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# Love as Principle of Knowledge in the Eastern Fathers

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## Abstract

The Eastern Fathers underlined the specificity of the christocentric knowledge as knowledge in and by love, that is the knowledge of the love which binds the one who knows and the one who is known. In love and by love, one can discover the way of Truth and of the real knowledge. In this knowledge, love appears truly as the bound of fulfillment. Also, this characterization of love, as the bound of fulfillment, refers to the wholeness of knowledge through love, in which knowledge becomes an event or an open and partakable fact. In this way, knowledge becomes a reality which is dynamic, open and relational, instead of a closed process, oriented towards the self or external to man. Of course, it is neither strictly human, nor exclusively divine, but a divino-human reality. Saint John the Evangelist stated the principle of Christian knowledge: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (Jn 17, 3). This phrase points out that the essence of knowledge is a spiritual, relational divino-human fact, which identifies itself with life and asserts life, so that both can be united with God’s love, in Jesus Christ. The main characteristic of the neotestamentary knowledge is the coincidence between knowledge and love.

## Keywords

love, knowledge, communion, participation, The Gospel of John, the Eastern fathers, patristic theology

## I. Introduction

It is not easy nowadays to talk about love, truth and eternal realities, because the logic of our times tells us that there is nothing irrevocable: everything changes, everything passes and this happens very quickly. “To change”, meaning to be modern, has become, in many cases, the password, the most inspiring exercise of freedom and in this way, our contemporaries are often inclined to think that it is impossible for them to make final decisions, which would pledge them for all their life, with implications for eternity. But which is the right way to use freedom? Is it true that in order to be happy we should be content with little, fleeting, momentary joys, which, once ended, leave bitterness in one’s heart? But this is not the true freedom, we cannot obtain happiness this way. Each of us is created not to make short-term and revocable choices, but final and irrevocable ones, which give life its full meaning. We can see this in our own life: we would like every beautiful, happiness-giving experience to be endless. God has created us out of love, for love and destined us to eternity, and He placed in the heart of each of us the seed of a spiritual life which may accomplish something beautiful, wonderful and deathless.<sup>1</sup> We are invited to have the courage of the final, eternal choices and to live them with fidelity and devotion. Perhaps God calls us to a particular offering of our own self: let’s answer Him with love in order to live forever!

But not only the people are looking for God; God Himself has set out to look for us. But starting with the Incarnation, something astonishing happens: the type of salvific communion with God changes radically and the body becomes the tool of Salvation: “And the Word became flesh”, wrote John the Evangelist, and a Christian author of the III<sup>rd</sup> century, Tertullian,

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Orthodox patristic conception, the spiritual life, being the life of Jesus Christ “in the Holy Spirit”, is in its essence, since now an eternal life, in which salvation is to be found. Consequently, spiritual life and salvation are exactly the same thing. See Rom. 5, 17-21; 6, 4, 8, 11, 22, 23; 8, 1-17; John 3, 34-36; 5, 24, 40; 6, 53-58, 63; 17, 2-3; 20, 30; I John 1,2; 4, 9; 5, 11, 20. St. John Chrysostom, *Homily* 13, 8, PG 60, 519. St. Grigory the Theologian, *Oration* XX, 5, PG 35, 1069. St. John of Damascus, *Ad Colossens* 3, 1-4, PG 95, 897 BC. Pr. Paul Florenski, *Stolp i utverzdenie Isrini*, Berlin, 1929, p. 264: „spiritual life is the salvation and the gift by our Lord Jesus Christ.”

stated: “*Caro salutis est cardo*”, the body is the basis of Salvation.<sup>2</sup> The fact that He Himself became man and descended to the abysses of human existence, to the night of death shows us how much God loves man, His creature. Drove by love, God has set out towards us. God is looking for me.<sup>3</sup>

