings the example of John the Forerunner, who reached a very high level of grace, without ever studying human wisdom. As is well known, St. John the Forerunner lived in the desert since his early childhood. St. Gregory asks: “where in the desert are the schools of this futile philosophy, which they call redeeming?” . He stresses the difference between the principle of the philosophers “know yourself” and the teaching of the saints “watch yourself”. If one looks carefully at the philosophers’ command “know yourself”, he will realize that it contains a lot of false belief. It is closely related to the teaching of reincarnation. The philosophers teach that one can obtain perfect knowledge if he examines thoroughly himself and find out where he lived in the past, in what body he was attached, what he did and how he was called. Naturally, by doing this search to himself, in reality he becomes the devil’s obedient instrument who whispers various interpretations to him . For this reason, according to St. Gregory Palamas, there is no relationship and no similarity whatsoever between the saints and the philosophers, nor, of course, between the teaching of the Apostles-Prophets and the teaching of the philosophers. If it seems that there is agreement in certain words and terms, it is an agreement only on external words, while in the depth there is a difference. He writes: “If a Father happens to say the same things as those in the world, the similarity is only in the words; in the meanings there is a lot of distance; because the first have, according to Paul, the mind of Christ, while the second speak out of human intellect, if not something worse” . The holy Fathers have the mind of Christ, while the philosophers and the worldly wise men speak out of their own thinking and sometimes are instruments of the devil.

This position is not an exclusive teaching of St. Gregory Palamas. It is the teaching of the Church, which is expressed by her genuine children, namely the holy Fathers. The saint cites passages from the teaching of St. Basil the Great who, speaking on hesychasm as a basic requirement for the acquisition of the knowledge of God, writes: “this is the good and beneficial school for someone devoted to learning; while the school of the Athenians is wicked, for they do nothing but saying and hearing what is new, even though now there are some who imitate the way of life, being a friend of evil spirits” . St. Basil the Great calls the school of the Athenians wicked and pre-occupation with it is a friend of wicked

spirits. He also presents part of St. Basil's letter to Eustathios, where it is clearly shown that St. Basil regretted for his occupation with human education: "I have wasted a lot of time in useless things and ruined almost all my youth in futility, by spending time in attending lessons of a wisdom made fool by God, and then, like waking up from a deep sleep, I realized the uselessness of the wisdom of the rulers of an age which will be abolished, and I cried a lot for my wretched life, wishing to find some guidance" . In addition to St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory Palamas cites a passage by St. Gregory of Nyssa on philosophy. According to this passage, philosophy is "barren and fruitless, giving product to no one, nor leading to the light of the knowledge of God", while the wisdom of the Spirit is "most fertile and gives birth to many children", has given rebirth to thousands of people right away and led them from dreadful darkness to the marvelous light of God .

St. Gregory Palamas defines also the true philosopher. A true philosopher is "he who seeks and does the will of God", "he who has active word and wise act" . This passage reminds us the truth that when Patristic texts mention that a Christian is a true philosopher they do not mean one who possesses worldly wisdom and education, who has an advanced intellect, but rather one who has the Grace of God in him. I point this out because, based on such patristic passages, there are some who claim that the Fathers of the Church were philosophers and cultivated philosophy. But as we have seen before, there is a great difference between theologians and philosophers.

There is also a great difference between worldly education and education in God. St. Gregory teaches that education in God starts with the fear of God, which then brings continuous prayer to God in compunction and the keeping of the gospel commandments. When through these ways man experiences reconciliation with God, fear is transformed to love and the pain of prayer is converted to joy, and then the flower of illumination blossoms, and by illumination man is offered the knowledge of the mysteries of God. This is true education. On the other hand, an education which starts not from fear of God, as is done with worldly education and wisdom, does not lead to the knowledge of God . Therefore, education in God is offered to a man whose soul is imbued with the fear of God, compunction, unceasing prayer. He who follows and studies this wisdom reaches the knowledge of the mysteries of God, that is, salvation.

