

The Ascetical Life

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I. Divine and Human Love

The ascetical life is a response to Divine love. It is an expression of human love driven by an unquenchable desire to abide in the embrace of the triune and tri-personal God. The ascetical life has its beginning and end in God. God who is triune and tri-personal willingly extends his life beyond himself seeking union and communion with the one he creates in his image and likeness. This going beyond or outside of divinity – this standing outside (ἔκστασις) of the tri-personal relationships of Trinitarian life is an expression of divine love supremely expressed in the incarnation of the Logos. “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation of our sins... We love, because he (God) loved us first.” (1John 4:9-10,19)

Both divine and human love are inexhaustible. However, there is one great difference. God is forever faithful to his beloved even when the beloved seeks the embrace of another lover. Human love, on the other hand, intended by God to be forever faithful and therefore opened to the other, has turned in on itself. Self-love can only establish phantom-like relationships that are manipulative and abusive. Unless transformed, these pseudo relationships have the potential to destroy all those entrapped by this dark love.

The ascetic is the one who struggles against self-love and therefore self-preservation. This struggle leads to an existential death and resurrection that is driven by an ongoing metanoia (μετάνοια) and rebirth of the person. Paul Evdokimov (The Struggle With God) writes: “The two terms (μετάνοια and birth) express clearly that profound modification of the human being and makes its entrance into the spiritual world, whose principles are the opposite of the world.” It would not be an exaggeration to say that Christianity and therefore asceticism is counter-cultural. The way of the Lord and therefore our lives as Christians in and for the world is simultaneously contra mundi.

The monastic movement of the fourth century was a reminder to the Church that it proclaimed a kingdom not of this world i.e. not allied with Caesar. The retreat into the desert was a retreat from what was understood as a compromise of the Gospel.

II. Asceticism and Baptism: The Social Responsibility of the Ascetic

It should be stressed that ascetical life – because it is the life of the Gospel – cannot be divorced from Baptism. Baptism is the response to God’s overture of love. It is a break

from the old and entrance into the new. It is initiation into the Kingdom not of this world that sojourns in the world for its life, salvation, transfiguration and deification.

At baptism the newly illumined is tonsured. All Christians are tonsured – all Christians are called to be living offerings to the living God. The baptismal tonsure is the pledge of giving oneself to the new life in Christ that is sustained by ongoing struggle nurtured by the Holy Spirit. “Put on the armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”(Eph. 6:11) Because μετένοια is a process of dying to the old self, it is also a rising into new life. But what is this new life?

Christian asceticism is not dualistic. It does not reject the physical or material because it is perceived as inherently evil. Christian asceticism is not the polarization of the spiritual and material. On the contrary, Christian asceticism is the harmonization of the spiritual and material. The Kingdom that is to come, the Kingdom already among us is comprised of the old being transformed into the new: “And he who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” (Rev. 21:5) We do not read, “I make new things.” God’s creation is inherently good. The ascetic is the one who truly realizes and experiences this fundamental reality. As the one who struggles to grow in his baptismal vocation i.e. to grow as a member of Christ’s body, the ascetic yearns for participation in the divine life. At the same time, the ascetic, as the one who loves the other, seeks to draw every one and every thing into the life of the triune and tri-personal God. The ascetic is the one who discovers daily not only his personal sin but also his divine calling to become God by grace – “God became man so man might become God.”

The re-ordering or re-harmonization of the person is a testament to the ascetic’s quest for a life integrated in God and creation. Self-love as the foundation of the ancestral sin and as the engine of personal sin is fought on the front of ecstatic love (ἔρωζ) – a love which reaches out towards the other and which binds every fiber of the human person into a harmonious and sanctified whole.

Ἐρωζ is the love that drives the ascetic outside of himself and into the embrace of Christ. Ἐρωζ is the total emptying of self in order to be in communion with the other. Ἐρωζ is a kenotic love that fills the self with the other. It is a love seeking to aid and serve the other. Ἐρωζ is love that compels the ascetic to suffer with and for the other. The model for this “erotic” or “kenotic” love is Christ himself. “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” (Phil. 2:4-8)

