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The Experience of Uncreated Grace: Theological and Spiritual Aspects of the Eastern Fathers of the Church

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Abstract

In Orthodoxy, the human person is never a static reality or presence. He is always understood as a being of communion, because he wants to meet other people, his fellows, and especially his eternal prototype, which is “a communion of persons”, the Trinity God. The Orthodox theology and spirituality affirm and express themselves by pointing to the possibility and reality of communion between man and God through divine, uncreated, and existential energies. Life within the Tradition of the Church means life within the truth, and communion is understood as a living and direct connection with the truth of the Father in the Holy Spirit. Orthodox spirituality is a spirituality of uncreated grace not only because it is presented during the grace, which is the time of the Church. In addition, because it can be achieved only with the work of grace, which spiritually transfers the believer to the level of the grace experience, that is the level of the ontology of the Holy Spirit.

Keywords

Most Holy Trinity, Church, Orthodox ethos, commands, person, communion, deification

I. The Triadocentric Basis of Orthodox Morality and Spirituality

The Christian existence is rooted and founded on the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. The authentic Christian life begins, continues, and completes as work and saving energy of the Holy Trinity, which is the mystery of freedom and love, of communion of God with man and of the union of divine and human truth¹. “We were baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity and by this name we live, know and think, by which we are and will be eternal, because we have a happy being and existence from God”². This is the living mystery of the faith revealed in the Church. Saint John of Damascus, the dogmatist of the Orthodox Church par excellence, considers faithlessness to be the lack of communication with the tradition of the universal Church. He considers it naturally, not declarative or “rationalist”. Both in the Prologue to his trilogy, *Πηγή γνώσεως*³ (*The Source of Knowledge*), as well as in the second chapter of *Dialectics*⁴ - the first part of the trilogy, he states that he is not called to express his own opinions, since “I will speak nothing of myself”.

For the modern secular spirit, the Church Tradition expressed through Chalcedonian theology / dogma is “unsuitable for the modern world”⁵. For the Orthodox Church, the Chalcedon dogma “saved” the Christian life from the wreck and deception of narrow and limited ethicism, as well as from the legalistic spirit, which is specific to exclusive rationalism. The mystery of the relation between the created and the Uncreated to the living experience of Tradition and the measures of reason have been described analytically and principally as *apophatic* and so the right faith has been armed⁶. Nikos Matsoukas says the Christological dogma of Chalcedon illuminates and

¹ Cf. Μιχαήλ ΚΑΡΔΑΜΑΚΗ, *Τό Άγιον Πνευμα και η Θέωσεις της ανθρωπίνης φύσεως*, Αθήνα, 1971, p. 51 and the following.

² Sf. SIMEON NOUL TEOLOG, *Θεολογικός Α'*, coll. *Sources Chrétiennes*, vol. 122, p. 128.

³ ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ ΔΑΜΑΣΚΗΝΟΥ, *Εκδόσεις Ακριβής Ορθοδόξου Πίστεως*, Μετάφ. Ν. Ματσούκα, Εκδ. Πουρναρά, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1983, p. 14.

⁴ Sf. IOAN DAMASCHINUL, *Fons scientiae*, praef. (Προοίμιον), PG 94, 525 A and *Capita dialectica* 533 A.

⁵ Cf. Ernst TROELTSCH, “Judentum und Christliche Antike, Die alte Kirche”, in: *Gesammelte Schriften* (= GS), Bd. IV, p. 91; *Die Bedeutung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu für den Glauben*, p. 162; *Logos und Mythos in Theologie und Religionphilosophie*, GS II, p. 817.

⁶ Νίκος Αθ. ΜΑΤΣΟΥΚΑΣ, *Δογματική και Συμβολική Θεολογία*, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1994, Β, p. 309.

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links the Church to the creation and history. These connections are not dialectical, but eminently soteriological realities and events, which spring from grace and the possibility of universal salvation in Christ. These are no links of authority and dominion over the world, but relationships blessed by grace, which spring from God, the assumed mystery of freedom and love⁷. A correct position is not expressed by the easy and unrelated accommodation of the Church with the world, if of course the love for the world, its renewal and recreation suppose paradoxically the involvement in its problems, but also, on the other hand, the non-commitment to the world. The paradox of this coming out and entering into its sphere can be overcome or transfigured by the grace of Christ the Incarnate and Crucified⁸. Matsoukas demonstrates that the theological and spiritual sources of Orthodoxy clearly show how many understandings are Greek in the content of Orthodox faith, but also how much they depend on the New Testament history⁹. Harnack, Sohm etc. believe that dogma and the organization of the latter Church are not related to the real content of the Church life. Probably this is true for the adogmatism of the Protestants who had to argue their theological affirmations. However, according to the double methodology of the Holy Fathers (the patristic methodology was first of all a charismatic knowledge and then it was defined by a theoretical-theological approach to the truth), taking into account the ontological and liturgical aspect of the ecclesiastical charismatic communion, such conclusions are baseless even from a historical point of view.

Olivier Clément states

“the great Byzantine theology gets to transfigure the Hellenistic vocabulary in the light of Revelation. Against the periodic «rebirths» of ancient rationalism and neo-platonic gnosis, the Church always emphasizes very clearly both the unity of man and the conception of knowledge as a personal meeting and

⁷ Ν. ΜΑΤΣΟΥΚΑΣ, “Η Ορθόδοξος πνευματικότητα και ο σύγχρονος πνευματικός άνθρωπος”, in: *Χριστιανισμός – Μαρξισμός*, Θεσσαλονίκη Σεμινάριου Θεολόγων, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1968, p. 96.

