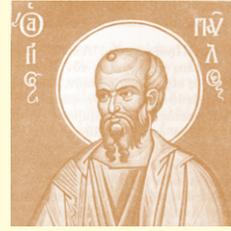


The Mystery of the Rapture

The Deifying Experience of the “Rapture” of the Apostle Paul “to the Third Heaven,” that is, “to Paradise”
(II Corinthians 12:2-4)



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Prayer

O **Trinity** beyond Being, Divinity, and Goodness, tutor of Christians in Divine wisdom, guide us to the supremely radiant and loftiest peak of mystic Scripture that surpasseth unknowing, where the simple, absolute, and unchangeable mysteries of Theology are veiled in the brilliant obscurity of hidden silence, outshining what is transcendently radiant with the intensity of their darkness and suffusing our sightless minds with the utter impalpability and invisibility of splendors that surpass all beauty.

(St. Dionysios the Areopagite,
On Mystical Theology, ch. 1
Patrologia Græca, Vol. III, col. 997AB)



In eternal memory of the righteous Theochares, who reposed in the light of the Resurrection during Bright Week, in the year of salvation 2001.

Preface

With awareness of our unworthiness, we began, in January of 2000, to apply ourselves to the interpretation of the concept of the “third heaven,” to which the Holy Apostle Paul was “caught up.”

We did not suspect at the time that the pious question from a brother in Christ on this subject would lead us into a realm of Orthodox spirituality which veritably constitutes its “Holy of Holies,” that is, the core experience of deification, the transcending of man’s createdness, participation in the uncreated Divine Energies, and the vision of the Glory of God.

After the first steps in this study, a sense of the weight of our unworthiness began literally to overwhelm us, and the thought of terminating our endeavor began to gain ground.

However, in an extraordinary event the engrossing nature of the subject, a certain pious “audacity,” personal benefit, our own feeble prayer, and our hope in the blessing of our Most Reverend Elder and spiritual Father gave us the decisive impulse to proceed with and to complete this hermeneutical enterprise.

Advancing from amazement to amazement, we have worked in a spirit of self-reproach, since “explanations” of this kind should be undertaken by a theologian steeped in Tradition, that is, one deified and energized by the Holy Spirit, “so that the theologian might speak theologically about theological issues,”¹ as the great Athonite theologian St. Nikodemos says.

July 6, 2002 (Old Style)
St. Sisoës the Great

¹ St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Παύλου αἱ Δέκα Τέσσαρες Ἐπιστολαὶ Ἑρμηνευθεῖσαι ὑπὸ Θεοφυλάκτου Ἀρχιεπισκόπου Βουλγαρίας* [The Fourteen Epistles of St. Paul, Interpreted by Theophylact, Archbishop of Bulgaria] (Venice: 1819), Vol. II, p. 112, n. 2.



The Mystery of the Rapture

The Deifying Experience of the “Rapture” of the Apostle Paul “to the Third Heaven,” that is, “to Paradise”
(II Corinthians 12:2-4)

I. The “revelation” of the Apostle Paul



1. The Holy Apostle Paul, in the third and final part of his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, vigorously defends his Apostolic dignity against his enemies, the false teachers.²

2. In this endeavor, he is compelled to sing his own praises, comparing himself to those false teachers,³ while at the same time admitting with humility that “[t]hat which I speak, I speak it not after the Lord, but as it were foolishly.”⁴

3. Having mentioned his unselfishness in the exercise of his ministry⁵ and having enumerated his Apostolic works and afflictions,⁶ he concludes by citing the special gifts that he has received from God, to wit, the “visions and revelations of the Lord.”⁷

4. Although he had been vouchsafed “revelations,”⁸ of surpassing number and majesty, he does not advert to all of these “revelations,” but only to one; nor does he say directly that it was he who received it, but speaks humbly about a putative third person: “I knew a man in Christ,”⁹ “I knew such a man,”¹⁰ “[o]f such an one will I glory.”¹¹

² II Corinthians 10:1-12:18.

³ II Corinthians 11:1-12:18.

⁴ II Corinthians 11:17.

⁵ II Corinthians 11:7-15.

⁶ II Corinthians 11:16-33.

⁷ II Corinthians 12:1.

⁸ Cf. II Corinthians 12:7.

⁹ II Corinthians 12:2.

¹⁰ II Corinthians 12:3.

¹¹ II Corinthians 12:5.

5. It is also noteworthy that this “revelation” took place “above fourteen years ago”;¹² and yet, the Holy Apostle kept this a secret and no one else knew of it. He now divulges it out of necessity, in order to defend his God-given Apostolic dignity and to confirm the faithful in the face of false teachers.

6. The Holy Apostle describes “such a man” as “caught up to the third heaven,”¹³ that is, “caught up into paradise,”¹⁴ and states that he himself does not know, but only God knows, whether “the man who was caught up” was in the body at that time or out of the body, in ecstasy: “whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth.”¹⁵

7. The insistence of the God-bearing Paul on this issue shows, firstly, that it was he alone who received the “revelation,” and, secondly, emphasizes that while the “rapture” indeed occurred, the manner of its occurrence was unknown to him, just as he was also unaware of the nexus between his soul and body when it occurred.

8. The Saints assure us that this admission of the Holy Apostle Paul regarding his ignorance of the manner of his “rapture,” and also his unawareness of the nexus between soul and body during this event, is not due solely to humble-mindedness,

‘but also, in truth, he did not know what it was, and even if, hypothetically, he wanted to say what it was, he did not know what to say’; for after the ‘ineffable enlightenment’ and the ‘inexpressible radiance’ of the ‘rapture,’ he who was deemed worthy of this mystery, upon returning to himself, ‘then recognized that during that time he was outside himself, that he experienced something extraordinary and above his own nature, and that, in truth, he did not know whether he was in the body or out of the body.’¹⁶

¹² II Corinthians 12:2.

¹³ II Corinthians 12:2.

¹⁴ II Corinthians 12:4.

¹⁵ II Corinthians 12:2, 3.

¹⁶ St. Nikodemos, *Παύλου αι Δέκα Τέσσαρες Ἐπιστολαί*, Vol. II, p. 111, n. 1, with reference to St. Gregory Palamas [his “Refutations” of Akindynos].



II. The kinds of “heavens”



1. However, we have the following question: Since Holy Scripture frequently makes mention of more than one heaven, what was this heaven to which the Holy Apostle was suddenly transported by Divine Grace?

Was it perhaps the natural and perceptible, that is, created heaven,¹⁷ the air,¹⁸ or the starry sky, the firmament?¹⁹ Was it perhaps the intelligible heaven, where the Bodiless Angelic Powers abide? Was it perhaps the “Paradise of [our] God,” that is, the dwelling

of the Righteous and the saved, where they eat “of the Tree of life”?²⁰ Or, finally, was it perhaps, in a general sense, the abode of God, where there exist His “high and uplifted Throne”²¹ and His Kingdom?

2. In the first place, it is very important for us to realize that in Oriental cosmology, and in the cosmology of popular Judaism, there was a widespread belief in multiple, successive “heavens.”

In the New Testament, there are passages which may well be allusions to the seven or three “heavens” of the Jews.²²

3. In Jewish texts not belonging to the Canon of the Old Testament (Apocalypses and Rabbinical traditions), there is a prevailing notion of multiple layers of “heavens” above the earth.

¹⁷ See, for example: Genesis 1:1, 9; 2:1, 4; Deuteronomy 1:10; 10:22; 1 Kings 17:46; Psalm 8:4; St. Matthew 24:35; St. Luke 17:24. All Old Testament references are to the *Septuaginta*.

¹⁸ See, for example: Genesis 1:26, 28, 30; 27:28; Psalm 8:9.

¹⁹ See, for example: Genesis 1:8, 14, 15, 20; 2:19, 20; Psalm 18:1; 32:6; Daniel 3:56; St. Matthew 6:26; 8:20.

²⁰ Revelation 2:7.

²¹ Isaiah 66:1; 6:1.

