

The Orthodox Mind or Spirit



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All that we have mentioned define the faith of Orthodoxy and protect the Mystery of man's salvation. They also establish the position of every believer vis-a-vis God, the world and his fellow man and constitute the Orthodox mind (*φρόνημα*) or spirit. We do not have here the result of an attempt on man's part to develop a type of self-salvation, but the result of a cooperation between God and man.

Man, through his fall, was deprived of God's Grace and depending upon his own powers, followed his own path. He was not able to prevail over his passions and was subdued by the spirit or mind of the flesh. In the person of Jesus Christ, God reached out to man and

brought him back to the communion of His Grace. In Christ Jesus, man becomes a partaker of the life of God, he overcomes his carnally-mindedness and embraces spiritually-mindedness which is "life and peace" (Rom. 8,6), the mind of Christ (Philip. 2, 5. I Cor. 2, 16). He no longer "minds" [sets his affection on] "things on the earth" but "things in heaven" (Col. 3,2).

An essential change has come about in the man who is "in Christ": he has become a "new man", and new creation; he is completely Christified. This is the result of man's embodiment into the Body of Christ and of his partaking of the divine Eucharist. St. Symeon the New Theologian expresses this in the most moving way:

"We become members of Christ, and Christ our members,

and Christ becomes the hand and Christ the foot of me the wretched one;

I move my hand, and Christ is my entire hand. for you must understand the holy Divinity

as being inseparable from me".

This Christification of all of man leads the faithful to respect his body. The words of the St. Symeon are most moving. When we understand ourselves, who we are and who we have become in Christ, we will discern the miracle. We will respect and be timid before our very selves and will respect ourselves as we respect Christ:

"And I marvel, understanding myself,

from Whom I have become as such; O Miracle.

And I respect myself and am timid

And as You I honor and respect myself

And I wonder being bashful all over,

Where to sit, and whom to approach.

And where- to rest Your members.

For what works, and for what actions

Should I employ Your fearful and divine members?"

All of man becomes Christified and feels infinite respect for his members which have become "members of Christ". This leads man to a completely new behavior towards his own body. His body no longer belongs to him but to Christ; it becomes a "temple of the Holy Spirit". Man cannot do whatever he wants with his body or with that of his neighbour. He must approach it with the same devotion and respect which he attributes to God's temple. Any other behaviour is a desecration.

His entire position vis-a-vis God, the world, his fellow man and his entire self becomes analogous to the height of the glory of Christified man. His life henceforth responds once

again to his nature, to creation "according to the image" of God. He forsakes his autonomy and freely chooses the communion of love.

Love is undoubtedly the gift of God, the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5, 22). But a necessary prerequisite for one to accept the Grace of the Holy Spirit is that it be his wholehearted choice, a reception on the part of the mind and the heart, which leads to obedience of God's commandments (Jn 14, 23). God loves man and gives him the possibility, if he himself so desires, to respond with his love to God's love and thus be changed into "an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph. 2, 22).

But this for the believer implies a way of life. It presupposes his decision and firm desire to "crucify his flesh together with his passions and desires" and to struggle with all his being to acquire the virtues of God, making this his aim with absolute priority.

But again, that which man shall attain to with his own attempts will not be the saving virtues which are God's gifts, but only the fruits of man's labour. Yet in this manner he demonstrates in deed, with all its personal consequences, his personal choice and wholehearted turning towards God; his desire to acquire the gifts of God. Then can he ask God to give him His grace, and God "takes into consideration" man's struggles, accepts the fruits of these labours and He transforms them into the gifts of the Holy Spirit, into love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance" (Gal. 5, 22).

This new "mind", this new way of thinking, presupposes that the believer will forsake his autonomy and accept his insufficiency and inability to achieve the meaning of life, i.e. that he will repent "meta-noia": change his way of thinking. An autonomous man is also he who seeks to justify his life with good deeds or by any type of "technical" processes, outside the realm of God's Grace in Christ Jesus. The Orthodox "mind" or way of thinking is free from all concepts of self justification (Rom. 3, 20. Gal. 5,4). The true believer looks his sinfulness and insufficiency in the face and looks to Christ with complete trust. It is for this reason that "the publicans and harlots enter the Kingdom of God before those who are convinced of their righteousness and depend upon it" (Matth. 21,31).

The Fathers of the Church talk about the "convulsions of the heart" which at the same time constitute the "opening up" for the Grace of God to enter into man's soul. The hymns of the Great Canon express this reality in the life of the faithful.

Through true repentance the faithful has the feeling that he finds himself in an ocean bed: "for no child of Adam has sinned as I have sinned unto You". He is convinced that this great distance separating him from God springs only from his disposition, "by myself have I sinned unto You"; and further, he expresses his inability to weep in repentance: "neither tears, nor repentance, not even contrition do I have". However man's impasse is set at naught by his crying unto God the Savior:

"Do, Thou, O God my Savior grant them to me.

Grant me thoughts of repentance,

Give to my wretched soul the desire for contrition,

Lift me from the sleep of fearful hard-heartedness,

Dispel the darkness of sloth,

*Dissolve the blackness of despair;
So that I, the most wretched one,
may lift up my head,
And attach myself to You, O Logos,
And walk in accordance with Your will".*

Deep humility constitutes the beginning of spiritual life, the foundation of the Orthodox "mind" or way of thinking. Here we do not have a cry of hopelessness but a turning about by man that leads to hope, despite all impasses that he may have been led to by his own volition.