Since I would not like to remain on a theoretical level, in what follows I will analyze in more detail the progression of the education in God. It will be shown that education in God is something specific. Only those who follow this course can become true theologians and, therefore, move from the image to the likeness, that

is, to deification. It will be shown that human education is intellectual, rational, while education in God is of the heart. Therefore, there exists an abyssal difference between the two.

2. Education in God

Education in God consists of the coming and hiding of the Grace, of all the knowledge about God and the eternal life offered to man who receives these comings and hidings of uncreated Grace. This education in God is a mystery, because everything acted within the Church is a mystery. We are based very much on the teaching of holy Fathers, who are “initiated by experience” and have received God’s revelation about these realities.

There are several passages about education in God in the Old and the New Testament. We do not intend to cite them extensively. We may refer only to St. Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews. By way of introduction we may state that Christians who originated from the Jews, to whom St. Paul addresses his epistle, received Christ’s Grace and right after that were persecuted by their compatriots. They were a little shaken, so the Apostle writes this epistle stressing some truths including that persecution and, generally, temptation is inextricably linked to the children of God. The whole Chapter 12 of the Epistle to the Hebrews is devoted to this mystery of education.

But this temptation was not only external. It was internal, too. The first Christians faced the problem of the lifting of God’s Grace from their heart and could not comprehend this abandonment by God. They were completely unable to interpret this phenomenon of spiritual life, that is, the participation in the Cross of Christ. St. Paul aims at this objective. We may say, according to the testimony of our saints, that the Apostle mostly refers to this kind of education. Because God works in a way incomprehensible to human reason.

In the works of the holy Fathers, spiritual life is presented as having several stages. They mostly distinguish three, the purification of the heart, the illumination of the nous and deification. St. Maximos calls them “practical philosophy”, “natural theoria” and “mystical theology”. This distinction originates with Aristotle and continues to the holy Fathers with a different content, though. Professor Panagiotis Christou elaborating on the “method of religious experience” describes the distinction of the three phases in religious life . Aristotle divides the phases of religious life in ethical, natural and theological. “Origen in his beloved metaphorical method says that a Christian acquires Christ through the practical one as a host, through the natural one as a King, and through theology as God” . The steps of

spiritual life are three, according to Christ's saying "I am the way (ethical) and the truth (natural) and the life (theology)" (John 14, 6). Evagrius defines Christianity as "doctrine of our Savior Jesus Christ constituted of practical and natural and theological". The same distinction is observed in St. Diadochos of Fotiki, in St. Symeon the New Theologian (who divided his chapters in practical, gnostic, theological) and even in St. Gregory Palamas who used the same distinction in his chapters (ethical, natural, theological).

However, when studying the works of the holy Fathers, especially the so-called neptic ones, we encounter another gradation of spiritual life. This gradation is deeper without abolishing the former stages of spiritual life. Because, according to the experience of many holy Fathers, the transition from one stage to another is achieved by the working of the Grace of God and the pain from the deprivation of Grace until its new coming. So, according to this, we can distinguish three stages in spiritual life: the coming of Grace, the hiding of Grace from man, and its new coming to man's heart. The God-bearing Fathers express this deep experience in their works, and, in what follows, we will try to present it to the extent possible.

St. Makarios the Egyptian refers to this fact in his spiritual sermons. He writes: "He who hears a word reaches compunction and, after this, grace is lowered by divine providence to man's benefit, and he enters war exercises and education, and struggles and competes against Satan, and after a long road and struggle he is awarded victory and becomes a Christian" .

This is a remarkable observation. It manifests what was said before, namely that education is the fight during the lifting of Grace, and also shows clearly that the stages of spiritual life are identified with the coming, the lowering, and the new coming of the Grace of God. Indeed, he remarks characteristically that a person becomes a Christian not with the compunction caused by the coming of Grace, but rather with the struggle that will follow. Then he acquires the experience and knowledge of God, as will be expressed below.

