

## A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF MOVEMENT

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“In Him we live and move”  
(Acts 17:28)

### *Introduction*

A well-known Desert Father living in the middle of the fourth century, Serapion, once travelled on a pilgrimage to Rome. It was at the time—as indeed it has been through the centuries—a pious custom to visit holy places and seek advice from saintly persons. In Rome, then, he was told of a certain very famous nun, who lived an ascetic life in a small cell, never leaving it to go out. Curious of the reason for this way of life—he himself loved to travel—Serapion paid her a visit and asked: “Why are you sitting here?” To this the holy woman replied: “I am not sitting; I am on a journey.”

In the same way as these two ascetics, both Serapion and the nun, Orthodox Christians have, especially during this century, migrated to distant countries in search of a better way of life. This travelling, however, is a symbol of the adventure of every Christian who is on an unceasing journey to the kingdom of God, to the heavenly kingdom which is within the heart. Whether in motion or motionless, every human person is, in fact, on such a spiritual journey, constantly transcending the limits of time, space, sin and death.

In this paper, we shall examine four distinct forms of movement which are characteristic of Christian spirituality. The first concerns the entry of the monk into the desert, which is symbolical of the relationship of the Christian to the world that he inhabits. The second is the movement away from things

earthly towards the heavenly kingdom. Then we shall briefly look at the descent of the intellect into the heart during prayer, according to the mystical theology of our Church. Finally, we shall study the life of the saint who moves "from glory to glory" (II Cor 3:18).

### I. *From the City to the Desert—the World*

The Christian life is dominated by the vision of a goal which gives it its full significance. It is a search for God such as He is revealed to us in His Word, Jesus Christ—nothing more nor less.

When one hears of "the flight to the desert," one usually envisages only the monastic way of life. Yet it must be remembered that monasticism is merely "the life according to the Gospel"<sup>1</sup>; all are called to respond to Christ's call to salvation. The external circumstances of the response may vary but the path is essentially one. In the spiritual life, there is no sharp distinction between monastics and non-monastics; the monastic life is simply the Christian life, lived out in a particular way. Other "ways" are not easier—otherwise they are divorced from the experience of the victory over death which is the aim of the Christian life. The Gospel, then, is an invitation to pilgrimage, extended to all those who wish to be saved (Matt 16:24). The prayer of Christ, referring to His life *in* the world but not *of* the world (John 17), applies to all those who wish to be His disciples. It is in this sense, therefore, that renunciation of the world becomes a virtue to be acquired by all Christians.

In the ascetic tradition, the term "world" has a wider than merely moral meaning—not implying, as is often thought, a form of hostility towards the world or escapism from it. "Renunciation" has a deeper significance when seen in relation to love for one's neighbor. Flight from the world is only the negative, but not an inevitable aspect of monasticism. The exodus into the desert is less a movement away than a movement into the realm where one encounters God. Jesus begins His ministry with such a withdrawal into the desert (Matt 4:1) and there are early

<sup>1</sup>Basil the Great, *Epistola* 207, 2 PG 32:761B.

suggestions that Paul, too, went to the desert after his conversion (Gal 1:17). This means, however, not an escape but a confrontation, a fierce struggle against the demons. The desert, according to the *Life of Saint Anthony*, becomes a source of life to the monk, just as sea-water to fish:<sup>2</sup> a monk moves out into the desert in a zealous search for the Source of life. This is why faith, love and renunciation of the world are interrelated. The Christian moves away from the earthly, from his fallen self, towards the unknown in order to find the Unknowable. Out of love for God, man is prepared to risk his life in exchange for God's life. For "he who finds his life shall lose it; and he who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt 10:39).

The Christian cannot meet God except in the embrace of the cross with the shedding of blood. "He who does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me" (Matt 10:38). The way of the Christian is the way of the cross; it constitutes a "via crucis," a crusade. In "denying himself and taking up his cross" (Matt 16:24), one is not renouncing himself or anything else for the mere sake of renunciation. There is, here, no implied condemnation, but simply a preference shown to God, a constant reference to Him whose "blood was shed for many" (Mark 14:24). It is a hierarchy in one's love, dictated by the very words of our Lord: "Seek first the kingdom of God . . . and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt 6:33).

The Christian can neither condemn nor renounce the creation of God. He takes it upon his shoulders like a cross; he assumes for it a new significance in relation to God; he baptises everything, immersing it in the fount of immortality. There can be no renunciation unless there is, first, a true esteem of the world as created by God. Man is not saved from the world but in and with the material world.

