



■ On the Occasion of the Commemoration of St. Gregory Palamas (Nov. 14)

The Transformation of the Mind into the Likeness of Christ*

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“Having purified thy mind by ascetical struggles on Athos,
O Gregory, thou didst live an Angelic way of life.”¹



The struggle to purify one’s mind (voûς) and the effort to ensure its proper orientation usually pass unnoticed in our era, or are regarded as superfluous luxuries that do not concern the simple Christian.

Indeed, those motivated by the spirit of what they suppose to be “practical” Christianity treat such matters as misleading theories that actually divert the believer from his primary task.

Only practical religion, which confines itself to obvious needs and seeks to deal with them immediately, is viewed as authentic Christianity or genuine Orthodoxy.

This is combined, moreover, with man’s impatience to see and admire the results of his activities instantaneously, something to which he has been inured by machines, which serve him but which also have such a great influence on his life.

We take great pains to acquire machines, we get around by means of machines, we think with machines, and in the end we become machines ourselves, “in the image and likeness” of the machines that we manufacture. Machines *do not* have a mind that requires purification and correct orientation.

We forget that we *do* have to purify our minds and orient them correctly. And machines need our minds purified and correctly oriented, so that they might function properly and not turn against us.

As well, today, when machines dominate our lives more than at any other time, the need to purify and orient our minds correctly is becoming more pressing.

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All of the evil in the world originates from our minds. The mind, furthermore, constitutes the loftiest aspect of our existence. God’s creation of man “in His image” is imprinted first and foremost in the mind. The mind is the “mirror” that reflects its Creator.

When the mind of man is directed towards God, it receives Divine Light and itself becomes light. However, when it turns away from God, it loses its light, becomes darkened, and wallows in darkness. It is enslaved to the cares and concerns of this world, is alienated by its tumult and turmoil, and forgets God and itself.

“Be still, and know that I am God,”² says the Spirit of God through the mouth of the Psalmist. When we come to know Who God is, then we learn also what a true man is.

Just like God, says St. Gregory Palamas, so also the human mind, created “in the image of God,” has essence and energy.

The energy of the mind is thought. When a man’s mind is darkened, his thought, which wallows in darkness, is held captive by sensations and passions and becomes bestial or demonic. “For, the mind that withdraws from God becomes either bestial or demonic and, having departed from the principles of its nature..., gives itself over to carnal desires and knows no limit to pleasure.”³

This is what happened at the fall of man. And it continues to happen with all of Adam's descendants. The fall of the first man dragged all of humanity down with it.

This is why the advent of the New Adam, Christ, was necessary: that He might become the firstfruits of the new creation, the Church. And He gave His commandments, which are the light of the new life that the Faithful are called to live.

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Christ dwells in man through the Mysteries of the Church: Baptism, Chrismation, and the Divine Eucharist. This does not mean that Christ transforms man automatically, in some mechanical way. Man continues to retain his nature.

Christ opens the path of renewal and offers His Grace for man to follow this path of his own free will. If man does not wish to assimilate the Grace of God, if he does not strive to coördinate his will with the will of God and to order his life in accordance with God's commandments, Grace remains infertile.

"[W]e have the mind of Christ,"⁴ says the Apostle Paul. The Christian, that is, has the mind and the thoughts of Christ.

Just as a mirror, says St. Gregory Palamas, when it receives a ray of the sun, creates its own ray, so also the mind of man, when it receives the Light of Christ, itself becomes light, and radiates this light also to other people.

But in order for a mirror to radiate the sun's light, it must be clean. If it is muddy or blackened, no matter how much light may fall on it, that light is not reflected.

The same thing happens with the human mind. When it is darkened or muddy, the light of Christ, the mind of Christ, is not reflected in it.

Sin darkens the mind of man and the passions heap up mud on it. Thus, man lives bereft of God and His Grace. He becomes either bestial or demonic: bestial, by rolling in mud himself; and demonic, by luring others into this mud and becoming a breeding-ground of pollution and destruction.

How much we suffer from these diseases, especially today! How much we make ourselves victims of these diseases!

If we are to correct this unhealthy spiritual condition, we must cleanse and purify our mind. “Having purified his mind by ascetical struggles,” St. Gregory became a recipient and herald of the Light of Grace.

Our first priority is to emulate the Saint as assiduously as we can.

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The amendment of the mind, as St. Gregory Palamas teaches, begins with its return to itself. Unless a man detaches the energy of his mind, that is, his thoughts and reasonings, from the passions and sin, unless he becomes calm and returns in repentance to himself and God, he will be unable to find the true wealth that he has received.