St. Siluan the Athonite expresses the same experience: "The Elder had an empirical knowledge of spiritual progression. He showed three essential stages of it: first, the receiving of grace; second, its lifting and, third, its reacquisition by a struggle of humility. There have been many who received the grace, not only within the Church but outside it too — because there is no favoritism in Lord — but there is no one who has kept the first grace and only a few have re-acquired it. Someone who ignores the period of the second coming, someone who has not passed through the struggle for its return, essentially has an incomplete spiritual experience.

Elder Siluan was rich through his personal experience and also well trained theoretically in the ascetic writings of the Fathers of the Church; by God's gift he was not only faithful to the tradition of the Church but also the experience of the great Fathers was repeated in him" .

Let us see in more detail these three stages of spiritual life.

a) The first coming of Grace

In the texts of the Old and the New Testament we see clearly that God manifests Himself to the Prophets in various ways. "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Hebrews 1,1).

God contracts with each person a personal covenant. He does not want us to have knowledge about Him through the testimonies of others, He Himself appears and gives His knowledge, and man acquires his own personal testimony about God. This first personal contact with God occurs at a time unanticipated by man or even after a painful search. It might also happen to a man fighting against Him. This is the case of St. Paul who sees God, Christ Himself appears and contracts a personal covenant with him, at the time he was going to fight against Him. This personal coming of the Grace is a holy state. Man's soul gets to know God as a person, albeit dimly. He understands with his heart, his nous as the Fathers say, that God is not an abstract state nor an impersonal power or a great value, but a Person.

This first coming of God's Grace, which is tasted differently by each one, is a life full of inner experiences of the heart and of mystical spree. St. Diadochos of Fotiki writes: "In the beginning Grace is accustomed to illuminate the mind in much [spiritual] perception in Grace's own light" .

At another point he writes: "In the beginning of our progress, if indeed we warmly and ardently desire the virtue of God, the Holy Spirit makes the nous taste in every [spiritual] perception and inner spiritual assurance the sweetness of God, so that the nous be able to know in exact knowledge the perfect reward of the God-loving ascetical practices" .

With this first period of the coming of God we receive one chapter of a new life, one chapter of Grace. God attracts us to Him, so that after a lot of struggle and sacrifices we become acquainted with Him. We will refer to this pain, this struggle below. Here we must note that this new period of God's calling is a period of sweetness, spiritual joy, of inner experiences of the heart.

A lot of people live this paschal atmosphere. It suffices to mention a written testimony about the state in which St. Siluan lived after Christ's appearance to him. "At the moment of God's Epiphany his whole existence was informed that his sins had been absolved. The flames of Hades that roared around him disappeared, the hell he experienced for half a year stopped. He was now granted to live the special joy and great rest of appeasement with God. In his soul a new sweet feeling of love for God and people, each one person, dominated. The prayer of repentance ceased, that unbearable fiery search for absolution which did not allow sleep to come to his eyelids went away. Did this mean that he could now quietly give over to sleeping? Of course not.

The first period after Epiphany, Symeon's soul, who got to know its resurrection and saw the light of true and eternal existence, lived in a paschal feast. Everything was beautiful: the world was magnificent, people were congenial, nature was unspeakably beautiful, the body changed and became lighter, strength was added, God's words gave joy to the soul, all-night vigils in the church and, above all, prayers in the cell became sweet. Overflowing by joy the soul felt compassion for people and prayed for the whole world" .

It is impossible to describe this state in words. The experience of uncreated Grace cannot be contained in created words. Only a reborn person, a person initiated by experience, is able to perceive this reality. Everything is new during this period. He feels the presence of God as a personal experience, he views the essence of beings in all creation. Everything is clear. Birds, trees acquire a new dimension. He sees everything in the perspective of eternity, under the energy of uncreated Grace and uncreated Light. Mankind's common problems no longer occupy him. He does not care for others' opinion about him. He is indifferent to any hardship. His sole preoccupation is prayer and communion with God. It is a life centered on love. This love was born by the coming of Grace. "Blessed is he who has acquired such a desire for God, like a maniac lover has for his beloved one ... Pierced by such an arrow, someone said about himself (and I admire it) that "I sleep", due to the need of nature, "but my heart is alert", due to the multitude of love" .