⁸ Cf. Σάββας ΑΓΟΥΡΙΔΗΣ, *Το Ευαγγέλιον και ο σύγχρονος κόσμος*, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1970, p. 51 sq.

⁹ Ν. ΜΑΤΣΟΥΚΑΣ, *Γένεσις και ουσία του ορθόδοξου δόγματος*, Εκδ. Πουρναρά, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1969, pp. 29-106.

participation of humanity transfigured by Christ in the Holy Spirit, which is communicated to us through the Holy Saints⁷¹⁰.

It is about the metamorphosis of the ontology. The Greek Fathers, especially the Cappadocians and Saint Dionysius, transfigured the vocabulary of Greek ontology introduced into Orthodox thinking, in the light of the Revelation of Nicaea. However, the ontology is thus used to express the central mystery of the Christian revelation: that of the person.

The teaching of faith explains Christ and His work of recapitulation and salvation of all in Him, Who said about Himself: “I am the Truth” (John 14, 6). Christ is the novelty of all news, the only novelty under the sun¹¹, the dynamic centre of theology and anthropology, soteriology and spirituality. St. Maximus the Confessor tells us that Christ is the purpose and the end of all created beings¹². Christ, God - Man who also assumed the Body of the Church through His Incarnation, is the life that is offered to man and the world, the unique and true life, the new and everlasting life of God’s people and world. The uniqueness of Christ’s icon is not the exclusivity, but the universality of the Truth, the truthfulness of the Revelation, the happiness of the Church¹³. The only danger to Christian morality and spirituality is the denial or falsification of their Christological or Christocentric basis and content. Because then they are gradually reduced and transformed into a spiritual life of mistaken imitation, into a sickly religiosity and closed psychological interiority, into a strange metaphysical discussion and pilgrimage, and into a transcendent and impersonal world of ideas. This would mean the separation of the spiritual life and the reality of life or the content of spirituality from the ontological relationship with Christ and their transformation into an individual morality. Saint Gregory the Theologian says the oeconomy of Christ’s Incarnation means “that those who died in Adam, however they live in Christ; they are related, crucified, triumphant and resurrected with Christ⁷¹⁴.”

¹⁰ Olivier CLÉMENT, *Biserica Ortodoxă*, Universitas, 2000, p. 15.

¹¹ Sf. MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Capita de charitate*, Centuria 2, PG 90, 984.

¹² Sf. MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Questiones ad Thalassium*, PG 90, 621.

¹³ Αθανάσιος Γεφτίης, “Η Βιβλική και πατερική προελεύθσεως περι Θεώσεως του ανθρώπου διδασκαλία του Γρηγόριου Παλαμά” in: Γ.Ι. ΜΑΝΤΣΑΡΙΔΗ, *Ο Άγιος Γρηγόριος ο Παλαμάς στην ιστορία και το παρόν*, Διεθνές Επιστημονικό Συνέδριο, Άγιον Όρος, 2000, p. 455.

¹⁴ Sf. GRIGORIE TEOLOGUL, *Oratio* 38, PG 36, 312.316.

The teaching of faith is the base of the spiritual life of the one who freely believes, because it is the expression of God's communion as a person, and of God Who is love and Who loves and reveals himself to man. Father Dumitru Staniloae says: "to redeem means leaving our isolation and uniting us with Christ and other people"¹⁵. This is because the person and the grace of the person's freedom possess the love for the neighbour as innate property, in particular, the love of God and the knowledge through and with love¹⁶. The interpersonal communion is nothing more than the expression of freedom and faith; it is the result of synergistic freedom of faith. Through divine adoption, the faithful "receive the freedom of faith" that reigns "in the court of God"¹⁷. Thus, the teaching of the faith or the dogmas of the Church are meant to promote a loving, and saving communion between the personal God and us. They are the ecclesial interpretation of the reality of Christ's Person in infinite progress of extension, updating, and communion with people. Christ is the living and sanctifying dogma of the whole salvation. Christ is the living dogma of salvation; he is the very Salvation, which calls us to the transfiguration of our lives.

Saint Gregory Palamas strongly affirmed that God is not a transcendent and inaccessible essence, but a loving and saving presence in the world and history¹⁸. This ontological character of communion with God through uncreated grace dogmatizes the anthropology of Saint Gregory Palamas too, since the theological understanding remains anthropological par excellence. Palamas believes that the dogma of the Holy Trinity is the surest way to access a correct anthropology¹⁹. Therefore, in his texts he places the creation of man in the image of God because it contains the possibility of his ontological renewal and perfection. The expression "in the image of God" bases the ontological foundation, the peak of the communion between God and man through the uncreated grace²⁰. The purposes of

¹⁵ Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Θεολογία και Εκκλησία*, μτφρ. Νίκος Τσιρώνης, Εκδ. Τήνος, Αθήνα, 1989, pp. 179, 196.

¹⁶ Ιωάννη ΜΑΓΙΕΝΤΟΡΦ, *Η Βυζαντική κληρονομιά στην Ορθόδοξη Εκκλησία*, Εκδ. Αρμός, 1990, p. 228.

¹⁷ Sf. CHIRIL AL ALEXANDRIEI, *In Ioannis Evangelium*, Book V, chap. 8, 35, PG 73, 864.

¹⁸ Cf. "Περί Ενωσης και διακρίσεως", in: *Συγγραμματα*, Μετάφ. Παναγιώτης Χρήστου, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992, vol. 5, p. 91.