## II. *From the Material To the Immaterial—the Body*

A Christian may only speak of the body with reference to the Incarnation of the Word, His Transfiguration, Passion, Resurrection and Ascension: Christ ascended into heaven having

<sup>2</sup>Cf. ch. 85 PG 26:961C-964A.

blessed human nature not once and for all, but continually blessing it (Luke 24:51). Our body is closely linked with the Body of Christ, and He is our archetype; He "became our type in order that we may follow in His footsteps."<sup>3</sup> Just as He acted in a divine-human manner, man too should act in a similar manner, following the example of the God-Man Christ."<sup>4</sup> One loves the body—and this love can only be wrong if the body is cut off from its relation to God—just as Christ did in assuming a human body.<sup>5</sup> This, of course, does not allow for any complacency: the fact that Christ assumed our body at His Incarnation is reason enough never to relax, being aware of His expectations.

As Christ has raised human nature to heaven, man too must deify it by His grace. Through the body, through its natural beauty—of which one ought not to be ashamed but proud, it being a gift from above—one should glorify God. The body, through ascetic struggle, becomes a means whereby one glorifies God and at the same time catches a glimpse of His Glory. The body is, in fact, a mystery reflecting God's beauty and love for humanity. Symeon the New Theologian describes this mystery in poetic language:

My hand is Christ, my foot is  
Christ, wretched though I am.<sup>6</sup>

Man's purpose is to raise the body to the level to which Christ raised it:

Man ought to use every means to raise his clay, so to speak, and seat it on the throne of God. And let no one make excuses for not undertaking this ascent because the way and the door are open."<sup>7</sup>

The human body is found on God's throne in the Person of Christ. The Fathers understood that Christ's victory over death

<sup>3</sup>Abba Isaias, *Logos* 27, 1.

<sup>4</sup>Anastasius the Sinaite, *Secundum imaginem* PG 89:1148D-1149A.

<sup>5</sup>Athanasius, *Tomus ad Antiochenos* 8 PG 26:804B.

<sup>6</sup>*Hymn* 15.

<sup>7</sup>John Climacus, *Ladder* 26:ii, 20 PG 88:1064 AB.

returned to our nature what it had lost as a consequence of the Fall, namely life—immortality and indestructibility—which we shall receive again in actuality at the resurrection of the dead (I Cor 15:54) and which we are able to taste potentially even now. This may be a difficult process, requiring force (Matt 11:12); still, in the words of St John of the *Ladder*, “the door has been opened” by Christ and, what is more, “the way” has been shown, the road trodden by the Saints.

When one is enabled to see the true light, and to see *in* the true light, then one may contemplate the real world that is around and to notice life as Christ meant it to be. The whole world is a burning bush, a revelation of God’s beauty, a manifestation of His love. Thus to contemplate nature is to become aware of things divine. “By becoming sensitive to God’s world around myself, I grow more conscious of God’s world *within* myself”<sup>8</sup> and see all things as a theophany mediating His presence. One must, therefore, rediscover this sacramental vision that reveals the genuine beauty of the world as a reality to be loved, in as much as it reflects the glory of its Creator. One’s duty as a Christian is to love earth right up to heaven, and to love heaven right down to earth. Each person, each animal, each object is a special witness to God’s love, a sermon of the very Word of God. And sin is the failure to accept the world and neighbor as gift and mercy of God.

### III. *From the Intellect to the Heart—Prayer*

For the Fathers, the aim of the human person in prayer is to abide in “the heaven of the intellect within the heart.” The intellect and the heart, though different, are nevertheless inseparable. The intellect is inside the heart, and there is a harmony and a balanced relationship between them which accords with the general Patristic resistance to extremes, whether it be sentimentalism or intellectualism. The separation of the intellect from the heart is cause for sin or deviation,<sup>9</sup> whereas their harmonious

<sup>8</sup>Archimandrite Kallistos, *The Orthodox Way* (S.V.S.: New York 1980) p. 158.

<sup>9</sup>Mark the Monk, *De Baptismo* PG 65:1016AB.

relationship ensures the edification of man's personality in the life of grace. The heart contains the entire *cosmos*, heaven and earth—God Himself, whose throne the heavens are, and the whole universe, whose creator He is. This microcosm or micro-paradise is guarded by the intellect, constantly vigilant and firmly concentrated on the presence of God within the heart.