²² II Corinthians 12:2; Hebrews 4:14.

Thus, there are references to three “heavens,”²³ five “heavens,”²⁴ seven “heavens,”²⁵ and one “heaven.”²⁶

4. While we are on the subject of these popular conceptions of the Hebrews, it should be noted that they locate Paradise either in the third “heaven”²⁷ or in the seventh “heaven.”²⁸

5. With regard to the kinds of “heavens,” a general, but clear and fundamental distinction is introduced by the sacred Psalmist: “The heaven of heavens is the Lord’s, but the earth hath He given to the sons of men.”²⁹

Above the physical heaven there exists the “heaven of heavens,” which constitutes the abode of the Lord and which is thus named in condescension to our understanding, for, to be sure, the “abode” of God is not localized; the “heaven of heaven,” the very “dwelling-place” of God, is, according to St. Augustine, “inconceivable and invisible, beyond language and beyond comprehension”; it is “heaven,” which conceals “the light which is beyond beginning, beyond comprehension, beyond language, and beyond being” and “is exalted most wondrously above every heaven.”³⁰

6. The purpose of these characterizations, with the intensive prefix “beyond” (ὕπερ), is evidently to emphasize God’s absolute transcendence.

The supracelestial “abode” of the Lord and the earthly abode of man express, on the one hand, the uncreatedness, the unapproachability, and the royalty of the Divine Nature, and, on the other hand, the createdness, the approachability, and the servility of man and nature.

7. This transcendence of Our Lord is suggested when we characterize Him as “the Most High”³¹ and believe that God is He “Who dwelleth on high,”³² that is, Who dwells in the heights of the “heavens.”



²³ Testament of Levi 2:9.

²⁴ Apocalypse of Baruch (Greek) 2:2-11:9.

²⁵ II Enoch (Slavonic) 3:1-9:14; see also the Rabbinic texts cited in Gerhard Friedrich (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), Vol. v, p. 511, n. 96.

²⁶ I Enoch (Ethiopic) 71:5-10; IV Esdras 2:14; 4:8; 6:38; 8:20; 16:55; Apocalypse of Baruch (Syriac). [There are also references to ten “heavens” (e.g., II Enoch 20:3 [longer recension])—*Trans.*]

²⁷ II Enoch (Slavonic) 5:1-18; Apocalypse of Moses 37:5.

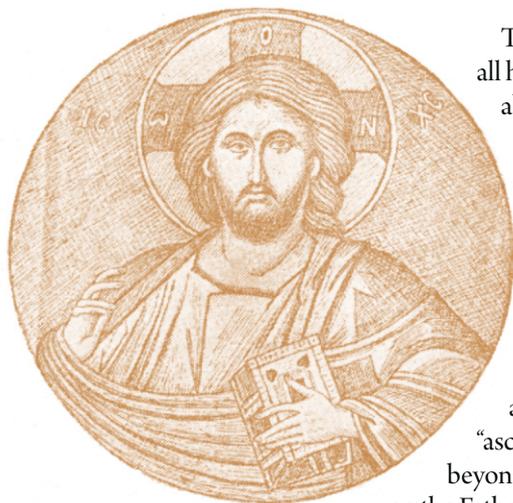
²⁸ A Rabbinic tradition. See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), pp. 49-54.

²⁹ Psalm 113:24.

³⁰ St. Augustine, *Soliloquy of the Soul to God*, §31, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. XL, cols. 889-890, cited by St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite in *Ἐρμηνεία εἰς τοὺς ψν' (150) Ψαλμοὺς τοῦ Προφητᾶνακτος Δαβιδ* [Commentary on the 150 Psalms of the Prophet-King David], 2nd ed. (Thessalonica: Ekdoseis “Orthodoxos Kypsele,” 2005), Vol. III, pp. 185-186, n. 15.

³¹ See, for example: Genesis 14:18, 19, 20, 22.

³² Psalm 112:5.



This place “on high” is located “far above all heavens,”³³ is established in some sense above all of the “heavens,”³⁴ and it was there that our Great High Priest and Savior Christ “ascended” after His Ascension, “that He might fill all things.”³⁵

8. In other words, Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God and God, did not simply enter into one of the “heavens,” but passed through all of them, was exalted above them all, “ascended far above all things, to that place beyond which there is nothing else,”³⁶ and sat on the Father’s Throne, now in the flesh, in order to fill all things with His presence and His Theanthropic gifts.

9. This truth, that what is properly called “Heaven,” in which God alone exists and dwells, and which “is not a localized heaven, but the essential [true] preëminence and state of God,”³⁷ was revealed to us by the incarnate God the Word: “And no man hath ascended up to Heaven, but he that came down from Heaven, even the Son of man which is in Heaven.”³⁸

10. This supremely unapproachable and supremely incommunicable “Heaven” is, therefore, the exclusive “dwelling-place” of God the Father, of the Incarnate Word, and of the Holy Spirit, Who was sent “from Heaven” at Holy Pentecost: “with the Holy Spirit sent down from Heaven.”³⁹

‘This “Heaven” conceals ‘the light which is beyond beginning, beyond comprehension, beyond language, and beyond being’ inasmuch as ‘no one knows the Father, save the Son and their Spirit; and no one knows the Son, save the Father and their Spirit; just as, therefore, no one knows the Spirit, save the Father and the Son, Whose Spirit He is.’⁴⁰

11. It should, however, be made clear that while “Heaven,” as the abode of Our Lord, emphatically underscores the transcendence of the Divine Nature, at the same time it expresses the omnipresence of God, and also the nearness of His presence through His uncreated Energies.

³³ Ephesians 4:10.

³⁴ Hebrews 4:14.

³⁵ Ephesians 4:10.

³⁶ St. John Chrysostomos, “Homily XI on Ephesians,” §2, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LXII, col. 82.

³⁷ St. Nikodemos, *Ερμηνεία εις τούς ρν’ Υαλμους*, Vol. III, p. 185, n. 15.

³⁸ St. John 3:13.

³⁹ 1 St. Peter 1:12.

⁴⁰ See note 30.

Men have the feeling that Heaven encompasses them on all sides, that they are within it, that it is near them, and that it provides them with its gifts.

12. In truth, this feeling of ours about the perceptible heaven, that is, that it in some sense “loves” us and “embraces us,” is reflected in Our Lord.

In other words, Heaven is an image of God, within Whom we exist, without, to be sure, sharing in His Nature. Nevertheless, we commune with Him by Grace, sharing in His gifts, His uncreated Energies: “That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us: for in Him we live, and move, and have our being.”⁴¹

13. Thus, the perceptible heaven, and also, more generally, the concept of “Heaven,” in which God exists, reminds us of, or renders perceptible to us, our relationship with the Lord, the relation between uncreated and created, unapproachable and approachable, incommunicable and communicable, distance and proximity.

14. This distinction also constitutes a reply to the hermeneutical dilemma that arises when certain passages of Holy Writ appear, at first sight, to be mutually contradictory, such as, for example, the following:

Distance: “The heaven of heavens is the Lord’s, but the earth hath He given to the sons of men.”⁴²

Proximity: “I am a God nigh at hand, saith the Lord, and not a God afar off.... Do I not fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord.”⁴³

⁴¹ Acts 17:27-28.

⁴² Psalm 113:24.

⁴³ Jeremiah 23:23-24.



III. The “spacious” House of the Father



1. The Holy Apostle Paul, therefore, did not enter into the “supremely unapproachable” “Heaven of heavens,” that exclusive abode of God, since Our Lord has prepared other “dwellings” for men, as the Divine Chrysostomos says:

He did not make only one heaven, but also another one, showing from the outset that He was not abandoning us to the earth, but would translate us thither; for if He were not intending to translate us thither, why would heaven have been created? This realm

was not of any use to Him, for He is not in need of anything. But, since He willed to translate thither those of earth, He prepared dwellings for them.⁴⁴

2. Did the Holy Apostle, then, perhaps enter into these “dwellings,” into the “city to come,”⁴⁵ which is “better” and “heavenly,”⁴⁶ the commonwealth which is “in heaven,”⁴⁷ “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem”?⁴⁸

The City of the living God, the Heavenly Jerusalem, is that “place,”⁴⁹ that “house,”⁵⁰ that “tabernacle,”⁵¹ in which, after our resurrection, “bearing the image of the heavenly,”⁵² that is, having acquired a “qualitative” similarity to Our Lord—“as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly”⁵³—we shall henceforth dwell for eternity as the “People of God”;⁵⁴ then the Lord will be with us, in our midst, eternally!