¹⁹ Cf. Amfilohie RADOVICI, *Το Μυστήριο της Αγίας Τριάδος κατά τον Άγιον Γρηγόριον Παλαμάν*, Ανάλεκτα Βλατάδων 16, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1973, p. 45.

²⁰ Ανέστη ΚΕΣΣΕΛΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ, "Ο Οντολογικός Χαρακτήρας της ηθικής κατά τη διδασκαλία του Αγ. Γ. Παλαμά", in: Ανέστη ΚΕΣΣΕΛΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ, *Ο Άγιος Γρηγόριος ο Παλαμάς στην ιστορία και το παρόν*, Διεθνές Επιστημονικό Συνέδριο, 1998, Αθήνα, p. 71.

human life, within the creation of man as the image of God, do not simply belong to the historical-social framework. This real framework only covers the means. The goals belong to the sphere of the Spirit, in the progress of man's likeness to God.

Nevertheless, how many of us have come to discover that uncreated light of Tabor in the intimacy of one's soul, so that by our own discovery we can join the Holy Fathers of the Synodicon from the era of Palaiologos?

“To those who confess that the light which shone forth ineffably upon the mountain at the Lord's Transfiguration is unapproachable light, boundless light, an incomprehensible effusion of the Deity's resplendence, unutterable glory, the transcendently perfect and praetor-perfect and timeless glory of the Godhead, the glory of the Son, the Kingdom of God, true and lovable beauty which encompasses the Divine and blessed nature, the glory natural to God and the Divinity of the Father and the Spirit flashing forth in the only-begotten Son, as our divine and God-bearing fathers have said, Athanasios the Great and Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom, and moreover John of Damascus, and therefore maintain this supremely Divine light to be uncreated, eternal memory”²¹.

The Christian life has the calling and mission to be a true moral, a living spiritual reality, to be “the taste of truth, the food and drink of truth, and also the food and drink of power and energy” that is Christ the Eucharist²². We can call poor the opinion which considers “the mystical experience of religious life or unlimited experience of transcendence” as the essential feature of moral and spiritual life²³.

²¹ “Synodikonul Ortodoxiei”, transl. Ioan Ică Jr. in: *Mitropolia Ardealului*, XXX (1985) 7-8, pp. 440-457.

²² Konstantin ANDRONIKOF, “Die Eucharistische Lehre von N. Kabasilas”, in: *Anrufung des Heiligen Geistes im Abendmahl*, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 154. See Sf. MACARIE EGIPTEANUL, *Homiliae 27*, PG 34, 697.632; Sf. GRIGORIE AL NYSSSEI, *In Baptismum Christi*, PG 46, 584.

²³ Cf. Παπαδερός ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΣ, “Ορθοδοξία και οικονομία, διάλογος με τον Alfred Muller – Armack”, in: Γεώργιος ΜΑΝΤΖΑΡΙΔΗΣ, *Θέματα κοινωνιολογίας της Ορθοδοξίας*, Θεσσαλονίκη, pp. 97, p. 17.

II. The Ecclesial Ethos of Deification

The revealed and saving commandments require us to be kind to others not for the sake of goodness, but to prove our obedience and love to Christ. We follow the way God shows us, and we fulfil His saving, and unchangeable will. The love of God and the love of neighbour are united in the Great Commandment of Jesus Christ (Mark 12, 29). God is the prototype of love, because the Most Holy Trinity is a communion of perfect love. Christ shows the Father and the Holy Spirit through himself, by working with the Father and with the Holy Spirit and perfecting the work of elevating humanity to the communion of love with the Most Holy Trinity, which is itself the structure of the perfect love communion. Christ tells people: “If you love the one I love, then I convince myself that you love me much”²⁴.

No one can fulfil love unless he is “synergos” with the divine, uncreated, being, deifying and eternal grace: “Nothing fills people with love as the Holy Spirit does, and nothing else convinces the Holy Spirit to remain in us but the power of love”²⁵. “Just as there is a soul in the body, which holds all, even the most different parts, so it is here. That is because the Spirit was given to unite those who are separated by nation and ways of being”²⁶. The prototype of love and its synergistic way is the Holy Trinity: “The Spirit, who makes us cry Abba, Father!, He brings us also the love for God the Father and for the neighbour”²⁷.

St. John of Damascus teaches us that the commandments are the expression of the divine will. They are eternally-current and eternally-applicable, because His will is eternal and unchanging: “Virtue is the fulfilment of God’s law, and the law of God is His will, because no one gives a commandment that he does not want, and the will of God is good, unchanging and always the same”²⁸. The Church has and proposes to us the ethos of the eternally current and applicable commandments. The transfiguring Orthodox ecclesial-ascetic-liturgical ethos is that of living in Christ, out of the divine-human fullness of Christ, which along with the

²⁴ Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Homiliae XXXII in Epistolam an Romans* 4, PG 60, 619.

²⁵ Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Comentarius in Epistolam ad Galatas* 5, 6, PG 61, 672.

²⁶ Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Homiliae XXIV in Epistolam ad Ephesios* 9, 3, PG 62, 72.

²⁷ Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Homiliae X in Epistolam secundam ad Timotheum* 1, 2, PG 62, 603.

²⁸ Sf. IOAN DAMASCHIN, “Contra Manicheos” 43, in: *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, Bände IV, Berlin 1969–2013, p. 375.