The stillness (or ἡσυχία) of this state is forever directed towards God, a continual movement before His countenance. In the quiet of the heart's treasure (Matt 6:21), on the altar of the heart filled with God's presence, the intellect offers "logical" sacrifice, "theo-logical" thanksgiving. Isaac the Syrian speaks of "the intellect entering behind the curtain of the holy of holies."<sup>10</sup>

The intellect, to adopt another image, becomes all eyes, riveting its waking, watching eyes on guarding its "treasure." The treasure is God's presence dwelling in the heart. The object is to bring oneself into one's "treasury," in the words of the Gospel (Matt 6:6), where only God sees us. There is an element of intimacy here, and one should be warned against self-display or audacity in this relationship with God. Ultimately, God is the only witness; He is the initiator of this relationship. For man, it is simply a case of being there, in his heart and with his intellect—that is to say, "with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind and with all his strength" (Mark 12:30)—together with God, beside God.

This vision of God in man's intellect and heart has the further implication of stressing God's mystery—beyond knowledge, yet well-known in His inwardness in us. Hence the mysteriousness of man himself in his divine dimension. God is not someone, let alone something separate from us, someone who made us and then withdrew into some heavenly dwelling-place. His kingdom is within our heart (Luke 17:21), and when we speak of God we inevitably speak of man. Anthropology and theology share the same language. In gathering the intellect to the heart in prayer, one does no more than respond to God with the love first given by Him. Yet one returns it from one's emptiness, as priest, with thanks and glory, while He gives from His fulness.

Love is the fiery gift of God's light which burns in the

<sup>10</sup>*Mystic Treatises* (ed. Bedjan, Amsterdam 1923) p. 349.

heart. Christ's Incarnation brought us out of darkness into light, and this gives joy to the heart.<sup>11</sup> The whole person, including the body, shines if the heart is illumined (Prov 15:13). The intellect, as the "eye" of the heart, is able to see this light when it is clear: "if your eye is simple, the whole body will be full of light" (Matt 6:22). For the heart to see God's light, however, it must be pure (Matt 5:8). Purity is the heart's natural condition, the authentic state; the "new heart" (Ezek 18:31) which man must acquire is his primordial one. When the heart is filled with impurity, man is no longer man but inhuman. The genuine human person is "unfailing light . . . in the heart,"<sup>12</sup> continually reflecting the light of God, unceasingly revealing God. Ultimately, of course, it is God Himself who plucks out our heart of stone and gives us a heart of flesh (Ezek 11:19-21); it is Christ Himself who must roll away the rock which blocks the entrance (Matt 28:2-3) to our heart, enabling His light to pervade it.

#### IV. *From Glory to Glory—Holiness*

The vision of God's light is overshadowed by the dark cloud of ignorance. Seeing the light of God means following Him "wherever He might lead" (Rev 14:4)—whether through fire or water, through brightness or darkness. The desire, furthermore, to see this light is constantly satisfied and yet never satisfied. The soul continually longs for God and reaches out to Him but there is no ultimate satisfaction, no final union, but only a deeper penetration into the darkness of His mystery. There is, here, a philosophy of becoming which may be identified with the fundamental principle of the "creation of man according to the image and likeness of God" (Gen 1:26). God is not remote from the human person—He is by grace firmly planted within him; the experience of God, however, is inexhaustible—the soul will always be inspired by its experience to long for more.

The mystical experience of union with God in ecstasy is not a static phenomenon, recurring in the same way each time.

<sup>11</sup>*Macarian Homilies* XI, 15.

<sup>12</sup>John Climacus, *Ladder* 7:53 PG 88:813B.

It involves, rather, a process of infinite growth in the mystery of God. The immutable God never ceases to remain transcendent and unknown in His essence, yet man is able to advance further and further into this light that is Darkness. Perfection or sanctity is considered as perpetual progress.

In a world like ours where change is a common event, the Church Fathers emphasize the essential character of change for the human nature. Yet this implies the possibility of degeneration also, and that good itself is never acquired absolutely, never "secured" by the individual. Change, then, may take place in one of two directions, since two different sorts of motion are possible. In the fallen world of sin, however, man is imprisoned in a perpetual cycle, a vicious circle leading to greater vices and compared with beasts turning a mill-stone.<sup>13</sup> This movement is, ultimately, motion without progress, likened to building in sand (Matt 7:26). Through sin, one only expends all one's energy, and the process involves no spiritual change.