Passions are not activated. Man “suffers deification”.

The first coming of Grace to man’s heart is a shocking experience. Man feels a whole life inside him. When St. Symeon was asked how one can know that he has the holy Grace in him, he said that this is most natural. He realizes that he has become a temple of the Holy Spirit and that the Grace of God camps in him the same way a pregnant woman realizes the existence of an embryo in her womb. It is not a sentimental excitement and elation, but rather a sense of life.

In this state man finds what the Holy Scripture and the holy Fathers call “deep heart”. The nous, returning to the heart from its previous dispersion through the senses in the surrounding world, initially locates the bodily organ of the heart and then enters the so-called spiritual heart, that is, the center of man’s existence. We can say, according to the teaching of the so-called neptic fathers, that the heart is the place which is discovered by asceticism in Grace, and where God Himself is revealed. In reality, when we speak about the person in the Church we mean this place of the heart. A person is the “inner self, the unfading ... spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight” (1 Peter 3, 4). Finding this blessed place is essential, because this constitutes man’s salvation. When asked on this, Abbot Pamvo replied: “if you have heart you can be saved”. Inside the heart, which in patristic theology is identified with the nous, man is united with God, as St. Gregory the Theologian says, “God united with gods and becoming known in the heart”. Then the heart becomes a Temple where an unceasing Divine Liturgy is celebrated, and in this case man becomes a true priest of the holy Grace, “spiritual clergy”, according to St. Gregory Sinaite.

The union of the nous - attention — with the heart is evident, that is, man has proofs of this union. I would like to mention three proofs at this point.

The first is that there is a pain in the bodily organ of the heart. A pain which seems like a wound, but causes a spiritual pleasure, tranquility and inner peace. This pain holds the nous to the prayer done in the heart. This pain brings together the whole existence of man on this point. In this state, man thinks and acts through the heart. A faith is developed which, according to St. Gregory Palamas, is a “comprehension of the heart”.

A second indication is that tears of compunction start flowing. The holy Fathers teach that when there is a sweetest state of compunction, this is a clear indication that the nous has been united with the heart. This compunction is associated with joyful tears.

A third indication is that prayer is done by itself. This unceasing prayer is not simply a movement of reason, it is something deeper. Man hears clearly the bodily heartbeat, and simultaneously under this beat at a long distance, as he feels it, another beat is heard, faster than the natural heartbeat. This is the beat of spiritual heart, a fact which means that the spiritual heart has been discovered and then man becomes a person. For the person is revealed from above, it is the coming of the Rule of God in the heart. The Jesus prayer is said unceasingly with this spiritual beat. Man does not try to pray, prayer is done by itself. It is self-activated, both during the work of daytime and even during sleep-time. That is, while he sleeps a few hours so that the body gets a rest, during that state he feels very well that the heart is sleepless and prays, in accordance with the saying of St. John of the Ladder who comments on a passage in the song of Songs "I am asleep and my heart is awake. I sleep due to the need of nature and my heart is alert due to the multitude of love". When he wakes up he senses very well that the body has slept, but he also senses very clearly that the heart has not stopped praying.

I would like to describe a few more states experienced by man when he becomes a temple of the All-Holy Spirit, that is, when the holy Grace dwells in his heart.

A communion of love with God is established. It is not simply a psychological state or even simply a spiritual experience of the element of physical love. It is a purely spiritual experience. Then man comprehends St. Maximus' the Confessor saying that God "is love and beloved" or that St. Ignatius the God-bearer calls Christ love ("eros"): "my love has been crucified". I repeat this is not physical eros, because it has been preceded by the purification of the heart. In fact, when this spiritual eros operates, the passions become inoperative. Man lives in a state of impassion. He experiences God in the desert as well as in the crowds.

The spiritual senses are also developed, namely, noetic sense, noetic vision and noetic hearing. The whole nous is concentrated inside the heart. This way it achieves the unification of man's entire existence. He realizes very well that he is reborn. He senses warmth in the heart, both the physical and the spiritual one. It is the same experience the Disciples had on the road to Emmaus, when they said: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road?". This warmth rejuvenates man's entire existence. It feeds him and gives life to him.