Holy Spirit constitutes the unique ontological fullness of life and perfection. The Orthodox ecclesial ethos means overcoming the individualistic “interiority” or “religiosity”. It is a new, paschal, and ontological fact, which is experienced as a miracle of revelation, faith, and communion. The Orthodox ecclesial ethos is intended to be the “daily bread” of Revelation.

Nikos Nisiotis says “placing man at the centre of philosophical concerns is the main feature of contemporary philosophy”²⁹. Alternatively, according to Heinemann’s already known relational expression, we could emphasize that “the man of antiquity communicated with cosmos, the medieval one with God and that of modern times with man”³⁰. The talk or dialogue of man with man without transcendent reference - even with himself - is the most successful expression of secular subjectivism, which eminently characterizes the evolution of modern philosophical thinking. The subjectivism expressed and represented by the philosophical ethics had a clear influence on the thinking of very broad social groups. The serious sins of the contemporary man are those concerning the violation of the communion-love relationship with God, the neighbours, the world and himself. We can consider them a categorical “no” told to the Gospel of God and to other fellows. Just as our acts of extraordinary generosity are the proof of our logosity to always and ever say a “yes” to God, so our deeds of hatred, envy, and evil are the proof of our inwardness and ability to say “no” to God.

The purpose of the Gospel and of the moral-spiritual teaching of the Church Fathers is not the improvement or conformation of the human being to the pragmatic-utilitarian level, but his dedication as a loving person that symbolizes its Creator. Today, we talk a little or more differently about virtue or sin, because the social relational model replaced the authentic model of moral life. Hopefully, the way we perceive God’s forgiveness, love, and mercy has not changed. We do not believe that Christ wants us to be limited and inert due to a distorted sense of guilt and responsibility. Rather, we believe that we are called to participate more fully in the creative and sanctifying power of the Most Holy Trinity, which has its oecconomy

²⁹ Νικόλαος Α. ΝΗΣΙΩΤΗΣ, *Υπαρξισμός και Χριστιανική Πίστις κατά τον S. Kierkegaard και τους σύγχρονους υπαρξιστάς φιλοσόφους K. Jaspers, M.Heidegger και J.P. Sartre*, Αθήνα, 1956, p. 17.

³⁰ Fritz HEINEMANN, *Neue Wege der Philosophie. Geist, Leben, Existenz*, Leipzig, 1929, p. XXI.

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in history and which calls us by name to reconciliation, to the dialogical reconnection with ourselves, with others, with the world and with God.

The true morality in the Church is the way of man's personal communion with God. If man experiences true communion with God, he truly lives and confesses the experience of the truth of communion, which he accepts, he personally lives as a theophanic-taboric present, as a joy in the light of the beauty of the uncreated divine energies. As long as man remains only on a closed psychological level, he is in a moral and spiritual split and confusion. When, however, he is transformed and lives morality at an ontological level of openness, relationship, and communion, of forgiveness and love, of repentance and Eucharist, he discovers the unity of his being, but also his true ecclesial hypostasis as the paschal member of the Church. The paschal man lives the mystery of his salvation as the ecclesial hypostasis. What God offers as a gift from the beginning and man cultivates in the Christian life is axiologized as a spiritual state in the Church, the place of ontological growth and freedom.

The Church exists to serve the ontological possibility of human salvation and deification. The church is the paschal laboratory of the world, the place/space-*topos* of deification. Therefore, according to Saint Gregory Palamas her characteristic as a "communion of deification" (*κοινωνία Θεώσιες*) also reveals both its ontological principle, and its true soteriological and eschatological perspective. Therefore, the decisions and deeds of true love can be taken correctly only in Christ, the possibility of ontological freedom. We love and we have genuine liberty only through a Christocentric-paschal way - *tropos*. According to the Palamite teaching, which is part of *phronema* (mind) of ecclesiastical Tradition, dogma does not constitute mere closed rational schemes, but expresses the soteriological spiritual experience of the Church, which springs from her communion with God.

III. The Commandments of God are the Uncreated Light

The evangelist Matthew tells us that Christ goes to Capernaum preaching repentance and the imminent approach to the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Matthew 4, 17). This sermon is not a mere morality. Everyone of us has to change his life and start a new theocentric way of life, completely dedicated

to God. Thus, “repentance, as a renewing state of life, is the gate of the Kingdom of Heaven: Christ is at its head”³¹. From this moment, repentance and the new world (the new ontology) go together in the course of history and it is incomprehensible to overtake or engulf it. The time of salvation is here and now. The encounter with God here and now has priority and existential value in the “sacrament of the present moment”. This is why St. Apostle Paul tells us, quoting the prophet Jeremiah: „At a favourable time I listened to you; in a day of salvation I helped you; Behold, now is the acceptable time! Behold, now is the day of salvation!” (II Cor 6, 2). The presence of Christ is His kingdom itself, the new reality that strongly invades in history. Moreover, being in the presence of Lord Jesus, with an open heart toward His love, this fact changes you and heals you. Thus, the Gospel makes known the ethos of God.