And even if man forgets about his Creator, the living and always true God doesn't stop being the first to call the man to the mystery-meeting of prayer.<sup>4</sup> It is a proof of love from the faithful God, Who is always the first within the prayer, and man's action is always an answer to Him.<sup>5</sup> As God reveals Himself to the man and also reveals the man to himself, the prayer appears as a mutual call, a moment of living the communion. By means of words and acts, this experience involves the heart also, the whole being who exists through love.<sup>6</sup> “The one that we worship – confesses Tertullian – is a unique God”. And he continues, using the antitheses and paradoxes that are specific to his language: “He is invisible, though we discern Him; whom we cannot touch, though represented to us by His Spirit; and incomprehensible, though we come to some imperfect ideas of Him by the help of our senses and thus He is evident and immense!”<sup>7</sup>. Do I want to recognize Him? Do I want Him to know me, to find me? God

<sup>2</sup> *De carnis resurrectione*, 8, 3, PL 2, 806. In the Virgin Mary, as V. Lossky correctly puts it, humanity has assented for the divine Logos to become flesh and to dwell among the people (*Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Bonifaciu Publishing House, 1998, p. 126); kenosis, the assumption of manhood, the adoption, the hypostatic union and its theosis are realized by and in the Virgin Mary (concerning the work of the Virgin Mary in the act of Incarnation, see Νικόλαος Καβάσιλας, *Εἰς τόν Εὐαγγελισμόν τῆς Ὑπεραγίας Δεσποίνης ἡμῶν καὶ Αἰειπαρθένου Μαρίας*, in Νικολάου Καβάσιλα, “Ἡ Θεομήτωρ. Τρεῖς Θεομητορικές Ὁμιλίες”, Κείμενο, ἔδ. Ἀποστολική Διακονία, Ἀθήνα 1995).

<sup>3</sup> If Adam's fall had not happened, God's Word would have incarnated from the bottom to the top, that is by man, through the work of sanctification Cf. Georges Florovsky, *The Byzantine Fathers from sixth to eighth century*, Buchervertriebsanstalt, Vaduz, p. 228. Concerning the cosmic dimension of the divine event of Christ's Incarnation, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Liturgie Cosmique*, Paris, 1973, p. 203 and the next ones.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, Essex, 1992, p. 312.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. St. John the Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, Homily 82, 4, PG 58, 742. See Π. Χρήστου, *Ελληνική Πατρολογία*, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1989, 4 tome, pp. 302-303.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jürgen Henkel, *Deification and Ethics of Love in the Work of Father Dumitru Stăniloae*, Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 2003, p. 91.

<sup>7</sup> *The Apology*, 17, 1-2.

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loves people. He meets the restlessness of our hearts, the disquietude of our questions and of our quests with the disquietude of His own heart, which makes Him accomplish the final act for us: the Crucifixion. The disquietude towards God, the fact of being on our way towards Him, in order to know Him better and to live in Him must not die in us<sup>8</sup>.

In this sense, we should always remain disciples. “Seek His face always” urges us a Psalm (105, 4). In this regard, Augustine commented: God is so mighty that He is always infinitely greater than all our knowledge and all our being. The knowledge of God is never consumed. During all the eternity we can, with an increasing joy, continue to seek for Him, in order to know Him and to love Him forever more. “Our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee”, said Augustine at the beginning of his “Confessions”.<sup>9</sup> Yes, man is restless, because all that is temporal is too little. But are we really restless when it comes to God? Haven’t we resigned ourselves with His absence in our life and do not we try to be self-sufficient? Let us not allow such reductions of our human being! Let us always stay on our way towards Christ, in our wishfulness for Christ, in the reception always new of knowledge and love! This means that the specificity of knowledge expresses essentially the union between the one who knows and the one who is known. God – as the Church Fathers say – has concluded a *sacrum commercium*, a sacred exchange: He assumed what was ours, so that we could get what was His, becoming like God.<sup>10</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa clearly expresses the purpose of our preoccupations, the supreme aim to which our life is directed: not wasting our life with futile things, but finding the light which allows us to discern what is really useful.<sup>11</sup> Finding this supreme good in Christianity thanks to which the “imitation of the divine nature” is possible.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor, *Centuries on Love* 1,9 and *Centuries on Theology* III, 37 PG 90. See also, St. Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names*, 4, 15 (PG 3, 713): “Love, whether we speak of Divine, or Angelic, or intelligent, or psychical, or physical, let us regard as a certain unifying and combining power”.