This causes a deepest peace of thoughts. In the process of purification the nous discards continuously all foreign elements which like scales covered it before. It thus becomes lighter and always finds shelter in the heart. There it hears the voice of God several times. God speaks to him and reveals his will inside the heart. There is a personal acquaintance with God and thus he acquires the spiritual knowledge of God.

However, this course is not a course of emotional joy. Spiritual joy is closely associated with spiritual mourning. The holy Fathers use a word to express this well. It is the word "harmolype"(joy-sadness). Despite the certainty of God's existence, despite the feeling of God's presence and of His love, he feels simultaneously deep repentance. This is how we realize that this joy is genuine and true. The nous, entering the heart, sees on the one hand God's love and on the other his own impurity, because man's sanctity cannot even be compared to God's sanctity. Therefore, he often immerses in lamentation. This may be expressed physically, but, mostly, it is done inside the heart. He feels his heart shedding tears, weeping, and these tears cleanse the heart from sin and the passions.

Having this inner life, man sees the essence of beings in all nature, since in the teaching of the holy Fathers there are uncreated reasons in all nature, not simply natural laws. He sees all things differently. He feels he has acquired a new sense of life. He reads the texts of the Holy Scripture and of the holy Fathers in a different way. He acquires new eyes and a new perception. Even a brief reading transfuses blood of life to the heart.

At that point the passions no longer act. Man experiences his rebirth. At the same time other people around him have an irrepressible thirst for contempt. He is not saddened by this contempt, in fact he loves it and seeks it even more.

St. Basil the Great analyzing this severe and unbearable desire felt by those who have the Grace of God says characteristically: "blessed are those who love to see the true beauty; having attached themselves to it through love, and being in love

with the heavenly and blessed love, they neglect their family and friends and their houses and all their possessions; and neglecting even their physical need for food and water they cling only to the divine and pure love”.

b) The lifting of the Grace - A Course in the desert

However, this state is not going to last for long. The duration of the Grace after the first coming is different for each person. It depends on various factors. On his zeal, on God' economy, on his way of life, etc. Nevertheless, after a certain period Grace is lowered.

In the works of the holy Fathers this state is known. There are differences in the terminology. Lowering, lifting, abandonment, abandonment by God, etc. Nevertheless, it refers to the same thing which is due to various reasons.

What is the lifting of the Grace? Is it a real lifting and abandonment? How is it possible for God to completely abandon man?

The Fathers are expressive on this point. “Of course it is not an objective full withdrawal of Grace, rather the soul subjectively experiences the reduction of the power of Grace as abandonment by God” .

The “vision” of God is reduced by various degrees and man experiences this reduction as abandonment by God.

St. Diadochos of Fotiki refers to an educational concession and a concession by aversion. The first occurs for reasons God knows, they contribute to our salvation and our education, the second for our sins .

These show clearly that the Grace is not completely removed from man, but rather hides itself, or better, lowers itself, to give man the opportunity to grapple with sin, to fight against passions, and to seek fiercely its new return. This fight, as will be shown below, is painful and has a different duration for each person. Nevertheless, man is in a desert for several years... He feels as if walking in a spiritual desert, in a land without the life-giving breath of the holy Grace.

What is the purpose of the lowering of the holy Grace? St. Diadochos writes: “...being true infants of the Grace of God, we believe that we are nurtured by it by small concessions and abundant invocation, so that by its goodness we manage to become a perfect man, to attain to the whole measure” . This way we grow up spiritually and from “breast-fed” infants we attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, that is, we reach communion with Christ. This communion is

man's salvation.

Besides, we are impassioned men, and thus we are unable to hold the Grace of God. Grace indicates the road and the goal to us and then leaves us to cleanse ourselves in order to achieve this "goal". Several times in our spiritual life we feel that the body is unable to follow the soul's progression to Deification. "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26, 41). Through education in God the body acquires a certain ability to follow the course of the soul.