⁴⁴ St. John Chrysostomos, “Exposition of Psalm 135,” §1, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LV, col. 401.

⁴⁵ Hebrews 13:14.

⁴⁶ Hebrews 11:16.

⁴⁷ Philippians 3:20.

⁴⁸ Hebrews 12:22-23. See also Revelation 3:12; 21:2.

⁴⁹ St. John 14:2-3.

⁵⁰ See note 49.

⁵¹ Revelation 21:3.

⁵² 1 Corinthians 15:49.

⁵³ 1 Corinthians 15:48.

⁵⁴ 1 St. Peter 2:10.

3. However, this “place,” in which, being henceforth “heavenly,” we shall “dwell” with Our Savior—“that where I am, there ye may be also”⁵⁵—this “House of the Father,” wherein there “are many mansions,”⁵⁶ is not defined spatially, but figuratively.

In other words, after our resurrection, we will not be “flesh and blood”; we will neither be marked by “corruption” and “mortality,” nor will the experience and limitations of perceptible reality any longer be in effect, since “we shall all be changed,” shall “put on” “incorruption” and “immortality,”⁵⁷ and shall have become uncreated according to Grace.

4. This preternatural relationship with the Heavenly Father through our elder Brother Jesus Christ makes us His kinsmen, vouchsafes us to be His children, to be His “friends and neighbors,” whom He “summons” to “rejoice” with Him over the salvation “of His sheep which were lost.”⁵⁸

Since, therefore, we will all together make up the Heavenly Family, it is natural that we shall abide in a common “house,” which has many “mansions,” many rooms, many “apartments”; the different orders of the inhabitants of heaven, the “friends” and “neighbors,” suggest that each of them—in proportion to the purity and illumination that he was vouchsafed in his earthly life—dwells in a corresponding “mansion,” that is, enjoys a corresponding degree of communion with God and of heavenly glory.

5. The Saints assure us that “the many mansions signify the different degrees of honor in that one eternal life.”⁵⁹ They also indicate the spaciousness of “heaven,” since it can encompass or contain both the Holy Angels and the Saints and the Righteous from all the ages until the consummation, who, while preserving their personality and individuality, will each have his own “portion” in the Kingdom of Heaven.

6. Abba Isaac the Syrian explains that Our Savior characterizes as “many mansions of the Father” the distinctions and differences of spiritual gifts, that is, “the noetic levels of those who dwell in that realm,” on the basis of which they will enjoy the corresponding delight:

Just as each person delights in the sensible sun according to the acuity of his vision and perception; and just as when a single lamp shines in a house, the radiance is different, although the light is not divided into many different beams of brightness, so also in the age to come, all of the Righteous will dwell without distinction in a single realm, but each will receive illumination from the one noetic Sun according to his own spiritual level, and gladness as from one air, one place, one dwelling, one vision, and one outward appearance.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ See note 49.

⁵⁶ See note 49.

⁵⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:50-54.

⁵⁸ Cf. St. Luke 15:6.

⁵⁹ St. Augustine, “Tractate LXVII on St. John,” §2, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. xxxv, col. 1812.

⁶⁰ Abba Isaac the Syrian, “Discourse LVI,” in *Ἀπαντα τὰ εὐρεθέντα Ἀσκητικά* [The complete extant ascetical discourses] (Thessalonica: Ekdoseis Bas. Regopoulou, 1997), pp. 224-225.

7. However, this difference in “noetic levels” and “spiritual gifts” in the heavenly “mansions” will not be visible, lest those who are “inferior” should feel distress and anguish at the exceeding Grace of those who are “superior”:

And no one will see the spiritual level of his neighbor, be he either superior or inferior, lest, on seeing the exceeding Grace of his neighbor and his own deficiency, this become for him a cause of distress and anguish. God forbid that this should be so, where there is neither sorrow nor sighing. Rather, each person, according to the Grace given him, according to his spiritual level, will rejoice within himself. The inner vision of all is one, and the joy is one.⁶¹

8. St. Cyril of Alexandria summarizes these ideas very beautifully:

‘When [the Lord] teaches that Heaven is very spacious,’ it seems likely that, in saying that there are many mansions, He wishes also to indicate the different grades of honor, implying that each one who desires to live a life of virtue will receive, as it were, his own place and the glory that befits his accomplishments.⁶²

9. Holy Scripture also gives us a panorama of this wondrous future state:

‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them’;⁶³ ‘In My Father’s house are many mansions’; ‘I go to prepare a place for you’; ‘that where I am, there ye may be also’;⁶⁴ ‘that ye may behold My glory, which the Father hath given Me’;⁶⁵ ‘and so shall we ever be with the Lord.’⁶⁶

10. It is, therefore, clear that then, in the “House of the Father,” we shall not be simply and solely in the same place as Our Savior, but also in the same state; we shall not be merely spectators of His glory, but actually partakers and sharers of it; then Christ will be “complete,” for He will be together with all of His members, which constitute His Church, “which is His Body.”⁶⁷ He is the Head, and we are His members; He is the “firstborn,” and all of us, who are like Him according to Grace and united with Him, will form the “assembly of the firstborn”;⁶⁸ then Our Lord will be made wondrous and glorified in each of His members separately, and every member will also be made wondrous and glorified in Christ.

11. We shall then experience the promised mystery in its fullness:

⁶¹ See note 60.

⁶² St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on St. John*, Bk. IX, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LXXIV, col. 181CD.

⁶³ See note 51.

⁶⁴ See note 49.

⁶⁵ Cf. St. John 17:24.

⁶⁶ 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

⁶⁷ Ephesians 1:23.

⁶⁸ Hebrews 12:23.

‘At that day ye shall know that I am in My Father, and ye in Me, and I in you’;⁶⁹ ‘I am by nature in the Father; for I am the Fruit and genuine Offspring of His Essence, subsisting in Him and existing from Him, Life from Life’; And He is also Himself in us; for we have all been made partakers of Him, and have Him in ourselves through the Spirit.⁷⁰

12. However, in speaking of the “House of the Father” and the “Tabernacle of God,” in which we shall dwell with the Lord eternally, we should never forget, on the basis of what we have said previously, that the Divine Essence is unapproachable and incommunicable: “[N]o man hath seen, nor can see” God;⁷¹ “[N]o man shall see the face of God, and live”;⁷² “No man hath seen God at any time”;⁷³ “No man hath beheld God at any time.”⁷⁴

13. This inability of ours to “see” God emphasizes, we repeat, the unapproachability of God’s Essence; the “dwelling-place” of God is the “Light,” and this is “unapproachable”;⁷⁵ but if His “dwelling-place” is “unapproachable,” how much more unapproachable, and therefore incomprehensible, is He Who dwells therein?

14. The commentary of the Divine Chrysostomos on this Apostolic idea is very apposite:

He did not say, ‘being unapproachable Light,’ but ‘dwelling in unapproachable Light,’ so that you might learn that if the house is unapproachable, how much more is God, Who inhabits it. He said these things, not so that you might suppose that God occupies a house or a place, but so that you might become all the more abundantly aware of His incomprehensibility. But neither did he say ‘dwelling in incomprehensible Light,’ but rather ‘dwelling in unapproachable Light,’ which is far greater than incomprehensible Light.⁷⁶

15. And yet: while God is “beyond all things,”⁷⁷ while He exists “beyond all being and human conception,”⁷⁸ and is He Whom “no man hath seen, nor can see,”⁷⁹ in the future life those who are uncreated according to Grace, the “heavenly ones,” will see Him “face to face.”⁸⁰

⁶⁹ St. John 14:20.