The second and superior kind of change is summarized by Gregory of Nyssa in his *Homily on Perfection*:

Let us change in such a way that we may constantly evolve towards what is better, being transformed from glory to glory, and thus always improving and ever becoming more perfect by daily growth, and never arriving at any limit of perfection. For that perfection consists in our never stopping in our growth in good, never circumscribing our perfection by any limitation.<sup>14</sup>

This is the "good change," the "change for the better" to which the Fathers refer.<sup>15</sup> It is thus an error to imagine perfection or good as a state of immobility. It would perhaps be more correct to speak of *stages* in perfection and the obvious image here is that of the ladder. Perfection consists in progress itself, not merely the cessation of evil or the acquisition of a certain number of virtues. It is not a reward but an attitude. Of course,

<sup>13</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, *Funeral Oration for Placilla* PG 46:888D.

<sup>14</sup>PG 46:285BC.

<sup>15</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Psalms* 3-4 PG 44:460BC, 500B.



however much the soul may be transformed and participate in divinity, God remains ever beyond, and thus the soul must constantly strive forward. The journey towards God is never ending; thus, holiness is a mixture of intimacy and distance, possession and quest, immanence and transcendence, knowledge and ignorance, light and darkness.

The soul constantly moves forward, forgetting what is past and continually opening up to "grace upon grace" (John 1:16). The motion is clearly borrowed from St. Paul:

I do not count myself to have apprehended; but this one thing I do: forgetting those things which are behind, I stretch myself forward to those which are ahead (Phil 3:13).

The word used by St Paul to describe this struggle is "ἐπεκτείνομαι," and "epectasis" implies a real contact with God and at the same time underlines the radical transcendence of God. Each stage in this divine participation or "theosis" is a stage obscured by the new "glory" constantly arising. And sin is nothing more than the refusal to grow, the denial of progress, the rejection of advance. With the successive deaths and resurrections of the fallen man, one comes into intimate contact with God who is within the heart, though ever inaccessible. The levels of intensity are infinite, the discovery of God unending. Man can never rest complacently on the Cross, nor stop triumphantly along the way. The call is for alertness and continual struggle, for constant surrender into the arms of God.

### *Conclusion*

Oriented towards the Age to come, the Christian lives in constant expectation of the Last Things whose realisation he tries to "force." There is a constant reference to Him who is above and beyond created nature, to Him who is "creator of heaven and earth."<sup>16</sup> To be human, in fact, is to look upwards continually: ἄνθρωπος derives its etymology from the words

<sup>16</sup>Nicene—Constantinopolitan Creed.

ἄνω (above) and ὄψις (face). Of course, "it has not yet been made clear to us what we shall be" (I John 3:2), but we are able from here and now to have partial glimpses of the End, where speech is overcome by the mystery of silence and movement by an ever-moving stillness in God's grace and in God's "kingdom where there is no end" (Luke 1:33).

We do not know the precise time of Christ's Second Coming (Acts 1:7), but until that day of truth we are at each moment moving in watchfulness, always prepared and expectant of Him: "What I say to you I say to all: Watch" (Mark 13:37). This word "watch" is perhaps the greatest message underlying the many exhortations and counsels of the Desert Fathers. One must always be alert, sober, aware of his environment, his neighbor, his own self.

The four kinds of movement described in this essay might each be succinctly defined in one word adopted from ascetic terminology. The detachment from the world in a movement of love towards God, the renunciation of the secular for the sake of an opening up to the unknown that lies before one, may well be summarized as an act or decision of faith (*pistis*). The endeavor to transfigure the bodily into the bodiless, the material to the immaterial, primarily depends upon God's grace; but to a large extent is a result of ascetic struggles (*ascesis*). The union of the intellect with the heart in prayer, often known simply as "the Prayer of the Heart," is a way of real mystical union with God (*ecstasis*) or divinisation (*theosis*). Finally, the continual perfection and reaching forward and upward to something greater that lies beyond is termed by the Greek Fathers as *epectasis*. Yet, through all these motions and advances in the spiritual life, it is awareness (*nepsis*) which is underlined by the Fathers of the Church as a way of watching out, being mindful, attentive and vigilant.

In the journey to heaven, the Christian must possess a clear sense of direction and purpose, knowing fully well from where he has come and where he is going. Unfortunately, all too often our life is scattered and dispersed, sold out to and exhausted in various attractions of this life which only serve to drug or stupify us. This alertness implies a responsibility not only to the

future but also to our present, not only to heaven but to our immediate neighbor.

Growing in awareness and self-knowledge, the traveller along the Way that is Christ (John 14:6) learns to watch his every movement, his every step, every word, every glance, every breath, transfiguring the entire world—to the last speck of dust—into “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1).



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