St. Nikodemos Hagiorite referring to the journey of the Magi, to the adoration of Christ, and specifically to the fact that they lost the star guiding them, writes: "... like the bright star that guided and consoled the Magi in their journey hid itself, in order to test their patience and their bravery and then reappeared and caused them greater joy than before; "when they saw the star, they were overjoyed" (Matthew 2, 10), the grace of God usually does the same to its servants and friends, as the so-called neptic Fathers say, and especially St. Diadochos. Sometimes, like a child-loving mother, she consoles and gladdens her children with her noetic illumination and divine energy and gifts, illuminating their nous, bringing contrition most sweetly to their heart and warming it and stimulating it towards the love of God; and sometimes it hides itself from them and allows temptations to go to them, like a mother often hides from her children to test their patience and brave heart, so that through temptations and grief they become grownups and not remain infants forever, to cry and ask strongly for the holy grace they have lost. And thus, after they enjoy it again, they rejoice even more, like a child who loses his mother and searches for her weeping and crying, and when he sees her somewhere runs in unspeakable joy and crying and laughing at the same time falls into her lap" .

This period is a period of assimilation of the Grace which man had tasted in his first contact with it. Doctrinal consciousness is born out of this assimilation. And this assimilation lasts many years for an ascetic and athlete of this spiritual course .

However, this par excellence blessed period is not so easy. Man goes through pain and great sorrow. The holy Fathers stress this side too in their works, speaking out of personal experience.

St. Isaac the Syrian describes part of this pain: "And at some point our soul is drowned and becomes like being in the waves. Even if one reads the scripture, or celebrates the Liturgy, or does anything, whatever he approaches he receives darkness upon darkness. And he goes out and often is not even allowed to approach. And he does not believe that he undergoes a transformation and this is

done in peace. That hour is full of despair and fear, and the hope in God and consolation by his faith have been completely ejected out of his soul; and it is throughout filled with hesitation and fear” .

The pain is great. The soul has known God and now has lost this communion. Before it got to know God, everything was agreeable. Human life with its details and its pleasant moments gladdened it. Now they no longer do. At the same time it has lost God’s Grace and is inconsolable. It falls to a despair in God. This is the privilege of despair. Crying becomes a way of life. Repentance is insatiable. God’s Grace which lies secretly in man’s heart helps him not despair. Thus he starts concentrated prayer, undeterred sigh, an inexhaustible source of tears. He cries out for God. His life is imbued in pain.

St. Symeon the New Theologian describes vividly this experience:

Oh, what is this reality hidden to all created essence!

What is this intelligible light, which no one sees

And what is this abundant wealth, which no one in the world

Has ever been able to discover or possess totally?

It is elusive to all, the world cannot contain it.

It is most longed for, more than the entire world;

It is desirable also, as much as this God surpasses

Visible things created by Him.

It is in that that I am wounded by His love,

Insofar as I do not see it, I dry up in my mind,

My nous and my heart are burning and groan.

I wander and I am on fire, searching here and there,

And nowhere do I find the Lover of my soul.

I frequently cast glances all around to see my Beloved

And He, the invisible One, never shows Himself to me” .

Then we are able to speak about Adam’s lament within the confines of our personal

life. Then we are able to understand Adam's grief after he committed the sin. This is how Elder Siluan felt it. He felt the loss of Grace or the lowering of Grace as Forefather Adam did. This is why he writes in a doleful and supplicatory way.

"The silence of the desert does not delight me.

The mountain tops do not attract me.

The beauty of forests and meadows does not bring me rest.

The singing of the birds does not sooth my pain. Nothing, nothing gives me joy now.

My soul has cracked of too much sorrow.

I have insulted my beloved God.

Even if the Lord would take me to paradise again I would lament there sadly, sorely:

For I have embittered my beloved God".

Expelled from Paradise, springs of tears gushed out of Adam's wounded heart. Similarly, every soul that has known the Lord laments for Him and says:

"Where are you Lord?

Why do you hide Your face?

My soul has not seen your Light for long and seeks You full of sorrow.

Where is my Lord?

