

ETERNITY AND TIME

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Introduction

The text presented here comes from a lecture given by the late Fr Dumitru Staniloae during his second visit to Fairacres in the summer of 1971. The lecture was given in French and simultaneously translated into English by Fr Donald Allchin. Fr Dumitru was speaking not from a prepared document but from brief notes, and the present text is based on the transcription of the tape-recording made on that occasion.

The lecture made a deep and lasting impression on the sisters who heard it, and now, twelve years after the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, SLG Press are glad to make it more widely known in the present form.

The end of World War II inaugurated a period of suffering and oppression for the Romanian people of which, even today, we in the West know very little. As an Orthodox theologian of great distinction Fr Dumitru was at the centre of an informal circle of intellectuals in Bucharest—writers, poets, scientists and scholars—who met to discuss the meaning of Christian faith for the period in which they were living. At the same time, through his new edition of the *Philokalia*, the great Orthodox anthology of spiritual texts, he was exercising a profound influence on the unexpected revival of monastic life in Romania. Not only his theological eminence but also his remarkable gift for friendship made him greatly loved and revered in monastic houses throughout Romania. So in the 1950s when the state intensified its persecution of churchmen and intellectuals, his arrest and imprisonment were not surprising. For five years Fr Dumitru was confined in one of the notorious political prisons by which the regime sought systematically to stamp out and destroy the intellectual elite and spiritual leadership of the country.

Released in 1963 he resumed his post as Professor of Dogmatics at the Theological Institute in Bucharest. When some years later and shortly before his retirement he was

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granted a limited freedom to travel, and to engage with Christians outside the Soviet empire in the ecumenical dialogue in which he delighted, he could never have referred openly to conditions in Romania or to the restrictions under which writers and thinkers had to work there, without incurring grave risk to himself as well as to his wife and daughter. The friends who welcomed him or who were able themselves to visit him in Romania had on their part to exercise considerable discretion. Of the years he spent in prison he said nothing in public and very little in private

It is against this scantily sketched background that the following text should be read. Depths of human experience as well as a commanding intellect and a profound Christian vision are behind it. We have it at two removes from the speaker's mother tongue, and this may partly explain a certain repetitiveness and occasional obscurity of language and style; these have been left for the sake of retaining the character of an informal address, as well as something of the quality of his speech and message.

Short as it is, this essay strikes several of the keynotes of his major work, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, (the first volume of which has already appeared in English). Canon Allchin recalls two occasions which illustrate, for example, the intimate relation between eternity and time expounded in this essay: 'Once in Romania, we were gazing at a panorama of the snow-covered Carpathians; and another time, in England, looking up at Durham Cathedral high above the wooded slopes of the River Wear. On both occasions Fr Dumitru said with emphasis: "*That cannot be absent from eternity.*"'

In Fr Dumitru, delight in the beauty and goodness of creation as the gift of divine love whose supreme expression is the Incarnation of the Word, lived unquenched alongside all that he knew of suffering and the distortion of sin. This talk, given in a dark time, mediates a vision which can refresh and fortify the faith of Christians today.

The Editors SLG

IN CHRISTIANITY there are two conceptions of God, one which comes from the Bible and which belongs to Christian life and experience, and the other which comes from Greek philosophy. The first presents God as the living God, full of concern and interest for humankind. The second presents God as unmoved and immovable. Eastern Orthodoxy has made a great effort to combine and harmonise the two conceptions. It has sought to reconcile both these ways of thinking about God by means of the doctrine of the divine essence and the divine energies—by saying that while in his essence God remains unmoved, he comes out of himself in his energies.

This is to think of God in a personal way, for a person exists on many levels at once. A mother for instance, when playing with her child, is descending to the level of the child while at the same time remaining an adult; likewise God who enters into the world remains also beyond and above the world. Today, Western theology also is trying to get beyond the notion of God as simply unmoved, but sometimes, as for example in Tillich, it rushes to the other extreme and thinks of God as only in process, in becoming, in movement. We shall try to reconcile the unchangeableness of God on the one hand and his living character on the other, in the spirit of St Gregory Palamas, the great Byzantine theologian of the fourteenth century, seeking to show the link between the eternity of God and our human life in time.