⁷⁰ St. Cyril, *Commentary on St. John*, Bk. IX, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LXXIV, col. 280CD.

⁷¹ 1 St. Timothy 6:16.

⁷² Cf. Exodus 33:20.

⁷³ St. John 1:18.

⁷⁴ 1 St. John 4:12.

⁷⁵ See note 71.

⁷⁶ St. John Chrysostomos, “Oration III on the Incomprehensibility of God,” §2, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XLVIII, col. 721.

⁷⁷ St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On Mystical Theology*, ch. 5, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. III, col. 1048B.

⁷⁸ St. Athanasios the Great, *Discourse Against the Pagans*, §2, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XXV, col. 5C.

⁷⁹ See note 71.

⁸⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:12.



To be sure, even in this life “the pure in heart”⁸¹ see God, albeit “through a glass, darkly,”⁸² whereas then “we shall be like Him” and “shall see Him as He is.”⁸³

16. Now, is it possible for God to be seen “as He is”?

The “manifestation” of Our Savior in the last times will be the revelation, not of His Divine Essence and Nature, but of His Divine Glory; we shall see Him in the uncreated Light of His Grace, and “then shall we appear with Him in Glory,”⁸⁴ that is, “in that Glory which is to be given to us by participation, through emanation, in the Glory that exists and will be beheld in Christ.”⁸⁵ God becomes visible and comprehensible only by Grace to those deemed worthy to become like Him, that is, to become “partakers of the Divine Nature.”⁸⁶

17. The pious, those who live a God-pleasing life

‘receive in the present life a pledge and prelude of the hoped-for deification in the age to come,’ and will receive perfect and complete deification after death and after the general resurrection, when they will be able...to enjoy that sweetest and indescribable beauty of God and to delight for evermore in the effulgence and luminescence that radiate from the Divine beauty, being vouchsafed to behold God face to face.’⁸⁷

18. Christ prayed before His Passion with astonishing intensity and insistence⁸⁸ to His Heavenly Father:

Father, I will that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am; that they may behold My Glory, which Thou hast given me: for Thou lovedst Me before the foundation of the world.⁸⁹

For us to be in the same place as Christ and for us to be in Christ does not constitute a tautology. Presence in the same place—“that where I am they also may be with Me”⁹⁰—attests to the distinction and incommunicability of the Divine and human natures, whereas “to be with Christ”⁹¹ attests to communion and union of God and

⁸¹ St. Matthew 5:8.

⁸² See note 80.

⁸³ 1 St. John 3:2.

⁸⁴ Cf. Colossians 3:4.

⁸⁵ St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Ἐρμηνεία εἰς τὰς Ἑπτὰ Καθολικὰς Ἐπιστολάς* [Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles] (Venice: 1806), p. 241.

⁸⁶ 11 St. Peter 1:4.

⁸⁷ St. Nikodemos, *Ἐρμηνεία εἰς τὰς Ἑπτὰ Καθολικὰς Ἐπιστολάς*, p. 158.

⁸⁸ St. John 17:9, 15, 20—“ἑρωτῶ” (“I pray”); St. John 17:24—“θέλω” (“I will”).

⁸⁹ St. John 17:24.

⁹⁰ See note 89.

⁹¹ Philippians 1:23.

men according to Grace in the vision of the Glory of Our Savior Christ, to participation and communion in uncreated Glory.

19. This is the Kingdom of God, the “vision of God face to face,” for it is “truly the greatest glory to behold His [Christ’s] Glory,”⁹² since “this is complete rest, to look upon the Son of God. This, at all events, is what causes us to be glorified, as Paul says: ‘with unveiled face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord.’”⁹³

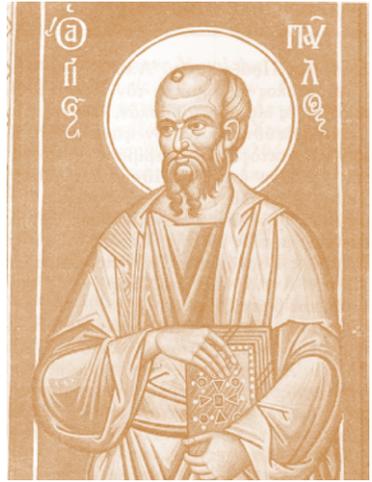
20. We shall, therefore, see Our Savior “as He is,” but not “as He is in His Essence and Nature”:

‘God forbid! This is impossible for any generated or created nature of Angels and men alike’; ‘We shall not see the invisible Nature of God, nor shall we become identical with Him, but we shall see the Glory of God, and in general the Divine Attributes [Energies]; it is according to these that we can become like Him,’ ‘as gods by Grace like Him Who is God by Nature.’⁹⁴

21. Since, therefore, “that superessential and infinite Essence and Nature of God are not only imparticipable by creatures, but also invisible, and not only invisible, but also incomprehensible and in every way inconceivable and unsearchable,”⁹⁵ for this reason, the expression of the Holy Apostle Peter, “partakers of the Divine Nature,” means

that Christians who have been purified and perfected through faith and a virtuous life are to commune of, and participate in, the Divine Perfections, Energies, Powers, Graces, and generally, in the Attributes of God, which the Chief Apostle calls the Nature of God. For these are united with the Nature of God and are inseparable therefrom, and, consequently, are essential and natural properties of God. For natural properties, too, are called ‘nature.’ And, just as the Divine Nature is eternal and uncreated, so also are they coeternal with God and uncreated. Therefore, by communing of these natural perfections of God [that is, the Divine Attributes], those who have been purified are deified and become gods by Grace, now as by a pledge, but then more perfectly and more explicitly, as we have said.⁹⁶

22. Precisely because the natural perfections of God, to wit, the Divine Attributes, are in general called the Divine Nature, *qua* essential and natural properties of God, for



⁹² Euthymios Zigabenos, *Commentary on St. John, Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. CXXIX, col. 1453A.

⁹³ St. John Chrysostomos, “Homily LXXXII on St. John,” §3, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LIX, col. 445; 11 Corinthians 3:18.

⁹⁴ St. Nikodemus, *Ἐρμηνεία εἰς τὰς Ἐπιτὰ Καθολικὰς Ἐπιστολάς*, p. 241.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

this reason the deifying Grace of God, that is, “the deifying gift of God,”⁹⁷ His Divine Energies, are called by the Holy Fathers “Divinity,”⁹⁸ wherein we participate and which we see, whereas the Lord, Who bestows this Grace, is assuredly above this “Divinity,” remaining incommunicable, unapproachable, and incomprehensible.

23. This truth, that is, the difference between the incommunicable Divine Nature and the communicable Divine Energies, is very pointedly emphasized by St. Maximos the Confessor: “God is infinitely exalted, infinitely many times, above all beings, whether they participate [that is, creatures] or are participated in [that is, the Divine Energies].”⁹⁹

The initiate of hidden mysteries, Dionysios the Areopagite, confirms this experiential knowledge of the Church:

He Who is beyond all existing things transcends all existing things, and the imparticipable Cause is beyond both all things that participate and all Attributes in which they participate.¹⁰⁰

24. Thus, this preternatural reality of reigning¹⁰¹ and sitting¹⁰² together with Our Savior Christ on the same Throne, where the Glory of the Lamb will be the Light¹⁰³ of the New Jerusalem¹⁰⁴—a Light which will be reflected in the deified and will transform them “into the same splendor”¹⁰⁵ “from glory to glory”¹⁰⁶—this is the Kingdom of Heaven:

The Kingdom of God is the imparting, according to Grace, of the good things [natural perfections] that belong naturally to God.¹⁰⁷

25. This is precisely what is meant in the Book of Revelation: in the New Jerusalem, the worshippers of the Lamb “shall see His face; and His name shall be upon their foreheads.”¹⁰⁸

⁹⁷ St. Dionysios the Areopagite, “Epistle II, ‘To the Monk Gaios,’” *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. III, 1068A.