<sup>9</sup> *The Confessions*, I, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Time is offered to man as space for his participation to eternity, time is a means of continual advancement towards holiness (Cf. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*, PG 91, 1153 and the next ones. See Vl. Lossky, *Théologie Dogmatique*, in *Messenger de l’Exarchat du Patriarche russe en Europe Occidentale*, 1964, p. 211 and the next ones).

<sup>11</sup> *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, 1, SC 416, 106-146.

<sup>12</sup> *On the Confession of Faith* PG 46, 244 C.

## II. The relationship between knowledge and love

The Old Testament revealed us that God is together with us, living and saint.<sup>13</sup> What does the New Testament add to this sublime image? Our answer could be: it gives it a heart! And this heart is the statement: “God is love”. In the Christian belief, love comes from God and moreover, God Himself is Love: “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them” (1 John, 4, 16). To say that God is love is the same as to say that God loves. Even the prophets had announced that Jahve was a loving God, but none of them had gone so far as to say that “God is love”. What did Jesus of Nazareth bring new, so that this qualitative leap could take place? Nothing but: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John, 3, 16). In the meeting of Christ and in the mutual love, we experience in us the same life of God, who stays in us with His perfect, total, eternal love. Nothing is greater to man, a mortal and limited being, than to take part in the loving life of God. Therefore, God takes care of the world not because He is loved, but because He loves the world and He has always loved it, from the very beginning.

By analyzing the definition “God is love”, successive curtains are drawn, on larger and larger backgrounds, so that eventually there comes an infinite background which is the Holy Trinity. Let us try to approach it through the stanzas of Gregory the Theologian, who writes:

“Among the great billows of the sea of life,  
here and there whipped up by wild winds...  
one thing alone is dear to me, my only treasure,  
comfort and oblivion in my struggle,  
the light of the Blessed Trinity”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Admitting the essential character of love, the Christian faith accepted what represented the core of Israel’s faith and, at the same time, it conferred to this core a new depth and a new extension. In fact, the faithful man prays every day with these words taken from *The Book of Deuteronomy*, in which he knows that the quintessence of his life is included: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might...” Jesus united the commandment of loving God and loving your neighbour from *The Book of Leviticus*, making them one commandment: “thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”. (19,18; cf. Mark 12, 29-31).

<sup>14</sup> *Historical Poems*, 2, 1, 15, PG 37, 1250 ss.

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There is no love without loving a being or a thing, there is no conscience which is not conscientious of something or of someone. Who does God love, since He is love? Man?... Yet, in this case, we cannot say that He has always been love, through Himself, but only starting with a few millions of years before. But before all these, what else was God, if not love? Does He love the material universe? But then He has been love only starting with a few thousand millions of years before. This is not enough either. The answer is the Holy Trinity!<sup>15</sup> Gregory the Theologian makes the light of the Holy Trinity shine, protecting the faith proclaimed at the Council of Nicaea: a unique God, in three equal and separate Persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, - “one glorious orb The triple rays unite”<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, Gregory, guided by Saint Paul (1Cor. 8,6), always affirms that “For to us there is but One God, the Father, of Whom are all things, and One Lord Jesus Christ, by Whom are all things; and One Holy Ghost, in Whom are all things”.<sup>17</sup> God is love by Himself, constitutive *ab aeterno*, because there is always a loving God, the Father, a loved God, the Son, and a God love, the Holy Ghost.

The words of St. John the Evangelist (1 John, 4, 16) express very clearly what makes up the essence of the Christian life and faith: the Christian image of God and, consequently, the image of man and of his approach to eternity. Besides all these, in the same verse, St. John the Apostle offers us a synthetic formula of the Christian existence: “We have come to know and trust the love that God has for us”. We have come to trust the love of God – in this way, the Christian may express the fundamental choice of his life. The Church Fathers showed us that love was the quintessence of the Christian life, in which the two Evangelic commandments of love are

<sup>15</sup> At the origin of the existence of the world lies the boundless love of the Holy Trinity, all that exists in it are expressions, manifestations, gifts of Her perfect, superabundant love. (Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturghia Ortodoxă*, ed. Mitropoliei Olteniei, Craiova, 1986, p. 11.). What is being accomplished by the Christian faith in a Trinitarian God makes possible to overcome the partial differences between people and allows the existence of unselfish love and the communion of people. Our creation implies a personal, real participation in the life of God. “Since, then, God, Who is good and more than good, did not find satisfaction in self-contemplation, but in fits exceeding goodness wished certain things to come into existence which would enjoy His benefits and share in His goodness...” (St. John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Christian Faith*, 1984, p. 29).