In his interpretation of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, St. Gregory says that a man’s wealth is his mind. When a man deviates into a sinful life, his mind is dissipated and cleaves to the passions. He becomes spiritually famished, and he cannot be saved unless he repents and returns to God.

The repentance and return of our mind to God does not come about through any movement towards infinity. It does not come about even through any movement directed outside ourselves.

It comes about through a return to ourselves. It comes about through the return of the energy of our mind, thought, and reasonings to “the hidden man of the heart.”⁵ It comes about through a personal encounter and union with God, Who abides within us in order to purify our minds and hearts and to make them bright with the light of His Divine glory.

Since we have been Baptized in the Name of the Holy Trinity and have been incorporated into the Church of Christ, we have Christ Himself within us. For this reason, moreover, we bear His Name and are called Christians.

This, however, entails that we behave in a commensurate manner towards Christ and the icons of Christ who are our fellow men.

In the Gospel passage about the Last Judgment, it is emphasized that the judgment of men by Christ will be based on the love that they have shown towards Him.

At that time, He will say to those on His right hand: “Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was an hungred, and ye gave Me food; I was thirsty, and ye gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took Me in; naked, and ye clothed Me; I was sick, and ye visited Me; I was in prison, and ye came unto Me.”⁶

And to the puzzlement of the righteous as to when they saw Christ hungry and gave Him food, or thirsty and gave Him to drink, or a stranger and sheltered Him, Christ’s reply will be: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.”⁷

We find Christ Himself in the person of our neighbor. For this reason, love for our neighbor, which is love for Christ Himself, is of fundamental importance in Christian life.

But Christ, Who is found in the person of our neighbor, is found also in us—in each one of us. And when we forget Him, He knocks on the door of our heart, so that we might open the door for Him to enter and dine with us.⁸

Christ’s food, His drink, His shelter, His clothing, and His rest are to be found in our heart. They are to be found in the place where our mind is supposed to be concentrated.

When we dissipate our mind in passions and amusements, when we exhaust it in worldly cares and wean it away from its spiritual nourishment, when we let it wander homeless in the misery and confusion of a life of sin, we leave the Christ within us hungry and thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned.

And when we do not show love towards Christ, Who knocks on the door of our heart, we naturally do not show love, either, when He approaches us in the person of our neighbor.

Man's love for God or his neighbor is born or dies within his own heart: in the "hidden man of the heart," where St. Gregory Palamas, like all of the Saints of our Church, concentrated his purified mind.

When the mind of man is drawn away from the passions and sin, when it becomes calm and returns to the heart in prayer and repentance, it encounters Christ and is illumined by His light.

This is why the prayer that is bound up with the gathering of the mind is restricted to just one phrase, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me," so that the mind might not be distracted, but rather, concentrate on the Name of Christ and on beseeching His mercy.

Thus is the sin within a man obliterated and thus Christian life bears fruit. Thus does one accomplish the "life-giving mortification" of his will and thoughts and their incorporation into the boundless horizons of Divine freedom. Thus can he say, with the Apostle Paul: "We have the mind of Christ."

It was from the darkened mind of man that all of the evils in the world began and continue to find being. For this reason, their eradication is possible only with the illumination of the mind by the Light of Christ—by its transformation into the likeness of Christ.

By his ascetic struggles, St. Gregory Palamas realized this inner transformation in his own life, and he calls everyone to such a transformation on the day of his commemoration.

The Saints, says St. Basil the Great, "are set forth as animate icons of a Godly way of life, so that we might emulate their good deeds."⁹

If we wish to honor the memory of St. Gregory, we are called to emulate his deeds to the best of our ability.

Let us cleanse our minds as much as we can and allow them—as he, too, allowed his—to be guided to God and to be illumined by His uncreated Light.

St. Gregory was very great; we are utterly insignificant. But when we do even the very least that we can, we will be entitled to approach the Saint and say to him:

“As a mind standing before the Primordial Mind, direct our mind to Him, O Father, that we may cry: Rejoice, O Herald of Grace.”¹⁰



* **Source:** Ὁρθόδοξη Μαρτυρία (Cyprus), No. 45 (Winter 1995), pp. 21-25. The title and the structural arrangement of the article are ours.

Notes

1. *Idiomelon* of the *Lity*.
2. Psalm 45:11 (*Septuaginta*).
3. Homily 51, §6 (ed. S. Oikonomou), p. 114.
4. I Corinthians 2:16.
5. I St. Peter 3:4.
6. St. Matthew 25:34-36.
7. St. Matthew 25:40.
8. Revelation 3:20.
9. Epistle 2, §3, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXXII, col. 228c.
10. *Kontakion* of St. Gregory Palamas.