

Knowledge of God as Vision, according to St. Gregory Palamas

Hesychasm is an old practice in the Eastern tradition, whose origins must be sought in the very act of the birth of monasticism, as withdrawal from the world and the search for spiritual perfection, but whose foundations can be found right from the beginning of Christianity, in the Evangelical precepts recommending the separation of believers from “those of the world” (John 15, 19) and indicating the purity of the heart as an essential premise of seeing God (Matthew 5, 8).

Saint Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) lived, synthesized and carried on the tradition of the Hesychast Fathers, beginning with Abba Evagrius, Abba Macarius the Great, Saint John of Sinai, Saint Maximus the Confessor, Theophanes of Philadelphia and many others, dedicated to acquiring peace and contemplating God. The dispute of Saint Gregory Palamas with Barlaam of Calabria - a monk from Seminaria (southern Italy), “Greek in respect to language and formation, but already imbued with the spirit of the Italian Renaissance”¹- had at its center the problem of man’s possibility to concretely share in the uncreated energies of God and see the divine light.

Barlaam had learned about the hesychastic practice of some Athonite monks and accused them of demonic hallucinations, saying that such manifestations, if they exist, must be abandoned, because they are not from God. For him, union with God is only a “natural inclination”, a capacity of the rational part of human nature, which can be achieved through imitation, but without any work of deifying grace².

The Fathers of the Church, since ancient times, had drawn attention to the danger of talking about God without knowing God, knowledge

¹ John MEYENDORFF, *O introducecere în studiul vieții și operei Sfântului Grigorie Palama*, trans. Măriuca and Adrian Alexandrescu, Ed. Nemira, Bucharest, 2014, p. 102.

² Sfântul GRIGORIE PALAMA, “Tomul aghioritic”, in: *Filocalia*, vol. 7, translated by Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 2016, pp. 379-380.

that implies purification, enlightenment, participation, experience. Saint Gregory the Theologian says that only

“those who have examined themselves in detail and who have progressed, step by step, on the path of contemplation and who, before these pursuits, have purified their soul and body - or, at least, strive to cleanse themselves - can philosophize about God”³.

Although he had deepened the teaching of Saint Denys the Pseudo-Areopagite, Barlaam had understood nothing - according to the words of Saint Gregory - of his apophatic theology, remaining at the idea of “darkness” as the supreme form of knowledge about God.

“So, if someone enters this darkness, says the philosopher, he does so by denying all that exists. Therefore, the most perfect vision is this darkness, or theology by negation. For nothing is beyond knowing nothing. So also, that light of which you speak, whatever it may be, you must leave it, in order to ascend to theology and vision through negation”⁴.

For St. Gregory, however, this uncreated and eternal light, “archetypal beauty”, the model of “any visible beauty” - according to the words of Father Stăniloae⁵ - is the perfect expression of the knowledge of God, a knowledge not by negation, but by transcending all forms of knowledge, that is, by participation and union. This vision, the result of perfect communion with God, is a work that cannot be understood purely rationally, and even more so cannot be satisfactorily described in words, which is why the very expression of this mystery is antinomian and paradoxical. It is a “divine work which is visible beyond sight and understood beyond understanding”⁶.

³ Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NAZIANZ, *Cuvântări teologice. Cinci cuvântări despre Dumnezeu*, I, 3, trans. Gheorghe Tilea, Ed. Herald, Bucharest, 2013, p. 35

⁴ Sfântul GRIGORIE PALAMA, “Cuvânt pentru cei ce se liniștesc cu evlavie. Al treilea din cele din urmă. Despre sfânta lumină”, 50, in: *Filocalia*, vol. 7, p. 300.

⁵ Sfântul GRIGORIE PALAMA, “Tomul aghioritic”, p. 382.

⁶ Sfântul GRIGORIE PALAMA, “Tomul aghioritic”, pp. 379-380.

Apophatically, this state may be called “unseeing” and “ignorance”, but not in the sense that it is a lack of sight or understanding, but in the sense that it is beyond all seeing and understanding, or any the human definition of God in terms and concepts⁷. Therefore, the mind can transcend itself and unite with that which is above itself. Saint Denys the Pseudo-Areopagite had already shown this: “We must know that our mind has the power to understand, a power by which it contemplates the intelligible, but the union with the beyond exceeds the nature of the mind”⁸.