<sup>16</sup> *Now at this evening hour; Historical Poems*, 2, 1, 32, PG 37, 512.

<sup>17</sup> *Oration* 39,12, SC 458,172

not to be lived as moral categories, precisely because they don't have a relationship only with a certain "moral part" of the man and of his existence, but they fully cover his whole human existence, in the personal reality, as well as in the social dimension. In this sense, we have to highlight the fact that the "first commandment" of loving God underlines all the main criteria and all the spiritual possibilities of the human existence: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind." The "second commandment", of loving one's neighbour, having exactly the same value as the first, expresses the same meaning, but with other words: "Love your neighbour as yourself."<sup>18</sup>

The two commandments of Christian love are summed up, eventually, in the one and only love for Jesus Christ, fully Man and true God<sup>19</sup>, as Saint Paul the Apostle puts it and, following him, the whole patristic tradition, to this day.<sup>20</sup> Loving God and loving one's neighbour are inseparable, they represent a unique commandment, a unique confession or a unique truth. But both exist out of the providential love of God, who loved us first. Therefore, it is no longer the question of a "commandment" prescribing us

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<sup>18</sup> Mat. 22, 37-3. Some people believe that perfection lies in the roughness of life, other see it in prayer, others in the frequent reception of the Holy Communion, others in Christian and merciful deeds, but they are wrong, because perfection lies in the love of God with all one's heart and this is visible in the love of the neighbour, because God wants love and not sacrifice. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen (cf. 1 John, 4, 20). But this understanding does not exclude at all the love of God as something impossible; on the contrary, in the overall context of the *First Epistle of John*, this love is explicitly demanded. The unbreakable bond between loving God and loving one's neighbour is stressed here. Both refer to one another so tightly that to affirm the love of God becomes a lie if man is blind to his neighbour's needs or, even more, if he hates him. We should rather interpret Saint John's verse in the sense that loving one's neighbour is a path for meeting God too, and closing the eyes to the presence of one's neighbour means to become blind as to the presence of God. In short, every man takes part in the act and in the event of the Christian love, which is in fact unique, unitary and indivisible. It is precisely for this reason that the first commandment does not exist without the next one, nor the second without the first, both imply themselves mutually. (See 1 John 4, 19-21 and 5,2. Saint Maximus the Confessor, *Centuries on Love*, 1, 13, PG 90, 964).

<sup>19</sup> Father Dumitru Stăniloae states, according to the tradition, that after the Incarnation, the Logos no longer has a divine life, separated from the human one. Cf. *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, Ed. Omnicop, Craiova, 1993, p. 154.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Saint Maximus the Confessor, *Centuries on Love*, 1, 57 (PG 90, 972): "The law of Christ is love".

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something external and impossible, but, on the contrary, it is all about an experience of love, given from my being, a love which, by its nature, must be consequently shared with the others. Love grows and exists by love. Love is divine because it comes from God and because it unites us with God and, by means of this unification process, it transforms us into a godly “we”, which surpasses our divisions and makes us one, until the end when God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15, 28).

In the Saint Gospel of John it is underlined that Christ is the truth, the life, the love, the word and, being all these, He is implicitly the source of the unique knowledge. Saint John the Apostle, when transmitting Christ’s last sermon to His Apostles (John 13, 1), which includes the famous words “I am the way and the truth and the life”, stated the principle of the Christian knowledge: “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” (John, 17, 3). This sentence points out that the essence of knowledge is a spiritual, relational divino-human fact, which identifies itself with life and asserts life, so that both can be united with God’s love, in Jesus Christ. Knowledge is the one which unites “the one who knows and the one who is known”, will say Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>21</sup> and Saint Maximus the Confessor will express the same thing.<sup>22</sup> Before them, Saint Gregory of Nyssa transmitted this truth using the following words: “The one who owns knowledge is the one who has lived it ... because in his life, he has transposed God’s word into acts and has made it his being. Knowledge is its transposition into being by the one who owns it.”<sup>23</sup> This truth is supported by other Holy Fathers as well, such as St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. Diadochus of Photiki, St. Symeon the New Theologian, St. Gregory Palamas.

