

ON THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD¹

“The Divine Word above all forbids that the Divine be likened to any of the things known by men, since every idea deriving from some conceptual image according to our understanding, which is the product of conjecture about the Divine Nature, makes an idol of God and does not proclaim God.”

(St. Gregory of Nyssa)²

God is Without Form and Beyond Description

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What It Means to Say That the Lord Sits
at the Right Hand of the Father

I

“*God is beyond every image.*”

The Holy Fathers often draw the attention of the Faithful to a very important matter—one which simpler Christians, in particular, ought to take into consideration. The latter have a tendency, especially when they pray, to try to attribute forms and shapes to God, in order somehow to render tangible His presence when they stand before Him.

This tendency, however, is unhealthy and is regarded [by the Fathers—*Trans.*] as the beginning of spiritual deception (πλάνη); it arises out of the vainglory of the mind, as St. Neilos assures us: “The beginning of deception is the vainglory of the mind, aroused by which, the mind attempts to portray the Divine in form and shapes.”³

To be sure, in Holy Scripture “many things” are said “concerning God which are more applicable to what is corporeal”;⁴ but the Saints explain to us that these anthropomorphic expressions should not be taken literally or in their exact sense, but “symbolically”: “Everything that is said of God as if He had a body is said symbolically, but has a higher meaning; for the Divine is simple and formless.”⁵

1 Translated from the Greek periodical *Άγιος Κωνσταντός*, No. 296 (May-June 2000), pp. 310-312.

2 *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLIV, col. 377B.

3 *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXXIX, col. 1193A.

4 St. John of Damascus, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XCIV, col. 841AB.

5 See note 4.

II

Searching for the “hidden meaning.”

Since, as human beings, we are clothed with “this gross flesh,” it is impossible for us to understand or to express “the Divine, lofty, and immaterial energies of the Godhead,” except by means of images, types, and symbols that correspond to our nature.⁶

Here is a concrete example: Holy Scripture talks of the “eyes,” “eyelids,” and “sight” of God. What is the “higher meaning” of these? Let us take the Saints as guides, so that, ascending from what is said “symbolically” and “corporeally” about God, we might arrive at its “hidden meaning.”⁷

Let us understand, says St. John of Damascus, by the “eyes,” “eyelids,” and “sight” of God, His power to oversee all things, as well as His knowledge, from which nothing can escape. By analogy, this symbolism applies to us, since we are aware that by this sense of sight we, too, acquire more complete knowledge and learning.⁸

III

God is “in every respect without form or figure.”

But this truth—that “everything that is said of God as if He had a body has some hidden meaning which, through things corresponding to our nature, teaches us things that are above us”⁹—should not lead us to form mental “conceptions” of God, Who is beyond description, that are congruous with and that correspond to our bodily nature.

And this is because, as St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite says, “just as God is beyond all senses and sensory things, and beyond all shape, color, dimension, and place, since He is in every respect without form or figure, existing everywhere, and is above everything, so, also, is He beyond every image”; “no image has any application to God, for, to put it simply, He transcends every conception.”¹⁰

Furthermore, the God-bearing Apostle Paul reminded the Athenians of this point: “We ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man’s device.”¹¹

6 See note 4.

7 *Idem, Patrologia Græca*, Vol. xciv, col. 844B.

8 See note 4.

9 See note 7.

10 *Άόρατος Πόλεμος* [*Unseen Warfare*], Part I, ch. 25.

11 Acts 17:29.

For this reason, the Holy Fathers place special emphasis on the fact that, “since God is incorporeal, invisible, and immaterial, devoid of shape, uncircumscribable, and incomprehensible, it is impossible to make an image of Him; for, how can the unseen be portrayed?”¹² “It is the height of insanity and impiety to give form to the Divine.”¹³

IV

Christ “sat at the right hand of God.”

Thus, we should not think in human terms, when we hear the Holy Evangelist recounting that, “after the Lord had spoken unto them, He was received up into Heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.”¹⁴

We should understand our Savior’s “sitting at the right hand of the Father” symbolically; it is described in this way in order to show His “affinity and equality of honor to the Father,”¹⁵ that is, to affirm that our Lord, the God-Man, is “on one throne” with and “equal in honor” to His Heavenly Father, with Whom He “reigns,” “is honored,” and “is glorified.”

The Holy Apostle Paul says that the Son of God, after saving us, “sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high,”¹⁶ and, after His extreme abasement, “is set down at the right hand of the throne of God”;¹⁷ in the Sacred Apocalypse, Christ Himself is represented as saying: “I also overcame, and am set down with My Father on His throne.”¹⁸

The Divine Damascene very beautifully and aptly summarizes the teaching of our Church on this subject: We believe “that Christ sits in the body at the right hand of God the Father,” though we do not mean “that the right hand of the Father is an actual place”; for, how could “He that is uncircumscribed have a right hand limited by place? Right hands and left hands belong to what is circumscribed.”

And the God-bearing Saint concludes: “We understand the right hand of the Father to be the glory and honor of the Godhead in which the Son of God, Who existed as God before the ages, being of one essence with the Father, in the last days became incarnate, and in which He sits corporeally, His flesh

12 St. John of Damascus, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. xciv, col. 1289bc.

13 *Idem*, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. xciv, cols. 1169c-1172a.

14 St. Mark 16:19.

15 Zigabenos, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. cxxix, col. 852a.

16 Hebrews 1:3.

17 Hebrews 12:2.

18 Revelation 3:21.

being glorified together with Him; for He, along with His flesh, is adored with one adoration by all creation.”¹⁹

“O all ye peoples, let us sing a song of victory unto Christ, Who is taken up with glory upon the shoulders of the Cherubim, and Who hath seated us together with Himself at the right hand of the Father; for He is glorified.”²⁰



Source: *Orthodox Tradition*, No. 2, Vol. xix (2002), pp. 2-4.



19 *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. xciv, col. 1104bc.

20 First Canon of the Ascension, Ode 1, *Troparion* 1.