⁹⁸ “Ἁγιορειτικὸς Τόμος ὑπὲρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζόντων” [Hagiorite Tome in Defense of Those Living in Holy Silence] in *Φιλοκαλία* (Athens: Ekdotikos Oikos “Aster,” 1976), Vol. IV, p. 189, ll. 10-13.

• “It is not only the Divine Nature, according to the theologians, that is called Divinity, but also the uncreated Energy, and the Grace of the Divine Nature, as divinizing those who receive it and making them sons of God” (St. Nikodemos, *Ἐρμηνεία εἰς τὰς Ἐπιτὰ Καθολικὰς Ἐπιστολάς*, p. 260).

⁹⁹ St. Maximos the Confessor, *First Century on Theology and the Incarnate Economy of the Son of God*, §49, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XC, col. 1101A.

¹⁰⁰ St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names*, ch. 12, §4 *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. III, col. 972B.

¹⁰¹ II St. Timothy 2:12.

¹⁰² Revelation 3:21.

¹⁰³ Revelation 21:23; 22:5.

¹⁰⁴ Revelation 21:2.

¹⁰⁵ Oikoumenios, *Commentary on II Corinthians*, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. CXVIII, col. 956C.

¹⁰⁶ II Corinthians 3:18.

¹⁰⁷ St. Maximos, *Second Century on Theology and the Incarnate Economy of the Son of God*, §90, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. xc, col. 1168C.

¹⁰⁸ Revelation 22:4.



IV. The “incomparable” glory of the Mother of God

1. “Heaven,” therefore—to wit, the “House of the Father”—is “spacious” and includes “many mansions,” that is “different degrees of honor.”

Perhaps, however, this clarification now gives rise to the perception of three very general “mansions,” that is, three places or levels of different degrees of honor, when we take into consideration that there is one glory of the Most Blessed Theotokos, another of the Holy Bodiless Powers, and another of the deified faithful.

A.

2. Yet, what mind is capable of apprehending the incomparable glory of the Mother of God? The sanctification that befits her as the Mother of God and her preternatural charisms “transcend every mind and every word, on account of both their magnitude and their multitude,” since “there is nothing else in the entire creation either equal to the Theotokos or superior to her.”¹⁰⁹

3. “There is, therefore, nothing in life like Mary the Theotokos,” says that most consummate orator Chrysostomos; “Go about the whole creation in your mind, O man, and see whether there is anything equal to, or greater than, the Holy Theotokos and Virgin; traverse the earth; look around the sea; pry into the air; scrutinize the heavens in your intellect; call to mind all of the invisible Powers, and see whether there is any other such wonder in the whole of creation.”¹¹⁰

4. In what, however, does the incomparable glory of the Mother of God reside?

“**Thou**, O Virgin Mary,” says St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, addressing the All-Holy Theotokos, “didst contain in thine immaculate womb genuinely, without seed [and] without knowing a man, God the Word, Whom thou didst carry without fatigue, didst bring forth without travail, and to Whom thou gavest birth without corruption, without impairing thy Virginity. These four [facts] are the most preternatural, the most extraordinary, the most unprecedented, and the most astounding.”¹¹¹

5. On account of these four [facts], “most fittingly is the Theotokos incomparably higher than all of the Heavenly Powers, for they only receive certain illumina-

¹⁰⁹ St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Ἐροδορόμιον* [Commentary on the Great Feasts] (Venice: 1836), p. 366.

¹¹⁰ St. John Chrysostomos, “On the Holy Virgin and Theotokos Mary,” *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LIX, col. 709.

¹¹¹ See note 109.

tions from God, whereby they are illumined and perfected”;¹¹² “hence, the Theotokos is incomparably superior even to the very Cherubim, as also to the Seraphim; for the Theotokos is incomparably more glorious than they.”¹¹³

6. Furthermore, it is a fact that “the Theotokos is the animate throne of God, the King of all, for she contained in her womb Him Who cannot be contained by anything, and carried him as a throne.”¹¹⁴ The Seraphim, however, stand around this throne, which suggests the distance between the Theotokos and the Heavenly Powers:

I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, and the house was full of His Glory. And the Seraphim stood round about Him: each one had six wings, and with twain they covered their face, and with twain they covered their feet, and with twain they flew. And one cried to the other, and they said, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of His Glory.¹¹⁵

7. There is, therefore, a “difference in station” between the Theotokos and the Heavenly Orders, concerning which the Divine Gregory Palamas makes the following marvellous comments:

‘Concerning the supreme order of Angels Isaiah writes: “And the Seraphim stood round about Him”; but concerning her David says: “upon thy right hand did stand the queen.” Do you see the difference in their station? From this you can also comprehend the difference in the dignity of their standing; for the Seraphim stand round around God, but only the Queen of all stands beside Him; ‘not only does she stand beside Him, but at His right hand, as is fitting, for where Christ sits in Heaven, to wit, “on the right hand of the Majesty,” there also she now stands, having ascended from earth to Heaven; not only because she loves and is loved in return more than all others, in accordance with the very laws of nature, but also because she is truly His throne; where the king sits, there also stands his throne. Isaiah beheld this throne in the midst of that Cherubic choir and called it “high and exalted,” indicating thereby that the Mother of God far surpasses the Heavenly Pow-



¹¹² See note 109.

¹¹³ St. Nikodemos, *Εορτοδρόμιον*, p. 367, n. 2.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 366, n. 2.

¹¹⁵ Isaiah 6:1-3.

ers. For this reason, he also introduces the Angels glorifying God for her and saying: “Blessed be the Glory of the Lord from His place.”¹¹⁶

8. So great is the superiority and the exceeding honor of the Ever-Virgin Mother of God, “beyond all measure and proportion,”¹¹⁷ in relation to the Heavenly Powers, by virtue of the magnitude and multitude of her “essential” and “inner” charisms,¹¹⁸ that St. Cosmas the Melodist, “wishing to hymn the incomparable glory of the Mother of God,” “is compelled to summon from without the Cherubim and the Seraphim, the foremost Orders of Angels, who stand around God, in order that through their comparative incomparability, or incomparable comparison,”¹¹⁹ he might chant this extraordinary hymn:

More honorable than the Cherubim, and incomparably more glorious than the Seraphim, thee who without corruption gavest birth to God the Word, the very Theotokos, thee do we magnify.¹²⁰

9. That remarkable exponent of our Church’s teaching concerning the Theotokos, St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, declares that this hymn should be understood as follows:

‘Beyond compare more honorable than the Cherubim, and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim,’ since the adverb ‘incomparably’ is to be ascribed ‘not only to the Seraphim, but also to the Cherubim’; that is, the Theotokos is ‘more honorable not comparably, but incomparably’ than the Cherubim and the Seraphim.¹²¹

10. It is noteworthy that “in referring to the two highest Orders of the first Angelic Hierarchy—I mean the Cherubim and the Seraphim—and in saying that the Theotokos is incomparably more honorable and more glorious than they, the Divine Cosmas demonstrated that she is more honorable and more glorious than all of the other lower Orders; for if she is superior to the greater, how much more superior is she to the lesser.”¹²²

¹¹⁶ St. Gregory Palamas, “Homily xxxvii, ‘On the All-Venerable Dormition of Our Most Pure Lady, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary,’ *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. CLI, col. 469BCD; Isaiah 6:2; Psalm 44:10; Hebrews 1:3; Isaiah 6:1; Ezekiel 3:12.

¹¹⁷ Cf. II Corinthians 4:17.

¹¹⁸ St. Nikodemos, *Ἐορτοδρόμιον*, p. 366.

• “Essential” and “inner” charisms of the Theotokos are “the sanctification that befits her as Mother of God and the preternatural and extraordinary charisms” with which the Holy Spirit enriched her and which “transcend every mind and all speech.”