According to them, love is the perfect method, as well as the ideal way to knowledge, love being the sum of life and work of all the virtues, including the authentic knowledge. Love is synonymous with forgiveness, charity and philanthropy, love being the reason why God has created the world and has become Man. Love is the ground of the Incarnation of the Word, that is of the unification of man with God, by Jesus Christ, by love and thanks to the love God has had for the man. But, by His Incarnation, Christ has created the structure in which man’s salvation will take place

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<sup>21</sup> Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names*, VII, 4, PG 3, 872.

<sup>22</sup> Saint Maximus the Confessor, *Centuries on Theology* VII, 91, PG 90, 1388.

<sup>23</sup> PG 44 , 1265 and 46,176.



– the Church which, as an eternal reality, becomes a universal mystery (καθολικόν μυστήριον)<sup>24</sup>. Together with the Incarnation of the Son of God, the Church becomes the mystical Body of Christ.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, without this visible Body, that is without the Incarnation itself, the Church would have been a reality *in potentia* and not a reality *de facto*. We can belong to Christ and be with Christ only in communion with Christ as a whole, head and body, in the full life of the Church, animated by its Lord. Only in it, thanks to God, the Holy Scripture is a living and topical Word. Without the living subject of the Church embracing the ages, the Bible disintegrates into often heterogeneous writings, thus becoming a book of the past. In the present time, the Bible is eloquent only where „the Presence” is – where Christ stays forever our contemporary: in the Body of His Church. Yet, the Christian faith is not a „religion of the Book”: Christianity is the religion of God’s Word, not a written and mute word, but an incarnate and living Word.

The words of Saint Maximus the Confessor show us to which extent the Church Fathers identified knowledge and love. In his writing, *Centuries on theology and economy*, this great Father states: “God and man are exemplars of each other. Man’s ability to deify himself through love for God’s sake is correlative with God’s becoming man through compassion for man’s sake. And man’s manifestation through the virtues of the God who is by nature invisible is correlative with the degree to which his intellect is seized by God and imbued with spiritual knowledge”<sup>26</sup>. According to the above text of Saint Maximus, the patristic method and the criterion of correlative knowledge of God and man are offered through love. I love, therefore I know. If Saint Maximus calls God’s manifested love “compassion for man’s sake” and the love of God means man’s participation to it, this doesn’t essentially change the matters concerning knowledge.

In Saint Maximus’ work, as well as the works of other Fathers, we often come across such passages: they contain the principle of the patristic knowledge and we can find them since the beginning of Christianity, for example at Saint Paul the Apostle etc. Thus, we can mention the well-known,

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<sup>24</sup> G. Florovsky, *To Σώμα του ζώντος Χριστού*, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1972, p. 39 and the next ones.

<sup>25</sup> “The Church is the work of the Incarnation of Christ, it is the Incarnation itself.” S. Bulgakov, *Orthodoxy*, Paideia Publishing House, 1997, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor, *Various Texts on Theology and the Divine Economy*, VII.74, PG 90,1380 and III, 27, PG 90, 1189.

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but somehow paradoxical phrase of Saint Paul the Apostle in the Epistle to the Galatians 4, 9: “But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God”. The paradox of this statement lies in the fact that, according to the Apostle, human knowledge granted by God is determined by the *a priori* knowledge that God has of man! In this way, Saint Paul the Apostle wishes to underline a very natural fact for all the Christian faith: the living and personal manifestation of God in Jesus Christ and man’s living communion with Him. Saint Gregory of Nyssa tries to define more accurately: “In fact this likeness to the divine is not our work at all; it is not the achievement of any faculty of man; it is the great gift of God bestowed upon our nature at the very moment of our birth”.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, to the soul “the question is not to know something about God, but to have God in you.”<sup>28</sup> For the rest, carefully observes Gregory, “deification means purity, it means liberation from the passions and the removal of any wrong thing: if all these are in you, God is truly in you.”<sup>29</sup>

