

The globalized and the universal person: on the sacred memory of Saint Païsius (George Mantzarides, Professor Emeritus of the Theological School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

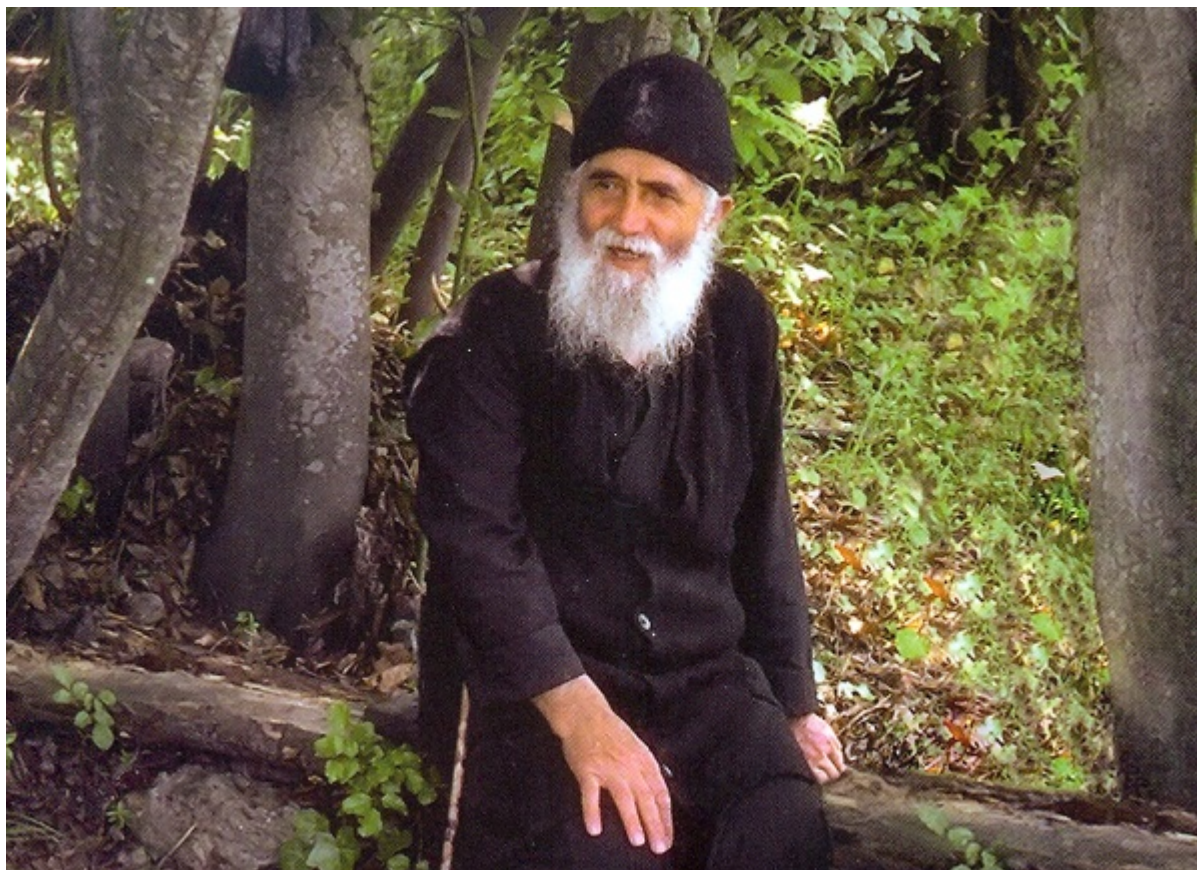


July 12, the Feast of Saint Païsius

People weren't made to stay where they are. They were made to become what they aren't. Our majesty isn't to be found in the present or the past, but in our future. Stagnation in the present, as immobility, is the equivalent of death. And any movement towards the past is motion towards the non-being from which we were called by the Creator's command. It's only movement towards the future that denotes vitality and the chance of prospering.