Why don't I see Him in my soul?

What hinders Him from dwelling in me?

So, Christ-like humility and love for my enemies are not in me.

For God is love infinite, love impossible to explain" .

Then, the athlete experiences death existentially. Because man's separation from God is true death. God is life. Departure from life inevitably brings death. During this period man may experience the memory of death as a gift. We repeat, this is not human despair, it is in-God despair. It is not a human fear of God, it is a fear of God by Grace. We realize this because in the second case there is inspiration, prayer! According to the Fathers, the memory of death is not a remembrance of death, because this is something anyone can have by viewing the corruptibility of

the world. It is that too, but mostly the memory of death is a gift .

God has died for him. Essentially he himself has died for God. The athlete of this spiritual life sees death in his depths, throughout his existence. And, as he lives a Paschal experience and everything outside is bright when he feels the Grace inside him, the opposite happens with the feeling of death dominating his existence. Everything is dead. Nothing satisfies him. He sees death everywhere. He sees that all humans are mortal. For this reason he does not ask for power from mortals. Is it not a macabre sight to see someone being the ruler of mortals and of the dead, to be the ruler in a cemetery?

This is man's self-emptying in the model of Christ's self-emptying. The saints definitely pass through this state. It is hades, an experience of hell. The flames of hell burn everything. Inner disposition, desire, even the body itself .

It is important to mention and try to explain this period of spiritual life, because there are many who go through it but do not know what exactly it is. They reach complete despair, ignoring the character of spiritual life, ignoring education in God. Thus, they feel lost, they despair. There are cases where monks abandoned monastic life and went to the world violating the promises they gave to God during their tonsure. Others run to psychiatrists to obtain an explanation of these states, and others still go mad.

To all these we say that this is a natural state. All those fighting the good fight pass through this temptation. This way they acquire spiritual experience. For this reason there is need for a lot of patience, intense and concentrated prayer. St. Paul the Apostle writes: "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons at all" (Hebrew 12, 7-9)

It must be said that even a little prayer during this period is equivalent with many hours of prayer of the previous period. Man learns to pray noetically during this period. He learns many ways of noetic prayer. Because of severe pain, of great repentance, the athlete's nous concentrates on the heart. He cries. Like a ship throwing an anchor to the bottom of the sea, similarly the nous is thrown to the heart. It stays there and this constitutes noetic prayer.

After learning that this is a natural state, we have to learn the ways of dealing with it.

Patristic teaching recommends patience, prayer, and resorting to teachers who

know these truly blessed states by experience. Obviously we need persons who have passed through these stages. These are true and proper spiritual fathers who can guide the people of God. This is the great value of the monks for our times. They comfort, they guide, they inspire and calm people.

St. Diadochos stresses that it is impossible to acquire the perfection of divine Grace. This is why the soul aches, this is why it has to struggle, so that it receives Grace bit by bit, until man acquires life and immortality devours mortality .

c) The new coming of the Grace

After many year of struggle, the Grace comes again to man and fills him with inner joy. It also brings the knowledge of God and everything divine to him. St. Symeon the New Theologian is a bearer of this tradition and life. He writes in a poem:

“But when I begin to weep, as desperate, then

He shows Himself and He looks at me, He who contemplates all creatures.

In amazement, I admire the splendour of His beauty,

And how, having opened the heavens, the Creator inclined

And showed me His glory, indescribable, marvellous.

And so who could draw nearer to Him?

Or how would he be carried away towards measureless heights?

While I reflect on this, He Himself is discovered within myself,

Resplendent in the interior of my miserable heart,

Illuminating me on all sides with His immortal splendour,

Shining upon all my members with His rays,

Completely intertwined with me, He embraces me totally,

He gives Himself to me, the unworthy one,

And I am filled with His love and His beauty,

And I am sated with divine delight and sweetness.

I share in the light, I participate also in the glory,

And my face shines like my Beloved's,

And all my members become bearers of light.