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

• The Saint explains why he spoke of “comparative incomparability” and “incomparable comparison”: “Comparison is made with things that are of the same nature, the same kind, and the same essence. When comparison is made between things that are of different natures and essences, it should rather be called distinction, and not comparison; in such a case, we are talking about superior or inferior, not about more and less. Hence, the comparison in this *Troparion* is really a distinction.”

¹²⁰ Orthros of Great Friday, Canon, Ode 9, *Heirmos*, in *Τριψύδιον Κατανυκτικόν* (Athens: Ekdoseis “Phos,” 1987), p. 541B.

¹²¹ See note 118.

¹²² St. Nikodemos, *Ἐορτοδρόμιον*, p. 366, n. 2.



11. The Spirit-bearing Athonite expert on the Theotokos concludes succinctly: She surpasses both Angels and Archangels, and all of the choirs of the Heavenly Powers, not commensurably, but incommensurably.¹²³

12. However, the incomparability of the preëminence of the Mother of God is extolled with especial emphasis not only when the Saints teach that the All-Pure one “is the sole frontier [μεθόριον] between created and uncreated nature,”¹²⁴ but also when they proclaim that

‘The Virgin is the treasurer and guardian of all the treasures and charisms of God the Heavenly King,’ so as to impart and distribute them to all creatures, both intelligible and sensible, both Angels and men.¹²⁵

13. This astounding idea was already expressed by St. Gregory Palamas:

‘She was the first to receive the fullness of Him Who fills all things, and she renders Him accessible to all in distributing to each according to his strength and in proportion to the measure of his purity; hence, she is the treasury and dispenser of the wealth of the Godhead,’ and none of the gifts of God could be granted either to Angels or to men save through her.¹²⁶

14. This common mind of the Church regarding the incomparable superiority of the Mother of God is summarized as follows by St. Nikodemos:

Since Our Lady, the Theotokos, as Mother of God, comes immediately after God and incomparably surpasses not only men, but also the very fore-

¹²³ St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Κήπος Χαρίτων* [Garden of Graces], 4th ed. (Thessalonica: Ekdoseis Basil. Regopoulou, 1992), p. 216B.

¹²⁴ St. Gregory Palamas, “Homily LIII, ‘On the Entrance of Our Exceedingly Pure Lady, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary into the Holy of Holies and Her Godlike Life Therein,” §37, *Ἑλληνες Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας* (Thessalonica: Paterikai Ekdoseis “Gregorios ho Palamas,” 1986), Vol. XI, p. 308.

¹²⁵ St. Nikodemos, *Κήπος Χαρίτων*, p. 217A.

¹²⁶ St. Gregory Palamas, “Homily LIII,” §§39, 37, *Ἑλληνες Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας*, Vol. XI, pp. 310-312, 308.

most and highest Orders of the Angels, the Cherubim and the Seraphim, she distributes through herself the wealth of all God's gifts and Divine illuminations to all, both Angels and men alike; such is the common mind of the entire Church of Christ.¹²⁷

B.

15. Nevertheless, the ninefold choir of the Holy Bodiless Powers, although incomparably inferior, in terms of participation in Divine Glory, to the All-Blessed Theotokos, is still clearly superior to the choir of deified persons, since the Angelic choir constitutes the Heavenly Hierarchy.

16. The Holy Bodiless Powers are differentiated, according to St. Dionysios the Areopagite, into three triadic ranks: the highest triad is comprised of the Thrones, the Cherubim, and the Seraphim; the middle triad consists of the Dominions, the Powers, and the Authorities; in the lowest triad are found the Principalities, the Archangels, and the Angels.¹²⁸

17. The Divine Damascene, with reference to these three "triadic ranks," says the following:

As that most holy, sacred, and superlative theologian, Dionysios the Areopagite, says, all theology, that is to say, Divine Scripture, assigns nine different names to the heavenly Entities; that Divine Mystagogue divides these Entities into three triadic ranks.¹²⁹

18. In Heaven, however, there prevails an eternal principle, as the Saints assure us: the lesser participate in God through the greater.

For, since this is an eternal principle in Heaven, that the lesser participate through the greater in Him Who is beyond being, and since the Virgin Mother is incomparably greater than all, as many as participate in God do so through her.¹³⁰

19. By virtue of this principle, therefore, the three Orders of the Holy Bodiless Powers participate to different degrees in the Divine illuminations, but whereas the



¹²⁷ St. Nikodemus the Hagiorite, *Συμβουλευτικὸν Ἐγχειρίδιον* [Handbook of Spiritual Counsel], 3rd ed. (Bolos: Ek tou Typographeiou Hyion Sot. Schoina, 1969), p. 214.

¹²⁸ St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, chs. 6-9, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. III, cols. 200-201, 205-212, 237-241, 257-261.

¹²⁹ St. John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Bk. II, ch. 3, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XCIV, cols. 872C-873A.

¹³⁰ St. Gregory Palamas, "Homily LIII," §40, *Ἑλληνες Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας*, Vol. XI, pp. 312.

higher Orders participate in the glory of the lower, the lower Orders do not participate in the sacred illumination of the higher, according to the initiate of hidden mysteries, Dionysios:

For the superior ranks possess superabundantly the sacred attributes of their inferiors, whereas those lowest in rank do not possess the transcendent fullnesses of their superiors, although the initial illuminations are partially conveyed to them through the first ranks, proportionately to themselves.¹³¹



20. This difference between the Heavenly Orders is confirmed by St. John of Damascus:

But they differ from each other in luminosity and station, either occupying their station in accordance with their luminosity, or participating in luminosity in accordance with their station, and illumining one another by virtue of the superiority of their rank or nature. It is clear that the superior Orders impart both illumination and knowledge to the inferior ones.¹³²

21. This difference in luminosity and station between the Heavenly “triadic ranks” became especially perceptible during the Divine Ascension of Our Lord, as St. Maximos the Confessor teaches us. Responding to the question, “Why did the Holy Spirit descend nine [ten] days after the Ascension?” he leads us up to the Mystery of the Restoration of those in Heaven:

‘Some who are educated in the things of God say that, since the Angelic Powers consist, according to Dionysios the Areopagite, of nine Orders, when the Lord ascended—according to His humanity (for, according to His Divinity, He fills all things), He assigned a single day to each Order, from the first day to the last; for these, too, were in need of the Lord’s visitation to them; for in Him, according to the Apostle, all things were gathered together, not only things on earth, but also things in Heaven; and after this He appeared to God the Father, and thus did the Spirit descend;’¹³³ ‘neither the Thursday on which He ascended nor the Sunday on which the Spirit descended being including in the reckoning.’¹³⁴

22. To each Order of the Heavenly Powers, then, the God-Man, in His Ascension, “assigned a single day” and “on each day” “each Order approached and worshipped that

¹³¹ St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, ch. 11, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. III, col. 285A.

¹³² St. John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition*, Bk. II, ch. 3, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XCIV, cols. 869C-871A.

¹³³ St. Maximos the Confessor, *Questions and Answers on Various Disputed Subjects*, §61, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. xc, col. 833BC.

¹³⁴ St. Nikodemos, *Ἐορτοδρόμιον*, p. 525.

deified Flesh” of the Savior. And finally, “when the nine days and Orders had been fulfilled, on the tenth [day] the Comforter descended.”¹³⁵

C.

23. Therefore, as the lower Heavenly Orders do not participate in the same glory as the higher Orders, “for the final ranks have no share in all of the attributes of the highest ranks,”¹³⁶ in precisely this way human beings who have been deified, who in some sense collectively form a place or level, do not participate in the sanctifying illumination of the supreme Heavenly Orders.