Erotic love, because it is self-emptying, will ultimately lead the ascetic to die for the other. Once the love for God and the other begins to emerge from a life no longer devoted to selfishness, the resurrected person - the regenerated person – is manifested. Without love for the other, the ascetic continues to live a false life i.e. a life of hypocrisy

in which he acts out a role that has no moorings in the life and light of Christ. “He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it there is no cause for stumbling. But he who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.” (1 Jn. 2:9-11) and “If any one says, ‘I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar...’” (4:20)

In the Ladder of St. John of Sinai (570?-649?) the reader is offered a glimpse of the redeeming power of ἔρωσ. “I have seen impure souls raving madly about physical love (ἔρωτας σομάτων); but making their experience of carnal love a reason for repentance, they transferred the same love to the Lord; and overcoming all fear, they spurred themselves insatiably into the love of God (εἶν ἀγάπην θεοῦ). That is why the Lord does not say of that chaste harlot - ‘Because she feared; but ‘Because she loved much (ἀγάπησε πολύ) and could easily drive away love by love (ἔρωτι ἔρωτα διακρούσασθαι). (Step 5)

St. Isaac the Syrian (latter part of the 7th century) stresses that the true ascetic, by coming to know God by responding to divine love also comes to know himself. As the ascetic comes to know God and himself he comes to also realize that all of nature is fragmented and polarized. “With this knowledge are connected a perpetual stabbing of the heart; distress and grief...” (Homily XLIV) Self-love has brought internal personal chaos which brings chaos to all of creation. Estrangement from God – due to the poison of sin and mortality – has caused the human person and all of creation to assume a false identity.

Overcoming this false identity is possible through love. Wounded by God’s love, the ascetic’s true love – ἔρωσ – begins to form within the process of repentance. From repentance comes the kenotic love that simultaneously causes the ascetic to weep and rejoice. He weeps because he recognizes himself as the very cause of nature’s fragmentation and polarization. Yet he rejoices knowing that the Divine Eros manifested in the economy of the Son and Holy Spirit has overcome all division. St. Paul expresses the overcoming of division and polarization in his letter to the Galatians: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (3:27-28) Saint Maximus the Confessor (7th c.) further develops this fundamental reality of the new creation revealed in and through Christ. All divisions resulting from sin are healed The created/uncreated; intelligible/tangible; heaven/earth; paradise/universe; male/female are restored to a unity in diversity and diversity in unity proclaimed, revealed and lived within the Church as the new creation.

The new creation is built on the kenotic love of God who “so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (Jn. 3:16) For St. Isaac the Syrian, the ascetic is precisely the one who practices and continues the kenotic love of God in and through his own person. In his Discourse LXXIV he speaks of the one who is merciful and, by extension, as the one who reflects the unbounded love of the Trinity upon which the Church is built: “What is a merciful heart? The heart’s burning for all creation, for human beings, for birds and

animals, and for demons, and everything there is. At the recollection of them and at the sight of them his eyes gush forth with tears owing to the force of the compassion which constrains his heart, so that, as a result of its abundant sense of mercy, the heart shrinks and cannot bear to hear or examine any harm or small suffering of anything in creation. For this reason he offers up prayer with tears at all times, even for irrational animals, and for the enemies of truth, and for those who harm him, for their preservation and being forgiven. As a result of the immense compassion infused in his heart without measure – like God’s – he even does this for reptiles.¹

Kenotic love overcomes all divisions. For the one who loves as God loves there is the desire to draw all into the embrace of Christ where “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.” (Gal.3:28)

In his book entitled *My Missions In Siberia* (published in 1917), Archimandrite Spiridon recounts the words of a holy peasant named Simeon: “For me, sufferings are not an object of fear. What does make me afraid is that God might deprive sinners of his grace... I am ready to pray to God not only for all Christians but also for those who have not been baptized. On all of them I have such pity! ...on those who have been hanged and on those who have committed suicide... on all who have died I take pity, and finally even on the devil I take pity. That is what I feel in my heart...”²

III. Love and Death

We have looked at asceticism through the lens of “restored love.” Here is where we need to understand “restored love” in relationship to death – death to the fallen self and to the fallen creation. Without death there can be no resurrection. It has been stressed that Baptism provides the context for “death and resurrection.” From this context, which initiates the newly illumined into the living body of Christ – the Church – a creative tension between the inaugurated Kingdom and the world emerges.

Christ says to his disciples: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Lk. 9:23 and parallels) The word “deny” is a translation based on the Greek verb ἀπαρνέομαι. This verb is rich in meaning and can also be translated as “to disown” which in turn helps to clarify what is meant by the denying oneself. Often, “to deny oneself” is understood as the way towards overcoming self-indulgence.