The commandments of Christ are recommended or addressed to all; nevertheless, some believe that evangelical advice is not for everyone, because there are few who can follow it. At times, this methodological dualism, which has become a moral dualism, has been a feature in the course of medieval and modern history³². The evangelical requirement has become optional, random, and not universal. The call to completion is addressed to all: „Therefore, be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matt 5, 48). In addition, every person is called to this evangelical perfection according to his personal gifts. In the patristic tradition, besides the fulfilment of the commandments, there is also the reception of the charismas, the “gifts”³³. This receiving of gifts does not relativize God’s commandments, nor cause a certain subjective division of people into various spiritual categories. The content of the Gospel cannot be divided into pieces or fragmented, nor delimited by anthropocentric intellectual, cultural, and ethical preferences. The theocentric spiritual content of the Gospel is common to all; it is universal in calling and in practical application. The commandment of God does not have a closed legalistic dimension with historical evolutions and changes, and it does not represent a closed spirituality. The commandments are the appearance of the divine

³¹ N. ΜΑΤΣΟΥΚΑΣ, *Παλᾶιας και Καινῆς Διαθηνῆς*, Εκδ. Πουρναρά, Θεσσαλονίκη, 2002, p. 401.

³² See Otto von Schilling, *Handbuch der Moraltheologie*, vol. I *Allgemeine Moraltheologie und von den Sakramenten*, p. 163 and the criticism of this opinion at B. Schüller, *Gesetz und Freiheit*, Düsseldorf, 1966, pp. 62-75.

³³ Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Capita de charitate*, Centuria 4, PG 90, 1064 C.

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life, they are the icon of God, and are in the image of God. The faithful are called to the mystery of likeness to God, and to report the authenticity of their evangelical existence in relation to the divine ethos. The content is common, and so is their purpose. There are differences only in the way that someone makes it his own and then progresses naturally and dynamically in his work and perfection. Moreover, this way of life is fulfilled according to everyone's good will and dedication to the gifts of God, as well as according to the personal possibilities and / or the particular frame of life.

The deepest centrality of Christian spirituality does not lie in the typical-formal approach to everyday issues, but in their spiritual settlement, understanding, and fulfilment³⁴. The key element here is the ecclesiastical-theocentric perspective, the approach of the faith by which man axiomatizes his life in this world, in the presence of God. Mantzaridis says: "Therefore, the essence of the problem lies not in the application [practicability] of the Gospel ethics, but in the acceptance or non-acceptance of the Gospel perspective"³⁵. In addition, if one sees and understands his or her life from a finite, wordily, biological, professional and historical dimension, the Gospel's teaching will always be impractical, intangible and superhuman. Nevertheless, if man wants to orientate himself existentially to the Kingdom of God, then he will always find support in the Gospel, his only understanding, the criterion of facts, and his authentic and permanent guidance. As man trusts in God, so naturally, paradigmatically, and willingly, he will look upon himself through the teaching and content of the Gospel. However, the more self-referential he closes, the more the Gospel will seem to him difficult and problematic:

"The Church must establish norms based on the Gospel and if she uses the compromise, it must be trans-subjectively substantiated and yet it cannot become formal. If in heaven, the compromise is not necessary, on earth we have to make definitive and spotless decisions a priori. If our own self substitutes itself for God, then crises should no longer be considered as belonging to certain sectors of our life, but they are quite crises of faith. Unfortunately, like many indications of faith, the Decalogue

³⁴ Sf. MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Capita de charitate*, Centuria 3, 48, PG 90, 1032 A.

³⁵ Γεώργιος ΜΑΝΤΖΑΡΙΔΗΣ, *Χριστιανική Ηθική*, Εκδ. Πουρναρά, Θεσσαλονίκη, 2002, p. 120.

does not clearly establish what is God's will in the sense that everything is formulated negatively. Thus, we received only the limits that determine where the evil starts that the Christian must reject. He remains under the influence of sin and forgiveness, but also in the deadlock and mercy. Compromise is a paradox just like faith itself. If it is valid, then it comes in the form of effects of several opposing currents that result in a personal decision arising from faith. While the wrong compromise always judges by itself and unilaterally, the true compromise stays between the ranges of equally justified opinions³⁶.

Father Sophrony, an abba of modern times, says the Gospel commandments are a true unbroken light³⁷ (τό άκτιστον φως) which shows how God is. If man has this conscience, then he accepts the will of God and His commandments as realities (messages and calls) of grace and indicators of true freedom. As the believer lives the evangelical virtues in the spirit of the gospel, so does he experience his unique freedom: freedom in Christ³⁸.

On the other hand, that immoral way of life without a theocentric reference, which works with alterations, alienations and syncopes, not only does not lead man to Christ, but man hardens himself towards Him. One of the most dramatic failures that Christianity has suffered lately is to neglect the gift of the Holy Spirit in the Mystery of Repentance. When the priest is no longer a spiritual confessor, he will gradually become a social worker with a religious character or an official provider of religious services. He lacks the experience of the deepest pastoral fulfilment, of working together so that each penitent, and thanks to his help, will leave confession forgiven and renewed. Sitting in the chair of confession, the spiritual can penetrate the hearts of many people and from here profound reflections, motivations, and inspirations may come out for his own communion with Christ and the paschal presence in the Church. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, Christ Himself works in the hypostasis of man, fulfils, and accomplishes the virtues or commandments of God. The phrase of Christ "without me you can do nothing" (John 15, 5) is a truth without denial that is practically certified in human life through experience.

³⁶ Hans STEUBING, *Der Kompromiss Als Ethisches Problem*, Tübingen, 1955, p. 113.

³⁷ cf. Αρχίμ. ΣΩΦΡΟΝΙΟΥ, *Ουόμεθα τον Θεόν καθώς εστιν*, Μονή Τιμίου Προδρόμου, 1992, p. 235.

³⁸ Cf. Sf. MARCU ASCETUL, *Opuscula, De Baptismo*, PG 65, 989 A.