Then I finally become more beautiful than those who are beautiful,

Wealthier than those who are wealthy and more than all the mighty

I am mighty and greater than kings,

And much more precious than all that is visible,

Not only more than the world or the men of the world, but also more than Heaven

And all the angels of Heaven, for I possess the Creator of the whole universe.

To whom is due glory and honour, now and forever. Amen" .

And in another poem the same Father writes:

"Again the light illumines me, again it is distinctly seen,

Again it opens the heavens, again it cuts through the night.

Again it brings all things into being, again it alone is seen.

Again it takes me out of all visible things" .

The new coming of God's Grace takes man out of the spiritual desert in which he lived before and moreover liberates him from the spiritual hades in which he was. The hades is a place where the rays of uncreated Grace do not enter or rather where they are experienced as fire. The hades of personal life is filled with light with the coming of Christ's Grace. Christ liberated the just ones of the Old Testament with His descent to hades and likewise He Himself takes man out of the peculiar spiritual mortification. The fire of hell and despair, which burned him before, is now transformed to the light of eternal life. He comprehends very well the distinction between cerebral knowledge and empirical knowledge of God, because the knowledge of God is offered through the illumination of the nous and the vision of God.

He then acquires an inner tranquility which is not shaken, not affected by anything external. Everything psychological is transformed to spiritual experience. The

Grace of God is united with man's nature and makes it light.

In his previous states man experienced intense fluctuations and changes, sometimes fire sometimes light, but now he lives a spiritual balance.

Man's existence has been cured. The struggle with God has ceased. The soul knows God well. Although he feels that he is the biggest sinner, he also feels that he is reborn and is certain that some other body sinned, some other person committed sins. And, indeed, he is another person, because now there is a new, reborn man. The body is transformed and is able to withstand the new life. In general, he feels a deep tranquility and spiritual balance. Christ becomes his life and his delight. Despite his unworthiness he feels a member of the risen body of Christ.

In this state, man becomes a theologian or rather a spring of theology. Theology springs, emanates from all his existence. St. John of the Ladder writes: "The growth of fear is the beginning of love, but a complete state of purity is the foundation of theology. He who has perfectly united his feeling to God is mystically led by Him to an understanding of His words. But without this union it is difficult to speak about God. The engrafted Word perfects purity, and slays death by His presence; and after the slaying of death, the disciple of theology is illumined. The Word of the Lord which is from God the Father is pure, and remains so eternally. But he who has not come to know God merely speculates. Purity makes its disciple a theologian, who of himself grasps the dogmas of the Trinity" .

He who has passed through this course becomes "a God-inspired book for others" according to the words of St. Symeon the New Theologian .

If man does not go through these stages, he cannot be considered a Christian, according to the words of St. Makarios we mentioned in the beginning. It is only then that he "becomes a Christian". Moreover, one cannot be considered to be a priest, a spiritual father, if he has not known the coming, the hiding and the new coming of the divine Grace. Because then he will have a mutilated spiritual experience. Of course, it is possible for man to leave this world while being in the desert of spiritual life, that is, during the period of the lifting of Grace. This is what happens with most Christians. Nevertheless, if he has patience and if he perseveres, he will also enter the Rule of God, as happened with Moses. He did not enter the land of promise, but he is Moses the Great who has so much glory that he appeared during Christ's Transfiguration.

This is education in God. It is neither a rational knowledge nor a memorization of scriptural and patristic passages; it is a personal knowledge of the coming and

lifting of Grace. This education has no relation with Schools and books; it is related to our staying within the whole atmosphere of Orthodox Tradition.

We must pray to God to open for us the way of His knowledge, to acquire this education, even if we pass through a lot of spiritual pain. At the same time, we must ask him not to abandon us completely, but give us consolation and comfort during that period, so that we manage to withstand the great burden of sorrows.

The road to the Rule of God passes through mysterious paths. Education in God is incomprehensible to human reason and to the criteria of this world, but is the only secure way to attain communion with God.

Lecture to Athens University students in the Hall of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece on the 2nd Sunday of the Lent 1989 (9th of April). Source:

<http://www.parembasis.gr/index.php/en/articles-in-english/83-education-in-god>