The time of our life acquires meaning and content only when it unfolds as a movement towards the fulfilment of the purpose of our existence, the purpose for which we were created. And that purpose is for us to become what we aren't. We're made in the image of God and are called to become like Him. To become gods by grace.

Despite this, almost all scientific research on people and the world is most often directed towards the past: to primeval people and the first moments of the creation of the world. What were people like initially. How did they evolve? What were the conditions of their life? How did they arrive at today's state? How did the cosmos come about? What about the beginning of the universe? What are its true dimensions, and so on?



A whole host of researchers from various parts of the world are working, at the present moment, at the research centre at CERN, in Switzerland, and enormous sums are being spent so that we can understand the past and to advance our knowledge, even by just a few fractions of a second, concerning the Big Bang. And one is tempted to wonder, along with Socrates, and say: 'What is it about these people? Did they imagine they'd learned everything there was to know about people and so devoted themselves to other things, or have they abandoned the study of humans and have engaged in the examination of other things in the belief that in this way they're doing their duty?'[1].

Our first duty is to try and examine and understand ourselves. And the first consequence of such an effort is humility and repentance. When we examine ourselves and come to know our internal state, when we understand what we really are and what we should be, it's natural that we should be humbled, to repent for what we are and to want to remedy the situation.

Of course, there's another possibility: that we'll justify ourselves and reckon that we're just about saints, because we haven't committed any egregious wickedness in our life (haven't killed, haven't robbed, haven't dishonoured). This is why we need to have some measure of comparison in our conscience, so that we know what a person should be. Where our value as people lies and what the purpose of

our life is.

When he was already advanced in age, Elder Païsius, this great saint of our times, said: 'I've gone white as a monk. But the further I go, the blacker I become internally, also as a monk, but a negligent one. But I justify myself as being sick, when I happen to be ill and as being sick at other times when I'm perfectly well and deserve a good beating' [2]. Moreover, in his spiritual testament he writes the following: 'On my word, I, the Monk Païsius, as I have examined myself, have seen that I have violated all the Lord's commandments, and have committed all the sins. It is of no importance whether some have happened to a lesser extent, because I have no exoneration, because the Lord has been so good to me. Pray that the Lord will have mercy on me'.

What was the measure to which Saint Païsius held himself? As is clear from his spiritual testament, it was God's commandments. And what ideal did he have in his mind? Who was the person he wanted to sculpt in his life? His ideal was to be a real person, a person as his Creator wanted him to be, a creature 'in His image' [3].

We weren't made to remain as we are: transient and mortal. We were made to become what we aren't: permanent and immortal. We were made to become the same as God, created gods, gods through grace. People who reach perfection, writes Saint Maximos the Confessor and gods in all things except participation in the divine essence [4], because in that case, to all intents and purposes, they would cease to be human and we'd be left with pantheism pure and simple.

It seems, however, that we spurn this sublime destination. We don't seek it. We don't investigate it. We avoid it. And usually people avoid what they fear. All the centuries-long research and inquiries which we've made have been concerned, as we've said, with the past, with our pre-history and the pre-history of the cosmos. Today, in particular, in what is known as post-modernity, it seems that everything's become history and there are no prospects at all for the future.

Even calling this era 'post-modernity' seems to indicate the end of historical ages. What era can be imagined after post-modern? And there's much other evidence which points towards some sort of exclusion of the future, some termination in the present or, even more so, some taste of the end of all things. This is why today there's talk of the end of ideologies, the end of philosophy, the end of politics and the end of history.

Naturally, this phenomenon isn't unrelated to the more general experiences people have, with the downturn in the economy, environmental problems and many other

areas. What makes this era special, however, is our terrible alienation as persons, the stripping away of our inner world, the way we're reduced to being mere numbers and our classification by machines.