In this way, God is not and could never be for us any kind of “object”, not even the “object of knowledge”, because God is “pre-eminently the subject”, He is always and everywhere a true and living Person. This is why the existence and possibility of knowing the personal God are not realizable without a free-loving communion with Him, without the personal-loving union, as long as the one who knows dissociates knowledge from the one who is known. For the orthodox spirituality, which knows by loving and loves by knowing, it is easy to understand that there can be no relationship and no union of man with God outside freedom, beyond any outer, physical, moral, intellectual, rational or any other type of necessity. Such a relationship of freedom expresses a desired state, that is an event which is possible only by love. The manifestation and the revelation of God to the world has happened by and with the initiative of the divine part, thanks to the love God has for the world, “because He first loved us” (1 John 4, 10.19), as Saint Paul the Apostle said (Gal. 4, 9) when he drew our attention to the fact that God is always the one who makes the first move, even when it comes to the divino-human Christian knowledge. Knowledge cannot happen and nobody could have approached it except by the loving union between God and man, because it does not manifest itself

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<sup>27</sup> *On Virginité*, 12, 2, SC 119, 408-410.

<sup>28</sup> *On the Beatitudes*, 6, PG 44, 1269 C.

<sup>29</sup> *On the Beatitudes*, 6, PG 44, 1272C.

as one-sided love, but as mutual, sacrificial love, creating union a mutual communion, without which it would have been one-sided compulsion or tyrannical domination.

In another passage, Saint Paul the Apostle points out very clearly the way in which one must understand the text of the Epistle to the Galatians, 4, 9, when he writes the first Epistle to the Corinthians, 8, 2-3: "If any man thinketh that he knoweth anything, he knoweth not yet as he ought to know. But if any man loveth God, the same is known by Him." No doubt that the aim of Saint Paul the Apostle, when writing these words, was not to depreciate or to relativize the whole knowledge itself, he only wanted to express the truth according to which knowledge depends intrinsically on love. His intention was to present love as the unique and fundamental criterion of the Christian knowledge. Therefore, Saint Paul the Apostle may be considered one of the first thinkers who outlined this specificity *sui generis* of the identity between love and knowledge.

### III. Love as Principle of Knowledge

The fundamental principle of life in general is giving life. He who lives egocentrically loses or ruins his life. It becomes barren, dull and empty. Consequently, this axiom of living becomes eventually identical to the criterion of love. Basically, love means to abandon the egocentricity of self-love, not to wish to have ourselves, and to become free of the egocentricity of self-love: not to focus our life on ourselves – how I will be, what will happen to me –, but to gaze in the direction You, the Eternal Other – towards God and towards the others that He has sent to me.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Abba Dorotheus used the image of a compasses to describe the way in which our relationships with the other people influence our relationship with God: "Suppose we were to take a compass and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The centre point is the same distance from any point on the circumference... Let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God himself is the centre; the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the centre are the lives of men." In order to come near to God, men have to progress on the circumference towards the centre of life: "The closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God... This is the very nature of life. The more we are turned away from and do not love God, the greater the distance that separates us from our neighbour". (*Αποφθέγματα των αγίων Γερόντων*, English edition *Discourses and Sayings*, transl. E. Wheeler, Cistercian Publications Kalamazoo, 1977, pp. 138-139).

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And this ground of love, which defines the action of man, identifies itself with the mystery of the cross, with the mystery of death and resurrection that we find in Christ. Man can accomplish love, because: he is created in the image of the God-love and is loved by God, therefore he loves in the full aspect of his potentialities.<sup>31</sup> Love implies a path of growth, which is never finished and completed, but it changes during life, matures and precisely for this reason, remains faithful to itself.<sup>32</sup> In fact, love is not ready-made and beautiful, but it grows, to call it that way, we can learn it slowly, so that it may contain ever-more our forces and it may open our way to a correct life. To Dostoevsky's question: "Which beauty will save the world?", the answer is: the explosive beauty of God's love.