Eternity cannot be simply an unchangeable substance, it cannot be like an eternal self-subsistent law. Such an eternity would not be inexhaustible, and the fact that it is inexhaustible arises from its interiority, which is like that of personal existence. Eternity must include an interior dimension and freedom of will. Only thus can it be inexhaustible, a source of continual newness. If we think of the eternity of God simply in terms of pure reason, or of an eternal substance, then we have a false picture of eternity not

the true one. Eternity must be a fullness of life, and therefore true eternity must be the eternity of God, God being perceived as a subject who is true and always the same in himself, but who at the same time is the source of an eternal and infinite variety of manifestations. But true personal life only exists where there is communion, and there is no fullness of life without fullness of communion. Fullness of life therefore subsists in perfect communion between perfect subjects, perfect persons. So the true eternity is that of the Holy Trinity. The Trinity of Persons is the fullness both of communion and of eternity. The Holy Trinity remains eternally unchangeable in its love, but its love is fullness of life and therefore there is inexhaustible potential for variation in its manifestation and action.

Eternity is life and life is movement. Karl Barth has rightly said that what is purely and simply unmoving and unmoved is dead, and that if God is entirely unmoved, then to be God is to be dead! But the kind of movement which is always the same—the automatic movement of a machine—is also dead. The true meaning of eternity can be found only in the perfect communion which subsists between eternal Persons whose love is inexhaustible. And he who shares in such a divine inter-personal communion receives into himself eternal life. 'This is eternal life, to know thee the one true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.' The inexhaustible life of God as Persons in communion cannot consist in simply passing from one concern or one thought to another. The eternal life of the perfect subjectivity does not depend on finite realities, rather these finite realities depend upon the eternity of God. The life of the eternal subjectivity of God must be a fullness which is not just passing away. It consists in love towards Persons of an equal plenitude; thus it is an eternal, an inexhaustible life. It involves a relationship with the other who responds with a similar love. The divine Persons love one another with an eternally inexhaustible love proper to themselves. They love

one another as partners in a complete reciprocity, a mutuality of sharing. It is a continual movement which passes from one to another in the mutual exchange of the same eternal and perfect love.

Eternity understood in this true way as a personal communion of life must not be thought of as irreconcilable with time. Time is not a sin against eternity, a fall from eternity, something opposed to it. The eternity of God, as life in its plenitude, as an eternal and perfect love between the Persons who are perfectly in union with one another, carries within itself the possibility of time. Time, on the other hand, carries within itself the possibility of eternity which can be realised in communion with God by his grace; for God can enter into a relationship of love with temporal beings. We would underline that this actualisation of eternity in time is always by God's grace, because it is God who has made us beings capable of responding to him in the first place, and it is he who makes us the offer of his love. Thus it is he who has given us this link with eternity, and it is in communion with him that we obtain eternity.

Love is the gift of oneself to another, and the waiting for the full return of that gift from the other in response. Only in a complete and immediate response to the offer of love is love fully realised and full communion attained between the two. The interval of waiting for the response is time. As such, time represents a spiritual distance between persons, while eternity is beyond all distance or separation. St Maximus the Confessor says:

The mystery of Pentecost is thus the direct union of those who are in the providence of God, with the Providence of God himself. That is to say, the union of our created nature with the Word of God by the operation of God's goodness is a union in which there is no longer time or becoming.

Within the Holy Trinity the interval of waiting for the response is reduced to nothing, because the gift of one Person

to the other is immediate. The divine love between the three Persons is thus always complete and perfect.

In creating others to be partners of his Trinitarian love, God has seen that, because they are created, they cannot respond in the same way, but only in a limited and finite way. For them response implies freedom of will, effort and growth. Our human reply cannot all at once be this total gift of ourselves, as prompt and immediate as God's offer of his love to us. For this reason, God offers his love in proportion to our growth and our capacity to respond. In this way God communicates himself to us gradually so that we can learn to grow at our own pace in response to him.

This gradual and slow movement in response to God is equivalent to time. And God is always ready to help us to grow towards the eternity of complete and immediate response to the love he offers us. As we journey towards eternity, God himself lives with us in time, sharing our expectation on the way, through the operation of his energies and through his relationships with us. This is so because, in offering his love, he voluntarily accepts and lives limitation; we can see this in the whole history of salvation as it is gradually realised in time. God lives his eternity fully in his own Trinitarian relationships, and at the same time he lives that same eternity in coming out to meet us in time. This is *kenosis*, the descent of God into time and space, willingly accepted by him for the sake of his creation and lived simultaneously with the eternity of his Trinitarian life.