Much more than overcoming self-indulgence, the disowning of the self is a re-awakening of the self towards the other. St. Maria Skobtsova (+1945) poignantly stresses that the ascetical life is not a private enterprise. Its social context and thrust always includes the other. In her essay, **The Second Gospel Commandment**, she stresses that the ascetic’s

¹ The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life, trans. Sebastian Brock, Cistercian Pub., Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1987, p. 251. Regarding the reference to reptiles, Brock states the following: “Isaac singles out reptiles since, according to Zoroastrian belief, they are part of the evil creation of Ahriman.” (p. 300) Hence, for St. Isaac there is nothing created that is inherently evil. There is no duality in the created order.

² Quoted by Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 302

true love for God is lived out in relationship to how love is shown for the neighbor. “The Orthodox man only fulfills the precepts of his faith when he takes them as a certain bi-une commandment of love for God and love for one’s neighbor.” Tragically, she points out the abandoning of this commandment in the context of Orthodox life and spirituality. “There occur, of course, whole epochs of deviation from the right attitude toward this bi-unity. And it is especially characteristic of periods of catastrophe and general instability, when man in his pusillanimity tries to hide, to take cover, and not deal with anyone who belongs to this tottering world. It seems to him that if he remembers God alone, and stands before Him in his soul in order to save it, he will thereby be delivered from all calamity and remain clean in a time of universal defilement. Such a man should tirelessly repeat to himself the words of St. John the Theologian about hypocrites who say they love God without loving man [1 Jn. 4:20]. How can they love God, whom they do not see, and hate their brother, who is near them? For the fulfillment of love for one’s neighbor, Christ demanded that we lay down our soul for our friends. Here there is no sense in paraphrasing this demand and saying that it has to do not with the soul but with life, because when the apostle Paul says, about the fulfilling of Christ’s demand, that he could wish he were separated from Christ, so long as he could see his brothers saved [Rom. 9:3] – it is clear that he is speaking of the state of his soul, and not only his life.”³

Disowning the self requires a reorientation of the mind and will which entails a type of death and resurrection. St. Paul clearly and powerfully expresses this liberation of the self: “ But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.” (Gal.6:14-15)

The putting to death of the mind and will owned and enslaved by the self requires the ascetic to leave the world in order to return to the world and to offer it back to God. Leaving the world and therefore dying to the world begins with the mind’s ascent to God.

For St. Maximus the Confessor the one seeking union with God begins with the ascent (ἀνάβασις) of the mind (νοῦς) through contemplation (θεωρία). Contemplation strives to free the mind from the senses and the negative passions. It enables the mind to undergo a liberation – death – in which it leaves behind all that is fallen. Contemplation is an ascent of the mind beyond the senses and the material. Yet, this ascent is not an abandoning of the world. On the contrary, the ascent of the mind eventually allows the ascetic to understand that all creation belongs to the Logos of God. The ἀνάβασις of the mind and its passing through or going beyond the created draws the person into a communal relationship with God enabling the ascetic to return to the world with a restored vision and renewed will. The renewed vision and renewed will manifest themselves in the virtues which express the ascetic’s relationship to the one who is the Truth. “Virtue exists for truth: but truth does not exist for virtue.” (Amb. P.G. 90, 369A)

The ascetic’s life – his ἀνάβασις to God – is a movement of the mind away from all created existence. St. Gregory the Theologian in praise of St. Athanasius the Great (Sermon 21) states: “If therefore it happens to anyone that, passing by means of reason

³ Mother Maria Skobtsova: Essential Writings, Orbis Books, 2003, p.48

and contemplation through matter and the fleshly, whether called cloud or veil, to become assimilated to God and united to the most pure light, so far as is permitted to human nature, this person is blessed by his ascent from here and his deification there, which is granted to those who genuinely live the philosophical life and transcend the material dyad through the unity of the mind perceives in the Trinity.”