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Communion with God through the uncreated grace enlivens and perfects man's existence and, implicitly, his powers. Thus, things that are unattainable by capacity and power are achieved "without difficulty and with good will"³⁹, as St. Macarius the Egyptian says. Spiritual life is not possible unless it follows the path of existential-dynamic-ontological renewal in / through Christ. The Christian is called to give every moment of his life to Christ. Every act, word and thought that takes place (is fulfilled) in Christ cultivates and expresses the communion of man with God and the Church. Oppositely, every fact, word, or thought that manifests itself without Christ is fragmenting him in essence and distancing him from Christ and the Church. It is natural for him who lives in and with Christ to be transfigured to the divine-human will of Christ⁴⁰ and then even the hidden / unconfirmed thought of a passion will seem to him a trembling impiety.

The relative ethical-philosophical opinion that it is not possible for God's commandments to be fulfilled has no base. God does not demand us to do things that cannot be done. The commandments are not a set of rules that must be kept, but a relational opportunity to freely meet the living God. Nevertheless, the divine commandments cannot be fulfilled only with human powers, through a purely unilateral, declarative, and external relation to them. Man may overcome his own weaknesses, limits, and frailties only by faith in Christ and by the uncreated grace of the Holy Spirit and then he overcomes himself and rises to the measure of life in Christ. St. Symeon the New Theologian says that he who says the commandments are inapplicable considers God a liar and deceiver⁴¹. The will of God is our joy, for it springs from Christ's heart, which is oriented only to divine goodness. In addition, Christ only wants our wellness.

IV. Spirituality of the Uncreated and Sanctifying Grace

The commandments of God have an ecclesiastical-therapeutic character and cure the soul diseases. The commandments heal man's ecclesiastical

³⁹ Sf. MACARIE EGIPTEANUL, *Homiliae*, 19, 6, PG 34, 648 A.

⁴⁰ Sf. VASILE CEL MARE, *Epistolae* 159, 1, *Eupaterio, et filiae*, PG 32, 620 B.

⁴¹ Sf. SIMEON NOUL TEOLOG, *Ηθικά*, 10, 211-34, ed. J. Darrouzès, coll. *Sources Chrétiennes*, vol. 129, pp. 274-276.

hypostasis toward being made a part of the Church (*εκκλησιασμός*), who draws near the mystery of Christ, approaches and learns how to receive God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This is accomplished in the sacramental-liturgical life, and in the prayer of the Word of God. Moreover, it is impossible for the soul not to be ill, if it does not keep or fulfil the commandments. The measure of the commandments' fulfilment shows the measure of the spiritual health of his ecclesial hypostasis. The commandments express the perfect ethos of God. The commandments have an ecclesial-eucharistic character. By their fulfilment, the believer partakes with Christ through the Eucharist. God Himself is in every commandment; their fulfilment strengthens the believer and he partakes with Christ⁴². Thus, the fulfilment of God's commandments acquires an ecclesial-eucharistic character and verifies the personal relationship and communication with Christ⁴³.

The ontological reality of the renewal of Christ is the foundation that the Christian life is based on. The fulfilment of the commandments is impossible without the renewal of life in Christ (*εν Χριστώ ζωής*). Nevertheless, without man's endeavour and perseverance towards the spiritual renewal of life in Christ, the gift disappears and extinguishes. The ontological renewal offered by Christ needs to be understood and personally known as ecclesiastical-liturgical and moral-spiritual renewal in daily life.

As St. Nicholas Cabasilas observes, we are called to have the common will with the One whom we have common blood. We cannot be united with Christ in some parts and separated in others: "All who desire to know the will of the Lord, are liable to kill theirs first"⁴⁴. Since the life of the Christian depends on Christ, his should conform to the will of Christ⁴⁵. This is also the purpose of asceticism, morality, and Christian spirituality.

The believer cannot limit himself to a subjective-eclectic fulfilment of the commandments, but he is obliged to take good care for the practical application of all the commandments without neglecting or minimizing

⁴² Sf. MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Capita Charitate, Centuria 2*, 71, PG 90, 1156 D.

⁴³ ΓΡΗΓΟΡΙΟΥ ΠΑΛΑΜΑ, *Άπαντα τα έργα, Homiliae 56*, Μετάφ. Παναγιώτης Χρήστου, Θεσσαλονίκη, 2009, p. 210.

⁴⁴ ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ ΣΙΝΑΪΤΟΥ, *Κλίμαξ*, εκδ. Ιεράς Μονής Παρακλήτου, Ωρωπός Αττικής, 1999, p. 384.

⁴⁵ Sf. NICOLAE CABASILA, *De vita in Christo, Lib. 6, 7*, PG 150, 641 D- 44 A.

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any of them⁴⁶. Moreover, all the commandments accompany and intersect with each other, all the virtues are co-synergistic, and the eclectic, random, and subjective fulfilment of the commandments proves to be impossible. Therefore, we are talking about the unity and indivisibility of the Gospel commands. The commandments of God do not lose their unity either by their moral division and distinction, or by their variety and multitude applied to life.

Their unity, indivisibility and practical viability show that when a commandment is violated or abolished, others are violated and abolished too; ignoring and breaking a commandment results in ignoring and disobeying others, as man gives in to sin and temporarily loses his living and working grace. God's commandments are divine powers of "incarnation" that direct man to holiness. They are divine sanctifying powers and divine energies that come to unite with man's energies to support and perfect him. Saint John of Damascus says that we know God through his energies⁴⁷. While God is and remains *ακατάληπτος*, unknown, incomprehensible in His nature or being, forever remaining the source of life and virtue, man becomes virtuous by participating to the life and virtue of God⁴⁸.