But this means that it is also necessary for us to respond, not only in our life in time, but also in our relationship to eternity from which this offer comes to us. God waits with long patience for our return to him, for us to wake up to the understanding of the love he offers. And at the same time he rejoices in the complete absence of interval or hesitation in the interchange of love between the Trinitarian Persons. What heightens the paradox of God's relationship with us is that

the joy of the supernatural love within the Trinity is increased as God waits for the response of his human creatures—or is lessened by their slowness to return, 'Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone will open to me I will enter in and dine with him.'

Time means for God the interval of waiting between knocking at our door and the moment when we will open it wide to him. Time in this sense also implies the freedom of man and the great respect which God has for his creatures; God does not enter man's heart by force. Union with God in love can only be realised 'in our free response to the offer of this love; that is why God gives us time; and because of the respect which God has for man, this time is lived both by God and man. To put it another way, God—in waiting for our response—lives in time without forgetting his eternity or leaving it, while we, when we do not hear his voice, live a time which is without any consciousness of eternity. For there can be no question that when we do not hear the voice of God, or choose not to respond to it, we are simply waiting; we wait for all kinds of things, and as a result we live totally immersed in time. But when what we are waiting for is an event of great personal importance to us, then we become more conscious of the passage of time. And this waiting for some great event always has something joyful in it which occupies the soul and drives away its boredom. The most intense expectation or waiting, the greatest desire of all, is for the unreserved love of another person.

Thus we live eternity in hope, in anticipation, and this fills us with joy to overflowing, so that we are no longer conscious of the passing of time. God is with us in this waiting in hope for the love of human persons. He does everything to make this response possible; he is never discouraged as we are, and never switches his attention to other, unimportant things, as we do. He never finds time boring as we do. God's vision of things extends deep into the fullness of the future and

therefore he is much more patient than we are and is content when things are not complete; he does not give up hope in the way that we do.

Since he wishes us to be always growing in our love for him, he continually gives us by his acts the divine energies which strengthen us to grow into a fullness of response. In this sense, one can speak of God in history—as it were in ‘becoming’—at the level of his actions which are directed towards us. He advances with us towards what we are to become. But in us the process of becoming is not *just* a matter of the interval which separates us from full union with God, not just a matter of our travelling towards him. Because we can sense a continual increase all along the way in the loving atmosphere of his presence, we can say that our time too is being gradually filled with an ever greater awareness of eternity. And God, by waiting with hope for the response of man, himself brings eternity into time. Nor does the interval between the offer of God and our response necessarily have to be reduced gradually. Human beings can respond rapidly—and there are some who do respond very rapidly to God—but others disappoint his expectation: ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, but you would not.’

God announces the future by his prophets, and this shows that his works are to be understood in and through time, though he himself is beyond it. Man is moved inwardly by God’s call, even if he responds only hesitantly. God is like a great arch spanning the gap between his offer and the response of man, between eternity and time, and thus man in time feels himself to be drawing close to eternity. Only when man has become completely oblivious of the offer of God, altogether unresponsive—when he no longer has any intention of responding to it—only then is he altogether lost to this movement towards eternity. God makes his eternity

efficacious by helping us to overcome this distance in time between ourselves and him and between ourselves and others. The love of God which works in time is full of his love as it is in eternity, and this is what makes it so powerful. Acting within time it draws us beyond time.

Whenever people perceive the love of God and respond to it in some measure, they live eternity. Indeed, in a certain way whenever they live in love between themselves, they live eternity. This understanding of time as always moving towards eternity helps us to see how it is that we are always turning towards the future, always looking further towards what we have not yet discovered and that we have never fully arrived in this life. Time manifests the fact that that we do not rest and cannot rest in what we are, but are always turned towards that state in which we shall be able to rest wholly in God. Time shows us that we are suspended over the abyss of nothingness. That is why we are always searching for a fuller understanding of what we are and of what is around us. We cannot fully understand the meaning of things in this life in time. The present moment is always a moment which is extended in expectation towards the future. It isn’t *only* a present moment. ‘Here we have no abiding city’, that is to say ‘a present’ in the full sense of the word. Only God, the fullness of being, has that eternal present. Through time we move towards a fuller response to God, to the offer of his love, and God himself draws us on into our true existence. For this reason we need to look beyond the present moment, working in it for the future in order to find our true existence in eternity. Leaving the things which are behind we press forward towards those things which are yet to be. What is in the present is in process of dying.