Elder Paisios wrote: 'Machines have multiplied, beguilement with them has increased, they've made people into machines and now the machines and things made of iron tell people what to do. Which is why our hearts have become hard as iron. With all these means that there are now, our conscience isn't being cultivated' [5]

Cultivation of the conscience, with the will of God as the guide, and the observance of His commandments, summed up in the dual commandment of love, opens up our heart so that we can embrace the whole world, the whole of creation. In this way we become 'universal'. The saints of our Church were people such as that: universal people.

A pre-requisite for universality is the eradication of egotism, which confines us to ourselves and isolates us from God and other people.

Selfishness makes us want to keep everything for ourselves and to use everything and everyone to serve our own interests. It's people like this who are shaping globalization.

They're the globalized people of our time.

Universal people are exactly the opposite. They open themselves up and widen their hearts to make room for the whole world. They eradicate the ego, the 'I', and turn it into a universal 'we'. They see their real selves in the faces of others and, in the person of others, they see the person of Christ: 'If you do this to one of the least of my brethren, you do it to me' [6].

Such a man was Elder Paisios, a universal person, just as were the other Fathers of our Church. Indeed, the hymnographers call them 'Universal Fathers'. All of them were imitators of the first universal person, Christ the new Adam, Who is the foundation and model of unity and of our universality.

We live in the era of globalization. An age where the person is crushed and we're treated as units of production or consumption. It's an age which has been shaped by entirely different political systems, which in a strange- though not theologically inexplicable manner- agreed on one thing: the eradication of people as persons. They agreed, which is how they arrived at the same conclusion from diametrically opposed starting points. Naturally it was impossible for any of these systems to

approach, let alone achieve universality.

Universality is promoted and achieved through the presence of universal persons. Persons who cultivate a humble outlook, eradicate egotism and embrace the whole of the world with love. The perfect person is a universal person. And the perfect society is one made up of universal members.

But how can we imagine or conceive of such a society? Biology today tells us that every cell in an organism has all the information concerning the composition of that organism. In other words, each one of the cells of an organism contains within it the whole organism to which it belongs and is able to reproduce it. This is true of plants, animals and human beings. This is what the efforts at cloning are based upon.

The similarities of all these cells, however, doesn't make them uniform, nor does it prevent them from being different and from forming the enormous variety of tissues, organs and members of the body: blood, innards, hands, feet, eyes and so on. Initially, all the cells in our organism are similar to each other, but they become different in order to make up the harmonious unity of our indivisible organism.

So like every other living organism, people are formed from cells, each of which potentially contains the whole of the organism. Human society, likewise, if it wishes to have organic unity, i.e. universality, must have persons, each of whom possesses within them the whole of human society, with the power of common understanding and love. When certain cells in the human organism rebel and disobey the rules, they then begin to develop to the detriment of the organism, to the point where they destroy it and are themselves destroyed (malignant growths, carcinomas). The same is true for human society.

As opposed to globalization, which is ruinous for us and for human dignity and which is being promoted today, we have Christian universality. The universality which the Saints and Fathers of the Church cultivate through their humility and love. This was the universality of the heart, which Elder Paisios experienced and transmitted in our own time. When asked what his heart said, he replied: 'What my heart says is to take a knife, cut it into little pieces, share it out among people and then die'.

[1] See Xenophon, Memorabilia, 1,1,11-12.

[2] Elder Paisios the Athonite, Epistles, Holy Monastery 'Evangelist John the Theologian' Souroti, Thessaloniki 2002

[3] See Gen. 1, 26. [In his Foreword to The Monk of Mount Athos, Elder Sophrony's

account of the life of Saint Silouan, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom writes that the book 'gives us the background of traditional Orthodox spirituality which nurtured him, which, indeed, made him what he was, an Orthodox Monk who sought to be a Man in the Image of Christ'. WJL].

[4] Maximos the Confessor, Questions, PG 91, 1308B.

[5] Elder Paisios the Athonite, With pain and love, Holy Monastery 'Evangelist John the Theologian' Souroti, Thessaloniki 2007.

[6] Cf. Matth. 25, 40.

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