This knowledge, which comes from God to man, and not vice versa, is called seeing and not seeing, knowledge and ignorance, light and darkness. It is sight, knowledge, and light in the proper sense, but it is non-sight, ignorance, and darkness in the sense of transcending all realities comprehended by the mind and perceived by the senses. Not to see and not to know is precisely to transcend human knowledge and to ascend to that which is above sight and knowledge. Light is darkness because of the “overwhelming outpouring of light”⁹.

Appealing to another Church Father, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Gregory Palamas explains how the “shining darkness” he speaks of should be understood¹⁰. Ascending Mount Sinai, Moses, after detaching himself from all that was felt and seen, i.e. after he had overcome himself and became “eyeless”, did not remain in ignorance and blindness, but entering the darkness, he saw the tabernacle not made by the hands, meaning Christ. This “shining darkness” is not darkness, but light, a “self-seeing” light - says Saint Gregory Palamas - which “sees and understands itself”. This does not mean that the divinity “comes out of His hiding place”, but only that, giving Himself to others, “hides them also under the divine darkness”¹¹. This closing of the eyes to the sensible and hiding them under the divine darkness means, in fact, the true opening of them to the divine, as happened at the Transfiguration of the Lord, when Christ turned the

⁷ “Despre sfânta lumină”, 48, p. 298.

⁸ Sfântul DIONISIE AREOPAGITUL, “Despre numirile dumnezeiești”, 7, 1, in: *Opere complete*, trans. Fr. D. Stăniloae, Ed. Paideia, Bucharest, 1996, p. 163.

⁹ “Despre sfânta lumină”, 48, pp. 51-52.

¹⁰ Sfântul GRIGORIE DE NYSSA, “Viața lui Moise”, in: *Scrieri. Partea întâi*, transl. rev. D. Stăniloae, rev. Ioan Buga, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 29, Editura Institutului Biblic și Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 1982, pp. 72-77.

¹¹ “Despre sfânta lumină”, 48, p. 309.

disciples from blind into seers, making Himself visible “differently from how he had appeared before”¹².

Knowledge by vision is therefore superior to that by negation, not only by word and reasoning, but “by deed and truth”, as fruits of the grace of the Holy Spirit:

“For as the mind, united in an unspeakable manner with senses, sees the things subject to the senses, and as senses symbolically and sensibly depicts the intelligible (known to the mind), once they reach their perception through its union with the mind, so both of them (senses and mind), united with the Spirit, will see the unseen light in a spiritual way, or better said they will cohabit, once deified, eternally together with her”¹³.

St. Gregory Palamas also shows us the way to reach this state of true knowledge and understanding, which is pure prayer. In order for it to become pure, this prayer must be accompanied by: fear of God, humility, piercing of the heart, tears, fasting, vigil and all other works of virtue¹⁴. Pure prayer is not only a state of contemplation, but an active participation, which involves keeping the commandments, in which God “is hidden”. Keeping the commandments leads to apatheia, and this, through perseverance and patience, leads to pure and immaterial prayer, prayer warmed by ardent love for God. Such a man, partaking of the light and being covered in an unapproachable radiance, is deified by the light and becomes light himself¹⁵.

It is, of course, a difficult path, full of struggles, sacrifices and trials; it is the path of perfection, walked by the saints and friends of Christ, a path that we are all urged to take, because it brings the assurance of true knowledge and union with God. And if, however, we did not reach yet such communion, we need not despair, as long as we receive the testimony of this knowledge through love towards those who have acquired it.

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¹² Sfântul GRIGORIE PALAMA, “Tomul aghioritic”, p. 383.

¹³ “Despre sfânta lumină”, 49-50, p. 299-300.

¹⁴ “Cuvânt pentru cei ce se liniștesc cu evlavie. Al doilea din cele din urmă. Despre rugăciune”, 15, in: *Filocalia*, vol. 7, p. 226.

¹⁵ “Despre sfânta lumină”, 57, p. 312.