Time is like the distance between the two ends of a bridge. There is something ambiguous, uncertain about it. It is a state of movement in the direction either of death or fullness of life. It is the flight from Egypt through the desert

of Sinai towards Canaan; the flight of Lot from Sodom towards another place, passing through a country where he cannot remain. To remain stationary is to die; we must move on, renouncing this state threatened by death in the sure faith that we shall find the fullness of life. In practice this means no longer living to ourselves but living to him whom we shall find only by dying to ourselves. We accept the loss of an apparent life so as to find the true life; it means conquering death by death. But only when this acceptance of death to oneself means living to the supreme Person of God, only then does this death bring us to the true life. 'He who would save his life will lose it. And he who loses his life for my sake will find it.' St Cyril of Alexandria says, 'One can only enter into the presence of God in the state of sacrifice', of voluntary death to oneself.

On the other hand, the person who goes out from himself simply in order to acquire more things, does not advance towards life but only towards death. Using time only to advance himself, he strengthens his own selfishness. Such a time filled with self is not really time at all because it is no longer an interval separating human persons, still less separating the human from the divine Person. The time that we live in selfishness apart from God is only an apparent time, because we are not going out from ourselves to another person. Time which is only an interval between a person and the things he wants to snatch, or between himself and other persons considered as things to be dominated and exploited, is not properly time at all; it is simply a going forward in the desert of oneself towards total death.

Time is only real, and in this sense positive and creative, when it is understood as an interval in which persons go out to meet one another, and ultimately in which persons go out to meet the Person of God. Time is only real and creative when a person is advancing, in his journey through time, towards the union of his own life with that of others and with

the infinite life of God. Time is a real movement of the human person beyond himself, in order to reduce the distance between himself and God. Only in passing through time as a real journey do we reach eternity—not by trying to escape from time—because we pass through this real interval only insofar as we unite ourselves in love with the supreme Person of God. As long as we remain shut up in ourselves, God draws away from us, because we draw away from other people and cannot enter into personal communion with them.

In this life we never enter fully into this union with God because sin always holds us back. I must find the supreme Person of God through the person of my neighbour, and if I did not find God in and through him I should not truly find my neighbour either. If I did not find God in him I would not find what is continually true and new in my neighbour, that in him which helps me to go out from myself and gives me life. In this way, going beyond time into eternity in no way takes us out of the realm of inter-personal relations as it would according to a Platonist or philosophical conception of eternity.

I can only really grow in personal communion with another if the other gives himself freely to me, is not dominated or snatched by me, or pushed to me by others. Only between persons can there be this free and complete mutual gift of life. We go out to one another in love. But we do not have the strength to give ourselves completely to the other unless the other has already invited us to do so. This is why St Cyril of Alexandria says we can only come before the presence of the Father in a state of sacrifice, when Christ is in us and his sacrifice is at work within us.

Because we are not willing to simplify things by making a full response of love to God, we come up against many problems and difficulties on our way. As long as we have a kind of spiritual hesitation in ourselves, time always has a double possibility; it can be a time of rising towards God or of

falling towards a black eternity. Time in this sense will come to an end only when we have either made a complete and immediate response to the call of God, or when we have finally and definitively shut ourselves up in our own solitude where there is no call and no possibility of response any more. A constant refusal to respond to the offer of love fixes the creature spiritually in the total impossibility of communication. Here there is no more waiting, no more hope, no more expectation. It is doubtful whether in that state it means anything to speak about time at all, still less about the fullness of eternity.

Since in this condition there is no longer anything new, all we can properly speak about is an image of eternity turned completely inside out, the extreme opposite of true eternity: time made meaningless—useless—by total emptiness, and absence of all movement, of any direction or goal. The endless monotony of emptiness and the fullness of communion represent the two radically different forms of eternity. The first is the eternity of death and the second the eternity of life.

Time which can advance towards the fullness of true eternity is itself creative. It draws from the life of the infinite energies of God and transfuses them into the created world. Time fixed in an unchangeable monotony no longer has anything of this true character. Properly speaking it is no longer time at all, because it is no longer a succession of states in which there is always something new. It becomes an eternity of emptiness and monotony in which hope is no longer possible, 'Abandon hope all you who enter here'—time which is utterly devoid of meaning and succession. It is an endless state of existence as damnation, as petrification, as conscious death. It is the immobility or black eternity of hell, the uttermost shadow and darkness of existence; the absence of life, lived as torture.