24. A clear picture of this inferiority of deified human beings by comparison with the Heavenly entities is given by the wondrous event of the purification of the Holy Prophet Isaiah by a Seraphim:

And there was sent to me one of the Seraphim, and he had in his hand a coal, which he had taken off the altar with the tongs: and he touched my mouth, and said, ‘Behold, this hath touched thy lips, and shall take away thine iniquities, and shall purge thy sins.’¹³⁷

25. The Holy Bodiless Hosts, as “celestial powers,” according to St. Basil the Great, “are deemed worthy of standing in closest proximity [to God] by virtue of their exceeding holiness,”¹³⁸ and consequently, as “secondary noetic lights,” according to the Divine Damascene, “which derive their luminosity from the First and Unoriginate Light,”¹³⁹ “enjoy a primary and manifold participation in the Divine, and provide primary and manifold revelations of the Divine hiddenness.”¹⁴⁰

It is precisely for this reason that they are called by the general name “Angels,” because “Divine illumination is granted to them first, and through them revelations that transcend us are transmitted to us.”¹⁴¹

26. To be sure, the Holy Bodiless Powers, that is, “every noetic nature,” as St. Gregory Palamas says, are “fellow-servants with us and in the image of the Creator”; nevertheless, “we are far inferior [in respect of the Divine likeness], and especially now [after the Fall], to the good Angels,”



¹³⁵ See note 134.

¹³⁶ St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, ch. 11, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. III, col. 284C.

¹³⁷ Isaiah 6:6-7.

• In verses 5-7, in a spirit of self-reproach, Isaiah confesses his unworthiness and sinfulness on beholding the Lord, and in order to take up his prophetic work he is purified by one of the Seraphim.

¹³⁸ St. Basil the Great, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, §183, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXX, col. 428C.

¹³⁹ St. John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition*, Bk. II, ch. 3, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XCIV, col. 868B.

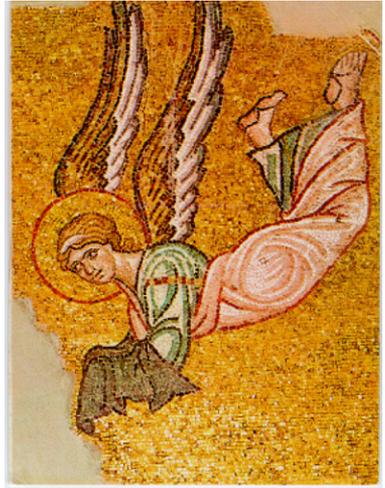
¹⁴⁰ St. Dionysios, *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, ch. 4, §2, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. III, col. 180AB.

¹⁴¹ See note 140.

who are “more honorable than us, as being without bodies and closer to the utterly incorporeal and uncreated Nature,” and “are for this reason called a secondary light and an emanation of the Primal Light.”¹⁴²

And, more specifically, the Noetic Powers “though fellow-servants with us, are nonetheless honored by us and are by virtue of their rank far more honorable than us,” as “maintaining both their proper rank and cherishing that purpose for which they were created.”¹⁴³

* * *



27. However, in spite of this vivid awareness of the three most general “mansions,” that is, the three levels of different degrees of honor and glory—of the Theotokos, of the Bodiless Powers, and of deified human beings—the Holy Apostle Paul did not have this distinction in mind, and certainly did not ascend to the third level, that of the Theotokos.

Therefore, what, in the end, was the “third heaven” to which the God-bearing Apostle was “caught up”?

28. The Holy Hesychastic Fathers will give us an authoritative answer to this question, since they had similar deificatory experiences, that is, they were “experienced Fathers,”¹⁴⁴ who, after passing through the stages of purification and illumination, attained to deification and became “supracelestial.”¹⁴⁵

• These three stages of the ladder leading to Heaven, which touches on the Throne of the Lamb, now induct us into the Mystery of the three Heavens.

¹⁴² St. Gregory Palamas, *One Hundred Fifty Chapters on Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life, Intended as a Purge of the Barlaamite Scourge*, §§27, 64, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. CL, cols. 1140A, 1068A; St. Gregory the Theologian, “Oration XL, ‘On Holy Baptism,’” §5, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. xxxvi, col. 364B.

¹⁴³ See note 142.

¹⁴⁴ St. Gregory Palamas, *Discourse in Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*, Bk. I, ch. 3, §5, in *Συγγράμματα* [Writings], ed. Panagiotes Chrestou (Thessalonica: 1962), Vol. I, p. 415, ll. 4, 1.

¹⁴⁵ See note 144.



V. The apprehension of “more Divine realities”

1. According to the Holy Fathers, “no one can be saved without first being deified; and again, no one can be deified without first being assimilated to God.”¹⁴⁶ For a man to be made like unto God, he must imitate the Divine perfections and thus be united with Him.

2. Salvation, therefore, means deification, and deification means the resemblance and union of the image (man) with the Prototype (God):

Salvation cannot be brought about but through the deification of the saved; deification is assimilation to God and union with Him, as far as this is attainable.¹⁴⁷

3. Man, in ascending the ladder towards assimilation to God, becomes good by participation and by Grace, and is inflamed by Divine longing,

and is purified through this Divine longing; in being purified, he becomes Godlike; in becoming Godlike, he becomes good by Grace forever after.¹⁴⁸

4. In this state, the mind of the person being deified “is smitten by longing” “and experiences awe beyond comprehension,”¹⁴⁹ because he sees “himself being caught up by God”¹⁵⁰ and enjoying the future blessedness, which is “the vision of God, not [of course] according to His Nature and Essence, but according to His Divine attributes and perfections.”¹⁵¹

5. This vision of God is to be identified with the vision “of the Divine attributes that are beheld naturally and eternally,”¹⁵² that is, with the vision of the uncreated Energies of God; this apprehension of “more Divine realities” is to be identified with the

¹⁴⁶ St. Nikodemos, *Συμβουλευτικὸν Ἐγχειρίδιον*, p. 186.

¹⁴⁷ St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, ch. 1, §3, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. III, cols. 373D-376A.

¹⁴⁸ St. Nikodemos, *Συμβουλευτικὸν Ἐγχειρίδιον*, p. 183.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 178.

“third heaven.” In that case, he who is deified is caught up “into the regions around the Trinity”;¹⁵³ that is, he participates in the uncreated Energies of God¹⁵⁴ and “is led and acted upon” by God,¹⁵⁵ since his bodily and psychic functions are suspended and become quiescent.

6. The Holy Fathers give the name “rapture” to this revelatory experience of the Holy Apostle Paul and speak about the “mystery of the rapture.”¹⁵⁶ This “rapture” was a spiritual experience identical to the deification experienced by the Saints of the Old and New Testaments. However, in view of its ineffability, it has been articulated in a variety of ways, since created language is insufficient to express realities that are, by nature and by Grace, uncreated.

7. As the Patristic theology of prayer draws closer and closer to the Mystery of the three Heavens, we observe that it already lays a secure foundation for the further understanding of this issue:

The beginning of prayer consists in expelling thoughts, through single words of prayer, as soon as they assault us; the middle stage of prayer is for the intellect to concentrate on what is being said or thought; the end of prayer is being caught up to the Lord.¹⁵⁷

8. Corresponding to the three stages of prayer, the journey towards deification passes through three stages: practical philosophy, natural contemplation, and theological mystagogy.

According to St. Maximos the Confessor,

It is said that the function of practical philosophy is to purify the mind of every passionate fantasy, that the function of natural contemplation is to afford the mind access to all true knowledge of existing things in accordance with the cause by which they exist, and that the function of theological mystagogy is to make it [the mind], by Grace and according to habit, like God and equal to Him—as far as possible—, so that it no longer has any awareness at all of things sequent to God, on account of its transcendence of them.¹⁵⁸



¹⁵³ St. Theophylact of Bulgaria, *Exposition of II Corinthians*, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. CXXIV, col. 929C.

¹⁵⁴ The Uncreated Energies of God are called by Holy Tradition also: “the Divine attributes that are beheld naturally and eternally,” “virtues of God,” “natural properties of God,” “natural and essential powers of God,” “processions of the Cause of all things,” “Divine names that disclose Providence,” “participations and essential participations of existing things,” “Divine gifts,” “unified theology,” and “attributes and perfections of God.” (See St. Nikodemos, *Συμβουλευτικὸν Ἐγχειρίδιον*, p. 179.)

¹⁵⁵ St. Theophylact, *Exposition of II Corinthians*, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. CXXIV, col. 929D.