God's commandments do not have a validity time, being timeless. They are eternal in God. God is beyond the gift of godly commandments, because he is their origin, source, cause, and eternal will. By fulfilling the commandments, the fear of death is overcome and one participates to the eternal life in God. This happens when the limit of the divine commandments fulfilment is put to death⁴⁹. This is the case of martyrs or "martyrs through the conscience", who have fulfilled God's commandments perfectly, following the parable of the Saviour, who „became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross" (Phil 2, 8). The threshold of eternal life is there on the Cross. This is how the believer proves that God's commandment "means eternal life".

Man knows God and fulfils His commandments only by participating to the eternal life (cf. John 17, 3). Only by fulfilling the divine commandments "unto death", does he know God and participate in eternal life. Eternal life is offered as grace. In addition, the commandments of

⁴⁶ Sf. VASILE CEL MARE, *Ascetica, Proemium in regulas fusius tractatas 2*, PG 31, 893 B.

⁴⁷ „Αι ενέργειαι αὐτοῦ πρὸς ἡμᾶς καταβαίνουσιν", *De Fide Ort.* 1, 14.

⁴⁸ Sf. MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Chapita Charitate* PG 90, 1101 ab.

⁴⁹ Sf. VASILE CEL MARE, *Ascetica, Regula Brevius Tractate*, 206, PG 31, 1220.

God, which organically accompany Him, are fulfilled with the powers or energies of uncreated grace. The Christian life cannot be understood or achieved without the uncreated grace. This reality is a characteristic of the Orthodox spirituality: it is a *spirituality of uncreated grace*, not only because it is presented during grace, which is the time of the Church, but also because it can be realized by the power of grace. Finally, Orthodox Christian spirituality is a spirituality of uncreated grace because it transfers man spiritually to the level of the grace experience, that is, to the level of the Spirit ontology.

V. The Life of the Church and Social Ethics

By carefully observing the secular dynamics of the evolutions and events in the moral, spiritual, and pastoral theology, an increasingly acute feeling of insecurity is generated by the existence of the decisional-factual-moral deadlock. The one triggers conflicts in the consciousness that do not have a “transparent” or clear solution from a spiritual-moral point of view. The main cause that generates situations of moral impasse is the discrepancy between our daily life and the Gospel, between the Spirit of Tradition and contemporary secularism, between the texts of the Holy Fathers and of the Church and our moral life, between Creed and salvation, between vocation and calling, between conscience and social responsibility.

Everyday life raises social demands and their fulfilment is never, in particular, in accordance with the evangelical moral commandments. And yet, on the other hand, the Gospel offers the Sermon on the Mount as a point of reference for the Christian life, which formulates total, ultimate and true requirements in the name of the Living and personal God.

The natural virtue of man that exists as *απήχημα* (accident) of the uncreated virtue of God is created. Without the uncreated grace, natural virtue remains essentially without work or embodiment. Then it is normal to speak of a “moral impossibility” to fulfil the commandments, when the natural virtue departs from God and becomes independent and autonomous⁵⁰. The participation of the created man in the uncreated virtue of God is impossible within time and space. Nevertheless, it becomes

⁵⁰ Cf. ΓΡΗΓΟΡΙΟΥ ΠΑΛΑΜΑ, *Συγγράματα, Αντιρρητικός προς Ακίνδυνον*, τόμ. 3, p. 377.

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possible in Christ⁵¹. The integration into the Body of Christ - the Church, links the created man to the uncreated God and places him in the divine life synergistically and in a participant way. In this way, the spiritual-moral life is a consequence of his participation to the divine life. God is and always remains the source of life and virtue, while man becomes virtuous by participating to the gift of divine grace, in the life and virtue of God⁵².

Primarily, human perfection is an ontological fact and not just a moral one. In the Church, where there is the space of uncreated grace and freedom in Christ, the Law transcends, as it goes towards this space of salvation and truth. This happens because the uncreated grace goes beyond law⁵³. Christ calls man to the spiritual freedom of grace and the Christian life is oriented towards it (Gal 5, 13). Man is called to love God with all his heart. Love is manifested by the fulfilment of the divine commandments. Love reflects the true freedom where the selfish interest is left behind. As long as man lives in passions, he cannot love God who is the being of virtue. However, as much as he loves him, he rarely reaches a complete fulfilment of the divine love commandments. The commandment of Christian love, its practice and perfection, is not at a psychological level, but at an *ontological*, and *spiritual level*, where the Christian no longer separates himself from his neighbour because he loves the neighbour as himself, since he lives in Christ. Through the fight against sin, man becomes the creator of his freedom within this freedom in Christ, to bring the gift of freedom in a spiritual and heavenly way of life (cf. Rom 6, 4), to a life in Christ where the Christian participates to His Resurrection. Participation to the freedom in Christ is accomplished with and through the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of freedom.

The moral renewal comes as an expression of the transfigurative ontological renewal of the Holy Spirit through the uncreated energies, the rays of divinity. The more man shares the fullness of the ontological renewal as a participation in the life of God, the more the moral life expresses and is authentic. Of course, for pastoral and pedagogical reasons in the Church there are canons, regulations, and laws. Nevertheless, there is also the danger of reining the legalistic spirit whenever the sanctifying

⁵¹ Sf. ATANASIE CEL MARE, *Orationes adversus Arianos* 2, 76, PG 26, 308 BC.