The unchangeable character of God, which he shares with those who grow in love, is the unchangeableness of the

fullness of his life of love, beyond which there can be nothing else. The unchangeableness of hell is the total absence of life. Those in this condition have entirely broken off the dialogue which kept them within the movement of love drawing them towards eternity. Strictly speaking, their life is no longer a life, their existence no longer an existence. For them time means *only* becoming. And if we say that God is entirely in a process of becoming it means that we no longer see in him the fullness of life and therefore no longer recognise fullness of life as a possibility for his creatures. Becoming is nourished from the fullness of God. As long as there is a chance of becoming, of movement, there is a link with God.

God offers himself to created beings through the creatures which he has made, and through his energies; but in Christ he offers himself as *hypostasis*, as Person. In Christ, full communion with the person of God himself is accessible to us at our own level. Christ bridges in himself the interval between divinity and humanity, and the interval between himself as God and ourselves; but for us in the present this condition is realised only in principle and virtually. The human will of Christ responds fully to this divine will, but that does not negate the distinction between them. The divine will of Christ remains always that which offers, calls, demands a response, and which makes response possible; the human will of Christ remains always that which does respond. But at the same time, the fact that the human will of Christ responds on our behalf, asks on our behalf, remains in communion with our temporal condition—with our aspirations and our griefs—means that Christ lives *as God* these links with mankind in its temporality.

As long as not all of us can fully and perfectly respond to the offer of God's love, Christ himself remains linked with us in our humanity, in our temporality, more closely than God was linked with us before the Incarnation; even though it is He who has brought into our temporal condition the dawn of

eternity and the power of a more complete response on our part to the offer of God. The Incarnation of the Word of God, and the fact that in him both his being linked with us in our temporal condition and his transcendence of any temporal interval between us and God exist together, also shows us the inward link between the eternity of God and the temporal condition of man. St Maximus the Confessor, in refuting the theory of the Origenists that time is the product of the Fall and that the Fall is the origin of movement, made it clear that movement, and consequently time and becoming, are all the products of God's creative act and are advancing towards him.

It is not on account of the Fall that movement and change have come about, but because it is the will of God the Trinity to draw us towards himself through movement and change. The movement of time is sustained by the fullness of God's eternity. The Son of God has become incarnate to help us to pass through and beyond this movement, this temporal interval which separates us from full communion with one another and with him. In a mysterious way he makes this movement with us. This is the way in which Christ is with us in time although he is simultaneously beyond time.

Following the text in Hebrews 11: 39-40, Origen himself has given this remarkable commentary on our Lord's words, 'I shall no more drink of the fruit of the vine until I drink it with you in the kingdom of heaven.'

He waits that we should return, that we should follow his example, that we should go with him in order himself to rejoice with us and to drink with us the wine of the kingdom, in the kingdom of his Father. For the present, because he is merciful, he weeps with us with great compassion, with greater compassion than the Apostle himself weeping with those who weep, and rejoicing with those who rejoice. ... In drawing near to the Father and in finding himself near to the cross of sacrifice and offering his sacrifice for us, he does not drink the fruit of the vine, because coming near to the altar of sacrifice means precisely

not drinking of the wine of joy, because he suffers until the fullness of time the bitterness of our sins.

One sees how Christ is at one and the same time wholly in the complete offering of himself to the Father, that is to say in the transcendence of any temporal interval in the fullness of eternity, but at the same time truly united and bound together with us who suffer within time, and that it is precisely thus that he gives himself for us. And Origen goes on:

How long will Christ wait? He says, "Until I have finished my work." And when will he finish this work? When he will bring me to perfection, me who am the least and greatest of all sinners. Then he will have finished his work. Until that time he will not be fully subordinate to the Father, nor will he offer up everything to the Father. He does not offer himself to the Father for himself, but for me in whom the work is not yet finished. For this reason he says, "It is not yet finished."

Christ's joy will not be complete until the whole of his Body also enters into joy. Since we are all members of his Body, as long as there are any of us who are not fully and completely submitted to the Father, Christ himself is not fully submitted to the Father. Neither will the Saints departed be in the fullness of joy as long as they weep for our sins, which means: as long as I have not passed beyond the temporal interval which exists in time between myself and everyone else, as long as time remains for me an objective reality. This same idea is taken up by St John Chrysostom, by St Maximus the Confessor and later by Pascal who said those wonderful words, 'Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world.' The eternal weeps for man in time. Eternity has entered into solidarity with time while remaining distinct from it. Eternity is the origin and the goal of time. This is the great consolation which Christianity gives to humankind.