¹⁵⁶ St. Gregory the Theologian, “Oration xxviii (Second Theological Oration), ‘On Theology,’” §20, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XXXVI, col. 52C.

¹⁵⁷ St. John of Sinai, *The Ladder*, Discourse xxviii, §20, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LXXXVIII, col. 1132D.

¹⁵⁸ St. Maximos the Confessor, *Concerning Various Difficult Passages of Sts. Dionysios and Gregory*, to *Thomas the Sanctified [Ambigua]*, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XCI, col. 1241C; cf. *Fifth Century on Various Topics*, §94, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XC, cols. 1388D-1389A.

9. St. Theophylact of Bulgaria, summarizing the Tradition antecedent to him, in which he participates by experience, gives us an anagogical interpretation of the three Heavens:

Since many matters are spoken of anagogically, we will say a few things that are easier to understand. Thus, there is the first heaven, the end and scope of moral philosophy, in which one properly regulates his moral conduct. Then there is the second, physical heaven, in which one acquires knowledge of the nature of the universe, as far as this is possible. Then there is the theological, third heaven, in which, according to the measure of his capacity, one attains, through vision, to the apprehension of more Divine realities that transcend knowledge.¹⁵⁹

10. To this hermeneutical tradition belongs also the choir of the Hesychastic Fathers of the *Philokalia*, down to St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite.



The greatest among them, St. Gregory Palamas, assures us that the Holy Apostle Paul

was at that time [during the “rapture”] light and spirit, to which he was united and from which he had received the capacity of uniting, having gone out from all things and become light by Grace and non-being by transcendence, that is, by rising above created things.¹⁶⁰

11. It should be noted that the Neptic Fathers distinguish between two different kinds of illumination and “rapture”: that of the heart and that of the mind, the former preceding and the latter following.

St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite calls illumination in the heart “enhypostatic” “because it abides in the heart by habit, not coming and going in the manner of thoughts,” and he also notes that “unless the heart is first illumined, the mind cannot be caught up to God.”¹⁶¹

12. When the “illumination” of the heart has increased greatly, then the mind, becoming the “mind of Christ,”¹⁶² is exalted “to the third heaven.”

For, being guided by that light which multiplies in the heart and inundates it, the mind ascends or is led up to Divine revelations of God’s power, wisdom, and goodness. It is caught up to the eternal and natural attributes of God prior to the fashioning of creation; and it sees the issues of things to come

¹⁵⁹ St. Theophylact, *Exposition of II Corinthians*, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. CXXIV, col. 929C.

¹⁶⁰ St. Gregory Palamas, *Discourse in Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*, Bk. II, ch. 3, §37, in *Συγγράμματα*, Vol. I, p. 570, ll. 26-29.

¹⁶¹ St. Nikodemos, *Παύλου αἱ Δέκα Τέσσαρες Ἐπιστολαί*, Vol. II, p. 111, n. 1.

¹⁶² 1 Corinthians 2:16.

and beholds whatsoever other secret and ineffable mysteries the Holy Spirit will reveal to him in proportion to his purity.¹⁶³

13. According to the Holy Fathers, the “Mystery of the rapture” is the next stage of “pure prayer,” since, as St. Isaac the Syrian elucidates, “prayer is one thing, and Divine vision during prayer is another”: beyond the boundary of pure prayer “there will then be wonderment, and not prayer,” for “what pertains to prayer has ceased, while there is a certain Divine vision, and the mind does not utter any prayer.”¹⁶⁴

This “Mystery” is given very rarely, for “one out of thousands is found worthy to attain to pure prayer with great vigilance, to break through this boundary, and to acquire experience of that Mystery,” “and as to that Mystery which is after pure prayer and lies beyond it, there is scarcely to be found a single man from generation and generation who by the Grace of God has attained to it.”¹⁶⁵

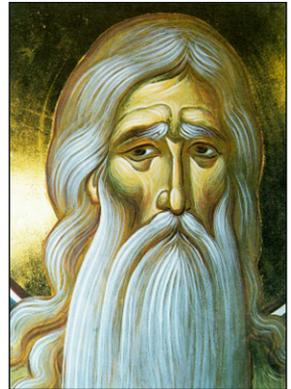
14. The “Mystery of the rapture,” which, on account of its rarity, is characterized by the Saints as “a thing difficult to grasp, difficult to express, and difficult to acquire,”¹⁶⁶ those who are deified are always vouchsafed “at the time of prayer.”

Abba Isaac, after stating that this “ineffable grace” “is granted to the worthy at the time of prayer,” just as, moreover, the Lives of the Saints present “many of the Saints standing at prayer, their minds caught up therein,” then responds as follows to the question, “why are these great and inexpressible charisms granted only at the time of prayer?”:

Because at this time, and more than at any other time, a man is prepared and collected, so as to devote his attention to God, both desiring and receiving mercy from Him.¹⁶⁷

15. With particular regret we must conclude our lengthy disquisition on the mysteries of the “third heaven” and the “progress, ascent, or assumption”¹⁶⁸ of the God-bearing Apostle thereto with the words of St. Theophylact of Bulgaria, according to the simpler rendition of St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite:

‘Paul, therefore, ascended to the vision of the celestial regions around the Holy Trinity, caught up thereto, assuredly, by the ineffable power of the Holy Spirit, having transcended all created things, both sensible and intelligible, and even the very Orders of the Angels. During the time of this rap-



¹⁶³ See note 161.

¹⁶⁴ Abba Isaac the Syrian, “Discourse xxxii,” in *Ἄπαντα τὰ εὐρεθέντα Ἀσκητικά*, pp. 135-136.

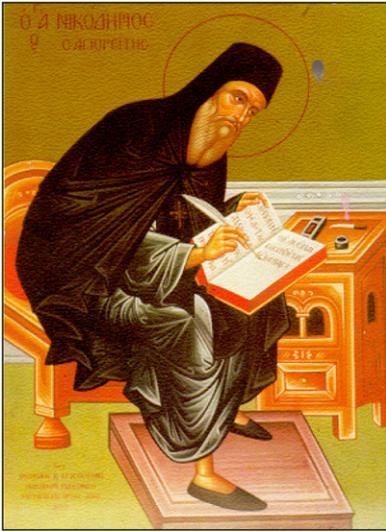
¹⁶⁵ See note 164.

¹⁶⁶ St. Gregory Palamas, *Discourse on the Life of St. Peter the Athonite*, ch. III, §20, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. CL, col. 1013B.

¹⁶⁷ Abba Isaac, “Discourse xxxii,” p. 138.

¹⁶⁸ See note 156.

• St. Maximos interprets these three terms of St. Gregory, “progress,” “ascent,” and “assumption,” in his *Ambigua* (*Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XCI, cols. 1237C-1240B, 1241BC).



ture, he was neither in the body, since his bodily senses were not functioning, nor outside the body, since even the cognition and energy of his mind had ceased and were not functioning; neither were the other faculties and energies of his soul functioning, and consequently he did not know in what kind of state he was. For before the things of God all human cognition becomes quiescent, since the mind of man is then caught up by God and is led and acted upon by Him as, where, and into what mysteries He desires and wills,' 'which sights and revelations are all unknown to the mind and inexpressible in language, and one cannot receive or apprehend them un-

less he departs from man's natural baseness and lowliness and ascends to that which is above nature by the ineffable power of the Holy Spirit.'¹⁶⁹



¹⁶⁹ St. Nikodemos, *Παύλου αἱ Δέκα Τέσσαρες Ἐπιστολαί*, Vol. II, p. 113; cf. St. Theophylact, *Exposition of II Corinthians*, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. CXXIV, cols. 929CB-932A.

• St. Theophylact distinguishes between the “third heaven” and “Paradise,” saying that the “third heaven” is “the regions around the Trinity,” to which the Divine Apostle was originally caught up, whereas “Paradise” is “the more arcane mysteries of the Godhead,” to which he was subsequently “caught up,” since “in the realm of theology, too, there are ascents.”