⁵² Sf. MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambiguorum Liber sive de variis difficilibus locis SS. Dionysii Areopagitae et Gregorii Theologi*, 1, 50, PG 90, 1101 AB.

⁵³ Cf. Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *Comentarius in Epistolam ad Galatas*, PG 61, 672.

work of divine grace is extinguished or suppressed. In addition, when the ontological character of Christian spirituality and morality is not understood, this legalistic spirit is manifest not infrequently. Therefore, as a safety valve, the Church always has the principle of oeconomy. However, the legalistic spirit can dominate and hinder the freedom of the Spirit continuously.

According to the Orthodox Tradition, social ethics exists as a dimension and as an inseparable reality of ecclesial morality and life. The Church is the space where the whole cosmos is committed and renewed through the grace of the Holy Spirit. It does not spring from the world, man did not create it, and the secular society does not give it vital forms. It is the new cosmos, the new creation and the new community. True society is not possible without Christ and the Church. "The true society is created by the simultaneous existence of the same thing in two parts. If the same thing exists successively in one and the other, there is no true society (communion), but probably separation ..."⁵⁴.

The true society is created with Christ and in Christ because the members participate simultaneously at the same thing. Christ, whom the believer is integrated in his Body, does not separate from him, but always remains socially united with him and animates him through His saving and renewing presence⁵⁵. Christ is, at the same time, food and nourishing, the Giver and the Feeder, the Giver of Eternal Bread and the Bread of Life itself, the medicine of immortality. One exists in many and many in One. By grace, the faithful become christs and Christ lives in their existence.

In their depth, the social problems are also moral or spiritual problems. Their solution is not always that of the administrative institutions (which can only approach them up to a point), but that of the person and of the spiritual life, that is, at an ontological level⁵⁶. The attempt of the Church to solve the social problems or to offer certain social ethics (or social authority alongside the political one) does *not* represent the nature and purpose of the Church.

⁵⁴ Γεώργιος ΜΑΝΤΖΑΡΙΔΗΣ, *Εισαγωγή στην Ἠθική*, p. 53.

⁵⁵ See Sf. NICOLAE CABASILA, *De vita in Christo* PG 150, 600 C.601 AB.

⁵⁶ The Orthodox morality is neither individual nor collective. The moral is based on the person, where the love is born, raised, and perfected. In addition, the content of the person has a theological perspective; it is linked to the revelation of the truth of the Holy Trinity. All go and gather in and towards the person.

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The position and place of the Church in the world is diaconic and transfigurative. She serves and should serve man, for whom Christ died, in all the personal and social aspects of his life, without creating certain social ethics apart from her morality, and without dealing with world politics, or creating “pastoral” systems or strategies. If the Church does not always have this belief, she will be subjected to many temptations, since any form of “power” is always a temptation. However, it is also a great obstacle, because it underestimates the Holy Spirit and subjugates the “holy ones” to the immediate data of worldly life. Ultimately, the Church does not save the world by imposing these outward principles, but by engaging it in the new creation of uncreated divine energies. The role of Christ’s Church is neither antagonistic or reforming, but transformative, renewing, and deifying.

The Church does not offer its own political system in a competitively way, or its own social teaching and a specific ethical system. Christ’s Church presents and testifies the new man in Christ, and Christ Himself, the love that reveals man’s meaning in the world that is to be near and in Christ - where he will know his authentic self and true life. (Cf. Matt 7, 12). The Orthodox Church does not approach the social and moral life of man with a special system, because, if it were appropriate, it could lead to a relative or absolute distortion and autonomy. The symbolic system has a vital role in the dogmatic teaching about God - Who is the absolute Truth. Nevertheless, this symbolic system is also maintained and lived through an open, unspoken, and humble apophatism - in the experience of the Saints.

The truth of things is not fully and comprehensively revealed through meanings and theories, but by stopping, understanding, and erasing the error, which creates different perceptions, realities, and reflections. The things that are always seen show a cross ... and those that are not always seen need a grave (*Τά φαινόμενα πάντα δείται σταυρού...τά δε νοούμενα πάντα χρῆζει ταφῆς*⁵⁷).

Here the antinomy of reality is summarized: total denial, but also total acceptance of the world. The position of the Church towards them can be characterized as *cataphatic and apophatic* at the same time. It is cataphatic because it approaches the concrete service of people spiritually, in the beauty of love embodied by deeds. Moreover, at the same time, apophatic (in the

⁵⁷ Sf. MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Ambiguorum Liber sive de variis difficilibus locis SS. Dionysii Areopagitae et Gregorii Theologi*, 1, 67, PG 90, 110 B.

spirit of open apophatism, in the wonder of uncreated energies) because they do not cease to believe that “one thing is necessary”: salvation. Neither the aspirations or the preaching of an eschatologism beyond history excuse the indifference to daily life, nor the concern for the present life excuse the neglect (omission) of the ultimate purpose: salvation.

In the Orthodox Tradition, the world finds its meaning, vocation and end as creation and history in the Church’s oeconomy which, being the pleroma of Christ, God-Man, constitutes the mysterious centre of the world, the “cosmos of the cosmos”. The denial of the saving and transfiguring presence and power of the Church means the loss of philokalia, the deformation, and the loss of the world’s meaning. It means to be closed in the self-sufficiency circle of history. Orthodoxy represents the spirituality of the Incarnation, a transfiguring philokalic presence in the world and in history. In fact, the ways of the Church in history are philokalic, that is the ways of loving the divine beauty.