The believer is henceforth called to a life-long spiritual struggle in which he is never abandoned by God, except in such instance where he were to consider himself able of his own and self-sufficient. For then he becomes autonomous and distances himself from the Grace of God. The faithful realizes that not only God but the Devil also calls to his disposition and threatens his "mind in Christ" through deceptive means (Jn 8,44. I Peter 5,8).

The demonic element is a reality; this why our Lord urges us to "be sober, to be vigilant" (I Peter 5, 7), "be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the Devil" (Eph. 6, 10-12).

This means that the Devil does not have authority over the believer, unless the latter cooperates with him through his disposition. Spiritual warfare, especially "prayer and fasting" i.e. asceticism in Christ crushes every intrigue of the Devil (cf. Matth 17,21. Mark 9, 29). Through asceticism or asceticism the believer does not aim at degrading the body, but at neutralizing the passions. It is a preparation of the body to receive God's grace and sanctification; "If you want to be saved, become as if you were dead", say the Desert Fathers in reference to the deadening of the passions. When one reaches such sanctity, he acquires that real humility which attracts to itself all of God's Grace, and he becomes "full of Grace" (Matth. 5, 3. I Peter 5,5); the machinations of the Devil cannot harm him.

Yet, it is possible that he may fall since man remains changeable, i.e. he can turn towards virtue or towards sin, on the basis of his free will, depending on what he chooses.

We can understand the term "freedom" either relatively or in an absolute sense. Absolute freedom places man's "ego" in the centre of the universe. The exercise of absolute freedom distances man from his very own nature, it alienates him, for man, according to the Christian faith, is not an egoistic being but a communion of persons. This idea means that our neighbour is a partaker and sharer of the very same nature in which we partake; he is relevant to us; he is not something separate from us, someone other; This means that he constitutes together with us and all our fellow men the one humanity, the one humankind, the one man with myriads of hypostases, i.e. persons.

The one nature is expressed in the daily life of the Christians through the existence of the one "mind" or accord, the mind or spirit of Christ, Who "emptied Himself, taking on the form of a servant" and "humbled Himself" becoming obedient unto death..." (Philip. 2, 7-8). This is the most extreme limit of humility and sacrifice on behalf of communion and love with apostate man. When one acquires this mind of Christ, he returns once again to living according to his nature, he possesses that "mind" which corresponds to man's true nature.

On the contrary, the man who has as his supreme law the imposition of his will, regardless of what this could mean for others, for human communion or society in general, and for all of creation, follows a path which alienates him from his very own nature. This type of behaviour constitutes communion only with himself, i.e. hell. This egocentric "mind" can constitute a real threat when man, in the name of freedom, considers it his right to impose his will in any way; in the name of freedom, he becomes destructive.

There is of course freedom "from something", e.g. freedom from oppression; there is also, however, freedom "for something", for a purpose. Absolute freedom from every kind of limitation, as we have said, goes against man's nature and alienates him; it transforms him into a tyrant or a monster. This is why true freedom is sought for in relation with the purpose, which of course is the edification, the building up, and not the destruction of man's personality.

In our times this question is especially contemporary, because many speak of freedom and liberation, negatively evaluating man's personality and aiming at its total abrogation. Others again speak about liberation, underlining that man has within him an unlimited power. Through their techniques they promise to liberate this power and to transform man into a superman, equal with God. And this concept presupposes absolute freedom and the right of autonomous man to impose his will upon the less powerful.

According to the Christian "mind" or way of thinking, true freedom, which is in harmony with man's nature, ministers unto human nature; it does not destroy it. It serves the unity, the harmony, the love of all of God's creation. It thus becomes apparent that the question of freedom is directly related to the concept that we have concerning man. Christian anthropology does not lead to impasses, nor to a concept of freedom catastrophic for man's personality. The Christian's concept of freedom is a blessing for man and for all of creation.

When, therefore, we speak of freedom "for something" we mean the realization of man's nature, i.e. the fulfilment of the meaning of his life. God created man to progress from creation "according to the image" to the achievement of "the likeness"; i.e. to that fullness of communion and love by grace which has as its model the love of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity.

It is indicative that Christ, speaking about the "limits" of love, which is the love for our enemies, characterizes them as "perfection" and puts forth as a model the love of the Heavenly Father: "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you: that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven" (Matth. 5,44). The "mind" of love which includes one's enemies is the mind "according to the likeness" of the heavenly Father. It is not offered forcibly or out of necessity, but freely.

The idea that to love our enemies, to bless those who curse us, and to do good to those who hate us, and indeed with all the strength of our souls, goes against human nature, is a warped and distorted idea. For that which goes against man's true nature is not loving one's enemies, but to hate them. Not to bless, but to curse.

God loves, blesses, does good. This is why the believer who loves God desires to be like Him; this moreover is the meaning of his life. In this way man overcomes his apostasy and returns to the mind of Adam before the fall. Adam was possessed by the conviction that Eve, the other person, was not something strange, but his very self; "this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh". In Christ Jesus we are no longer egoistical beings, "a thousand pieces"; we regain the feeling and awareness of the oneness of mankind, of the one man, and we

understand the meaning of divine dispensation in Christ; Christ came to gather God's scattered children "into one" and He desires to incorporate all into this unity of "one in Christ". In this sense does the believer understand the words of Scripture:

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself (Matth. 22, 37-38).

Referring to this love, Christ emphasized that on this the fulfilment of the entire Law depends; this constitutes the Orthodox "mind". Do not differentiate the other; understand him to be your member, and consider yourself and all others as one body and members of one another.

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH
Its Faith, Worship and Life

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