

STILLNESS AS A MEANS TO ATTAIN TO THE GODLY PASSION OF LOVE

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the role of mental prayer in achieving the image and likeness of God and renouncing worldly passions, bringing hesychastic theory into conversation with the life and outward conditions of modern man.

Keywords: St. Silouan the Athonite, St. Sophrony (Sakharov), ascetic labor, stillness, *hesychia*, hesychasm, spiritual perfection, mental prayer, prayer of the heart, divine likeness, contemplation and vision of God, spiritual pleasure

In writing the *Life* of his Elder, Saint Silouan, Saint Sophrony summarized the spiritual tradition of the Orthodox Church. In the book *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, he describes the path of repentance and spiritual perfection in all its length; he shows how man turns from his fallen state to God, how he undertakes the work of repentance, and which measures he can attain by the grace of Christ.

God is passionless and, as His image, man was also created passionless. Man is a reasonable creature. His beauty and his ability to receive and bear the breath of his Creator constitute the image of God in him. The dynamic increase from one fulness of love and sanctification to a greater fulness is the ineffable gift of likeness to God. By bestowing His image upon man, God gave him a spiritual capital. Through the gift of His likeness, He opened before him the way, so that by walking therein and cooperating with God, he might attain to the fulness of the gift. God wanted His creature to become the author of his own likeness to Him, so that He might render praise to him.

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According to the words of the holy Fathers, the model for man's creation was the Son and Word of the Father, Who was not yet incarnate, but known by God. Moreover, St. Gregory Palamas underlines that God created man's nature to be suitable for the "future teaching" of the Gospel.¹ This word of the saint explains the fact that for those who are images of God and who strive to acquire His likeness, the word of the Gospel is known, intimate, one with their nature. Conversely, it is a criterion of man's spiritual progress: when the Christian athlete begins to feel intimacy with the word of God, when he has similar thoughts and dispositions to those contained in the Gospel, it means that the image of God in him grows towards His likeness.

True human nature is revealed in the man who rises to the likeness of God. After the Fall, man is divided. He wants to do good, but a greater force impels him towards evil. The Apostle Paul vividly explains:

For the good that I would do, I do not: but the evil which I would not do, that I do ... For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.²

The passions are indeed part of every man's inheritance from his forefathers; but they also represent the rust that he himself has accumulated by his own transgressions under the influence of the enemy, who is the author of all evil, the "murderer of men from the beginning,"³ always plotting ways to bury man's life under the earth.

The purpose of the ascetic labor of mental prayer is precisely to find the primordial beauty that God had bestowed upon man when He created him, as well as to attain to divine likeness. Man's striving is centered on the removal of the rust that covered the beauty of the reasonable creature through the counsel of the devil. The image and likeness of God in man are in a sense the preconditions for beginning this struggle. Man could not undertake any ascetic labor if he did not bear the breath of God within him and if he were not destined to acquire His likeness.

In Paradise, instead of cultivating the power of the mind with which God had endowed him, and instead of absorbing the vision of God with every pore of his being and imitating Him, man turned toward the created world and desired it with sensual pleasure. In this way, the senses opened the door to the fall and the

¹ St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 45*, 1, trans. Christopher Veniamin, *Saint Gregory Palamas. The Homilies* (Dalton, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2014), 353.

² Rom 7:19, 22-23.

³ Jn 8:44.

perversion of the blessed vision. The mind, which until then had been immersed in contemplation of God, now turned toward the earth and was dispersed into the creation.

In order to reverse this vicious circle, the worker of godliness first blocks the outlets of his senses. So that his mind can freely ascend to God, he does not allow his eyes to wander and cling with curiosity to visible things. He does the same with his other senses. When he has gathered all his senses into his heart and his spirit has dominion over the passions, he begins to discern the true nature of his soul. Only then does he begin to discover the hidden treasures concealed in his innermost parts and to behold the beauty of the image of God which he bears within. If the senses are not transformed, man remains spiritually blind and unable to reach the blessedness of likeness to God. Certainly, the man who practices holy stillness is not annihilated but rather becomes a true hypostasis. The senses are not abolished but are transformed into spiritual faculties. Likewise, sinful passions are transformed into godly passions.