Commenting on this part of St. Gregory’s sermon, St. Maximus writes: “Why does the teacher say that the flesh is a cloud and a veil? He knows that every human mind has gone astray and lost its natural motion, so that its motion is determined by passion and sense and things perceived by the senses, and it cannot be moved anywhere else as its natural motion towards God has completely atrophied. He therefore divides the flesh into passion and sense, designating these two parts of the ensouled flesh cloud and veil. For the cloud is the fleshly passion darkening the pilot of the soul, and the veil is the deceit of the senses, causing the soul to be overcome by the appearance of things perceived by the senses, and blocking the passage to intelligible reality, through which it is overcome by forgetfulness of natural goodness and turns all its energy to sensible things and also discovers in this way angry passions, desires and unseemly pleasures.”⁴

The ascetic ascends from the world - leaves the world – by abandoning his disordered passions ruled by the mind and senses which have forgotten or turned away from God. Leaving behind the created which has become obscured and abused by a mind and will turned in on itself the transformation of the person begins. The ordeal of turning the mind toward God (repentance) – the struggle to disown the self - makes the ascetic a slave of righteousness and no longer a slave of sin. (cf. Rom. 6:18) As a slave of righteousness the ascetic acquires his freedom in Christ and his responsibility for the other.

For St. Maximus, freedom is a condition of the natural will (θέλημα φυσικόν) which is to be in harmony with the divine will. This harmony is a result of a dynamic in which all the components or properties of the human person are in union with God. Because of this union, human freedom ultimately transcends choice since choice implies hesitation, preference, confusion and doubt. Yet, though the human person possesses the natural will it underwent a fall – a collapse derived by a turning away from God. In other terms, once the human will is severed from the divine will there ensues a total collapse of the person which impacts all of creation. This collapse of the person gives way to sin, confusion, ignorance and darkness. At times the fallen will is referred to by St. Maximus as the gnostic will (θέλημα γνωμικόν). Paradoxically, for St. Maximus the natural will is capable of turning away from God and confines itself in the limitations of choice.

In the ascent to God, the ascetic chooses (again) to be a slave of righteousness which St. Paul describes as being totally possessed by Christ: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me...” (Gal. 2:20)

Being possessed by Christ does not obliterate one’s personhood. When the ascetic is possessed by Christ he recovers his true identity sustained and developed by and through the Holy Spirit. By resurrecting his mind, will, heart, energy, body the ascetic is led by

⁴Translated by Anerew Louth in his Maximus the Confessor, University of Durham, 1996, pp. 96-97,99

the Spirit and dwells in the Spirit. “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the spirit is life and peace.” (Rom. 8:5-6)⁵

IV. The Ascetic as a Eucharistic Being

The ascetic is a Eucharistic being. In the context of the Liturgy the ascetic feasts on the spoken and Eucharistic words of Christ. Drawn to the Lord’s Table, the ascetic is the true Gnostic who “sees” with the eyes of faith the first fruits of the restored creation. As a co-celebrant of the New Covenant, the ascetic participates in the inaugurated Kingdom of God where every one and every thing is restored to its proper identity in relationship to the incarnate Logos. The reasonable worship (λογική λατρεία) confirms and affirms for the ascetic that his personal death in baptism is indeed initiation into the resurrection of new and eternal life. This new and eternal life is the unending Pentecost in which the divine Spirit binds and gathers the body of Christians transforming them into the living body of Christ.

As an eschatological event, the Eucharist is a pre-figuration of deified existence to which all of created existence is called. As a participant in this existence, the ascetic abides in this world but as one who is of the world to come. Here and now the ascetic, compelled by “kenotic eros,” seeks to bring all that is fallen to the very source of healing and transfiguration. The vision of the New Jerusalem described by St. John is a liturgical – even a Eucharistic – description of the Kingdom breaking into time and space where the old becomes new: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.” (Rev.21:1-4)

The ascetic lives this reality, proclaims this reality and offers this reality to all.

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⁵ A note on the word flesh: καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο... Flesh acquires its negative connotation when it becomes an idol. Likewise the term desire (ἐπιθυμία) is used negatively when the mind no longer sees a person as belonging to God. Consequently desire, as it is related to possessing and using the flesh as an object, devolves into a passion. Tragically, the one who desires and the one desired both lose their identity as persons. In the Gospel according to St. Luke, our Lord says to his disciples: “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer... (ἐπιθυμία ἐπεθύμησα τοῦτο τὸ πάσχα φαγεῖν μεθ’ ὑμῶν πρὸ τοῦ με παθεῖν. 22:15) Here Jesus seeks communion with the disciples and therefore his desire does not objectify or rob his followers their personhood.