A great neptic Father, Saint Diadochus of Photiki wrote in his work, "Gnostic Chapters", that "He who loves God consciously in his heart is known by God, for to the degree that he receives the love of God consciously in his soul, he truly enters into God's love".<sup>33</sup> Therefore, Abba Diadochus joins knowledge and love, concerning man's relationship with God in and

<sup>31</sup> Saint John the Chrysostom says that the knowledge of God is innate to man. The spiritual vocation is innate to man (*On the Saint Roman Martyr* 2,1, PG 50, 611) and it was planted in the human being by God Himself. (See H. Mpouki, *The Essence of Religion According to the Cappadocian Fathers*, Tesalonic, 1967; W. Pannenberg, *Gottesgedanke und menschliche Freiheit*, Göttingen, 1972). The natural religiosity is underlined more by the "optimist" spirit of the Old-Testamentary theology. (*The Ones Who Will Have Trouble* 9, 6, PG 52, 497; cf. John. 16, 33; see: P. Dimitropoulos, *The Christian-Orthodox Moral*, Athens, 1974, p. 8 and the next ones.) Our proto-parents Adam and Eve had the innate capacity of knowing God (*Theognosias, capax Dei*), since the rational "power" of God's image worked naturally. (*On Ana*, 1, 3, PG 54, 636; see: St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the One Who is Image...*, PG 44, 201). The Church Fathers interpreted this innate religiosity as the dynamic inclination of our whole being towards the divine Archetype (Origen), the unbroken aspiration of our spirit towards God (St. Basil, St. Maximus), the human love which aims at the divine love (St. Augustine, St. Gregory Palamas) (cf. N. Nisioti, *Introduction to Theological Gnoseology*, Athens, 1978, p. 78). Consequently, there are, in the human mind, *a priori*, ideas, principles of knowing God. (cf. P. Palgaki, *Education and psychical health*, in Grigorios ó Palamas, 1990, p. 262; N. Matsoukas, *Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology*, vol. 1, p. 154). "Even man's soul is endowed with common meanings and final, divisible, syllogistic powers". (see: St. Gregory Palamas, *The Ones Who Will Have Peace*, 2, 1, 27; Ed. P. Hristou, vol. 1, p. 488; St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, 1, PG 44, 624 C.

<sup>32</sup> Saint Maximus the Confessor, *Centuries on Love* in "Philokaly", vol. II, p. 111.

<sup>33</sup> Diadochus of Photiki, *On Spiritual Knowledge* XVI SC5, Philokaly I, XIV, Astir Publishing House, 2008, p. 238.

by love, as well as beyond the transcendency of this love relationship, directly linked to the personal knowledge of God. This is not only the basis or the starting point in knowledge, but also the end on any other form of shared knowledge. This happens because the knowledge of Truth is granted together with the personal knowledge of God, by experience or by living, so that in the end, the knowledge of God's truth may offer eternal life and true joy.

The experience of the saints proves the fact that without God, the knowledge of Him is not possible, because man is not endowed neither with those necessary characteristics, nor with the capacity of knowledge, physical or metaphysical, by means of which he could know God implicitly and personally, thus arriving to the true knowledge of Him. Man can get to know God only if He wants this and He makes Himself known. But God proved us by His economical revelation that He shows Himself to people only in love and by freedom. God revealed His free, freeing and unlimited love, showing Himself to the man and to the world and He expects from the man, as well as from the one who knows, the same unlimited and unconditioned love. This loving, unlimited reciprocity of the love between God and man is implied in the words of the Saint Apostle. (Gal. 4,9; I Cor. 8,3).

The character of the knowledge by love contained in the words of Saint Paul the Apostle: "But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God" and: "But if anyone loves God, he is known by Him" is very clear. But these words express mainly the new biblical and Christian content of the notion of knowledge as experience and love, that is, in essence, the relational and communal character of knowledge. The relational character of knowledge expresses mainly the reality of the communion and union act which bounds the one who is known and the one who knows. Didymus of Alexandria wrote the following about the neotestamentary content of science and knowledge:

"The meaning of the word *knowledge* is double: on one hand it means to know; on the other hand it means to unite, to blend the one who knows and the one who is known. According to the first meaning, God knows everybody, not only the marked ones. According to the second meaning, God knows only the rightful ones: «The Lord knows those who are His» (II Tim. 2, 19), and he ignores the sinful ones... Because the wicked one

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is not known. The one who stopped sinning and who was not known before is known now. This is in perfect accordance with the apostolic word: «But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?» (Gal. 4, 9). When people ignore God, they are ignored by Him too, and those who know God are known by Him too.<sup>34</sup>

The words highlight the special character and the method of the patristic knowledge. Man and knowledge are not defined autonomously, but in relationship, by communion with God and the other people. Already by the act of knowledge and recognition, man is considered from the point of view of knowledge as unity.<sup>35</sup> As an act of personal and relational knowledge, it is not mainly a capacity of accumulating notions or ideas, but mostly a relationship and mutual loving communion between living and personal beings. Such knowledge becomes in the heart a living reality: it is not only a theory, but a force of life, a life-changing union of love. The knowledge of Christ is not only a thought, but love which opens the eyes, transforms man and creates communion with Christ the Word, who is truth and life.<sup>36</sup> In this communion, which is unflawed knowledge and love, the perfect Christian attains the contemplation, the union with God. In other words, for the patristic knowledge, knowledge arises from the union and from the life of the communion, from the “kinship” and “familiarity” existing between the one who knows and the one who is known, as Saint Cyril of Alexandria highlights; following the words of Saint Paul the Apostle<sup>37</sup>, he adds that in this act of mutual knowledge “we, the ones adopted by Him are called His people... because Christ wanted to receive us into all that are His.”<sup>38</sup> The path to the visible unity of all the Christians *dwells* in prayer, because, fundamentally, the unity is not “built” by us, but “built” by God, it comes from Him, from the trinitarian mystery, from the communion of the Father with the Son in the dialogue of love which is the

<sup>34</sup> Didymus of Alexandria, *Commentaries on All the Psalms*, PG 39, 1264.

<sup>35</sup> In almost all the languages of the world, the word “knowledge” seems to indicate a community knowledge, that is implying the participation of more than one person to the act of knowledge.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Diac. Ioan I. Ică jr., in “Mitropolia Ardealului” 33 (1988), nr. 1, p. 37–59.

<sup>37</sup> Ephes. 2, 19: “members of God’s household”

<sup>38</sup> PG 73, 1045 and PG 75, 485.

Holy Spirit and our life must be open to the divine grace, it must become daily invocation of God's grace.

#### IV. Conclusion

To the orthodox ethos, knowledge is not and inductive, abstract and theoretical act, but it represents the living encounter between the one who knows and the one who is known. Therefore, knowledge does not mean to invent, to create, to elaborate, to discover or even to conceive a notion or a system of notions able to explain everything, "illuminating" or calming man's conscience. The unique aim of a real knowledge or its unique content is that man, as Christian hypostasis can meet face to face the living and shareable Truth. He can attain with his whole soul, his whole heart and his whole conscience the level of the personal encounter of the true and living God by Jesus Christ, who already is a symbiotic relationship and a living meeting. It is the beginning of a new life: love in the union with Jesus Christ, Who is known and in the same time remains transcendent, the One who knows, because the living and true God never becomes "object". He always remains "Subject", as man does, otherwise. Thus, in Clement of Alexandria, on the way to perfection, the moral-spiritual element has the same importance as the intellectual element. The two go together, because one cannot know without loving and cannot love without knowing. The likeness of God and His contemplation cannot be accomplished only by rational knowledge: for them, a life in accordance to Christ is necessary, a life in accordance to Christ's truth. Therefore, love must accompany the intellectual knowledge, just as the shadow accompanies the body. We end our paper by quoting a few sentences from the famous "Prayer to the Paedagogus", by which Clement of Alexandria finishes his "Paedagogus": "Be gracious, O Instructor, to us Your children, cause all of us Your peace, having sailed tranquilly over the billows of sin, may be wafted in calm by Your Holy Spirit, by the ineffable wisdom, by night and day to the perfect day; and praising thank the Alone Father and Son,... Instructor and Teacher, with the Holy Spirit, Amen!"<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Paedagogus*, 3,12,101.