A concrete example is the passion of love for sensual pleasures, which nowadays has been elevated to the rank of art and is presented as natural, ensnaring most people. However, there is also spiritual pleasure. Carnal pleasure lasts for a short while and afterwards becomes destructive, stripping man from grace. At the other end of the spectrum, spiritual pleasure is indescribable. When man curbs the senses that cause carnal pleasure, he gradually comes to know spiritual pleasure, incomparable to the carnal in its effects, intensity, and duration. Spiritual pleasure is regenerating and renewing.

Those who have never experienced the indescribable tension of spiritual life believe that it is tedious, dull, and deprived of joy. Yet when the saints speak of spiritual pleasure, they describe it as a sober drunkenness of spirit. What more powerful experience can man have on earth than that described by the Apostle Paul?

I knew a man in Christ ... (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one was caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) how that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.⁴

After the Fall, man's mind is fragmented and dispersed. It imagines, thinks, flies from one thought to another, from one desire to another; in general, it cannot remain anchored anywhere. But he who receives the illumination of the Holy Spirit

⁴ 2 Cor 12:2-4.

naturally brings down and anchors his mind in the heart, blocking all its entrances. In this state, the heart melts with a flame of divine love and becomes like soft wax which can be molded into any shape. On such a heart Christ hastens to imprint the seal of His holy Form. Now, astounded and reduced to silence, the mind can turn its attention nowhere else. It only beholds the image of the Word of God engraved on the heart.

The state described by St. Sophrony Sakharov, wherein the mind is stationed in prayerful attention in the heart, is fearful. The mind now resembles a king who has entered the safety of his fortress. He sees from afar the enemies who attempt to attack, but he repels them, and they are unable to enter this holy place. "All these additional elements – alien, intrusive factors – the mind stationed in the heart resists and repels with prayer."⁵ In this way, with his mind firmly established in his heart, the Christian ascetic becomes passionless.

To be sure, these states are too lofty for the earthly man. However, "the Lord is at hand."⁶ If man turns to God with his whole heart and offers repentance with mighty tears from the depths of his contrite spirit, God can grant him lofty states within a short period of time. At other times, He allows man to be tested so that he learns to appreciate His gift. Some saints received the gift of the prayer of the heart very quickly, even the first time they tried to practice it, while others received the gift simply by hearing of it.

God desires to give His grace; and if He foresees that the Christian will be worthy of His trust, He will not tarry to bestow His gift upon him. Again, if man is unstable, God may let him struggle for years until, through repeated oscillations, he learns one lesson, that salvation is "not of ourselves: it is the gift of God,"⁷ Who does not give His gifts without discernment.

The mind that stands in prayer in the heart discerns every thought that approaches before it attempts to enter in. The whole being of the hesychast ascetic becomes one eye, and the tension of his spirit cannot be described or conceived by human imagination. Outwardly, he shows no piety, nor does he make spectacularly devout gestures. He who possesses the gift does everything to remain unnoticed, "so as not to appear unto men,"⁸ so that no one suspects what is taking place in his heart. Deep sighs and outward manifestations of contrition are unacceptable in the spiritual life. In his cell or his private space, the man of prayer is more free to express himself; there his heart can groan, and his eyes can shed "rivers of waters;"⁹

⁵ Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1991), 145.

⁶ Phil 4:5.

⁷ Cf. Eph 2:8.

⁸ Mt 6:16.

⁹ Cf. Ps 119:136.

his body can freely take the posture of sorrowful mourning, with hands raised in anguish to find the mighty helping hand of God. When he is alone, the ascetic is only mindful of attracting the mercy and grace of God.

In *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, we find the story of an ascetic who had gone to pray in the evening in the church of the monastery long before the beginning of the service. Thinking he was alone, he let out a sigh from the depths of his heart. At that moment, he heard a rustling and realized that someone was behind him. He turned and saw a young novice sitting in the corner. He went, made a prostration before him and said to him: “Forgive me, brother, for I have not yet made a beginning.”¹⁰

In order not to provoke his brother, neither the monk nor the Christian in the world is allowed to reveal his spiritual state. This is the guidance that the holy Fathers have bequeathed to us. In this way, he who has a gift is protected and does not scandalize his brethren. St Sophrony refers to and analyses the subject of concealing one’s inner self.¹¹ True prophets are lords over their own spirit, since, according to the word of the Apostle, “The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.”¹² In order to conceal the treasure of their hearts and not be esteemed by men, the saints sometimes behave as if they have lost their wits in the eyes of the world. Their minds scrutinize everything like lightning, while outwardly they appear poor, pitiful, and witless. Thus, their heart remains wounded with spiritual pain and avoids the false satisfaction of vainglory and human praise. Saint John of the Ladder calls vainglory an “underground sewage pipe” that waters the passions of the soul with its foulness; whereas praises, he describes as “fertilizer.”¹³

Saint Isaac calls the passions “an addition” to the soul. Indeed, passions and demons are alien to the nature of the soul. However, as long as man accepts the energy of the devil and follows his suggestions, he is “taken captive by him at his will,”¹⁴ unable to distinguish truth from the phantoms of truth. Thoughts bombard him, accuse, and clash with one another. A great struggle is required for man to separate his way from the way of the enemy, to expel him from his nature. If he succeeds, he sees henceforth the spirit of evil existing and moving outside him. But while he is still at war and the enemy has access to his soul, man is in great confusion and turmoil.

¹⁰ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 90 (John the Dwarf), 237 (Tithoes).

¹¹ See Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 248–249.

¹² 1 Cor 14:32.

¹³ St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2012), 61 (step 2:6).

¹⁴ Cf. 2 Tm 2:26.

At holy Baptism man renounces Satan. If he has prepared himself properly, through the grace of the sacrament, the devil no longer finds a place in him. The question, however, is how to preserve this grace. If man begins to yield to the suggestions of the enemy, the devil makes his way back into his soul. He finds his house “swept, and garnished... and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there.”¹⁵

He who has succeeded in keeping the grace of Baptism or has regained it through the union of mind and heart, receives strength to resist the power of the enemy and can only be tempted from without. Such were the temptations that approached Christ in the wilderness. They were entirely external. Therefore, after His dialogue with the devil, he departed. With man, however, such events do not occur exactly in the same way because the enemy usually finds a grip and tempts him from within. Then the struggle against sin is relentless, “unto blood,”¹⁶ but the Lord is also “nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.”¹⁷

The struggle is rough, arduous, and prolonged. However, sometimes the Lord gives deliverance in the twinkling of an eye, as it happened with the good thief on the cross. “Few were the words that the thief uttered upon the Cross, yet great was the faith that he showed. In one moment, he was saved: he opened the gates of Paradise and was the first to enter in.”¹⁸

Something similar can happen to the man who is going through a great trial, hanging, as it were on a cross, even if he caused it himself with his errors and sins. If he finds the strength to transform the energy of his suffering into the spiritual energy of prayer, in one instant he can be saved. How many times has this happened to people suffering from terminal illnesses? How many people suffering from cancer have received the great grace of the saints without any asceticism and made their journey to heaven as martyrs without any obstacle? They only embraced the word of the Apostle: “Whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s,”¹⁹ and they were praying: “I am Thy servant, O Lord; save me.”²⁰

In general, if the Christian rejects the temptation to face his afflictions on a human level; if with the energy of the pain he endures on his cross he lifts his mind to God; if his sole concern is whether he lives or dies to be pleasing to Him; then his cross becomes the Cross of Christ that leads to the Resurrection and eternal life.

¹⁵ Cf. Mt 12:44-45; Lk 11:25-26.

¹⁶ Cf. Heb 12:4.

¹⁷ Ps 34:18.

¹⁸ Matins of Holy Friday, *antiphon* 14.

¹⁹ Rom 14:8.

²⁰ Cf. Ps 115:7.

Even the great calamities of our times can be a way in which God Himself evangelizes. And since people are no longer able to undertake great ascetic labors, it may be that, through the trials He allows, God opens the way to enlarge the hearts of His servants and grant His great grace. In the pit of his spiritual poverty, man has become a faint-hearted and self-centered creature. But when the grace of the Holy Spirit visits him and opens his heart, he begins to ponder the fate of all men and live it as his personal destiny. Then, not only the life of his brethren, but the life of the whole world becomes his own.

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