

**The Lamp of the Body**  
*The Mind of Man in Orthodox thinking*  
by  
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*'The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light.'*  
(Matt.6:22)

There is a danger in being too systematic. Having systems is an obsession for a certain kind of mind. Political history is littered with people who believed in systems, imagining that they had power to make the rest virtuous by reason of having invented just the right system. It happens in the Christian religion as well: when the medium all too easily becomes the message itself, rather than a means to an end; when this *method* of praying becomes indispensable; when this theological *opinion* is expanded into heresy; when the *thinking* of our group becomes exclusive.

Bearing this in mind, I am reluctant to suggest that there is a system to be observed in our spiritual life. Systematic Theology (as an academic abstraction, separate from the living experience of the Church) in the Protestant or Roman Catholic sense is not really a feature of Christian Orthodoxy. We can, however, quite legitimately, observe the dynamics at work in our salvation, only, these dynamics are the movement of the Holy Spirit Himself and, as such, like the wind, *'bloweth where it listeth'*, and is by no means tied to any system.

The reason we are Christian at all is for our salvation. Having said that, I realise that the statement is open to a variety of interpretations. In this essay I shall attempt to uncover something of the Orthodox mind on what we mean by salvation, that is, the processes and dynamics that are involved without, I hope, erecting some form of rigid scaffolding for the construction of a house of cards.

Anyone who embarks upon the Christian life in any meaningful sense engages in a process or, as we might say, passes through a spiritual experience. If there is any spiritual life at all in the follower of Christ, then he is certain to discern the common threads and themes that are found in the spiritual lives of others as well. Unless ones religion is devoid of all spirituality and inner experience, (in which case, it is reduced merely to ritualised club-membership) any seeking after God in Christ begins at a fundamental repentance. This after all, is the first thing that Christ preaches when he begins his public ministry:

*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*

(Matt.4:17)

The English word *repent*, however, is a weak rendering of the Greek *Metanoia*. Repentance does suggest regret and sorrow; a feeling of guilt for past wrong and an intention of the will to amend ones ways – even if we know full well that, ever the recidivist, we will fall into the same sins again and again. This is all right as far as it goes but it is too backward looking. *Metanoia*, on the other hand, looks to a possible future, it is a vision of what we can become in Christ with a full and sad awareness of what we currently are. It implies more clearly a change of mind (Greek: *Nous*) – a radical and fundamental shift in the way in which we see things. If, for example, we sin through gluttony, this is not just the breaking say, of the rule during a fast, evoking feelings of guilt; it is not just harmful to our health or concupiscent indulgence in pleasure to the point of satiety. With *Metanoia*, we come

to understand not just *how* we have sinned against God but *why*; we understand the sin from the view of the love of God where we have found our delight not in Him who is the bread of life but rather in the creatures he has made. We have made a god of our belly rather than using food for its true purpose as nourishment and best of all, communion.

Metanoia cannot, of course, be a dead end: it must lead into a change not only in mind but also in action. Here, the spiritual struggle takes place within the will. Constantly, metanoia must bring us back to the question of our action, of our obedience to the commandments. Where the habits of sin become habitual, the struggle is a matter of force and will power and there is clearly a great element of struggle (asceticism) involved with any spiritual growth - for the kingdom is taken by 'violence' (Matt.11:12). Already this is becoming complicated for obedience, as a virtue, demands humility and virtues, like vices, belong to the heart. So we seem to be playing parallel games: on the one hand developing virtues and on the other, following commandments. In one sense, virtues are nothing beyond the keeping of the commandments yet commandments can be kept hypocritically. Virtues define the character within the heart and the good character is expressed in the very keeping of the commandments, as the good tree produces good fruit. Here, it must be stated that the purpose of keeping the commandments is to cleanse the heart, from which the passions that lead us to sin originate in the first place. In this way we set up a virtuous circle, where the greater our obedience to the commandments, the purer the heart becomes and the more the virtues can take root in us. This, though, is a work of synergy; none of our spiritual advance is established without the grace of God. For this reason we have a deep need of the holy mysteries, especially Confession and the Holy Gifts.

I should point out here that by referring to the keeping of the commandments, something quite specific is understood. Christianity is not a system of deontological ethics, where fixed moral precepts define good action. Neither does the word commandment refer directly to the 613 Mitzvot of the Jewish Torah, not even the Ten Commandments. Christ, as we are told in St. Matthew's gospel, came to fulfil, though in no way to abolish, the Commandments of Moses (Matt.5:17). It is rather that, in being fulfilled, they nevertheless remain in force, only to be superseded by Christ's own teaching on how they are to be put into practice. In short, the commandments we follow are recorded in the Sermon on the Mount [Matt.5 -7] and throughout the gospels: not only do we not commit murder, we are not even to nurse anger; not only do we not commit adultery, we are to root lust on any kind out of the heart. We do not keep the fourth commandment to observe Shabbat for Christ has kept the perfect seventh day rest in his tomb. Instead, we observe the first day of the week as the Lord's Day. As Orthodox Christians we clearly supersede the second commandment with its ban on images because in his incarnation, God himself gave us his image, robed in our flesh.

We might notice here how, drifting away from the mind of Christ at the Reformation, the Protestant reformers made a distinct return to an Old Testament understanding of deontological righteousness. It is significant that Thomas Cranmer, for example, reframed the Mass into a didactic service of Holy Communion, at the heart of which lay 'Receptionism', the doctrine that any sacramental action was entirely endocentric, occurring not within the actions of the community but entirely within the individual, thus inaugurating the shift of religion from the public to the private sphere. And at the introduction to his service, he placed the recitation of the Ten Commandments. In contrast, what do we find in the Typical Psalms of the Orthodox Liturgy but the Beatitudes. The contrast could not be starker: clearly,

Protestantism, in its iconoclast anxiety, becomes not so much a reform towards, as a reversion away from what Christ taught.

Following on from repentance and the cleansing of the heart through keeping the commandments, the soul is ready to stand before God. This means to be able to pray, as the Fathers say, *with the mind in the heart*. At first, this appears an obtuse idea; a concept that strikes the critical mind as a mere playing with words in order to create the illusion of profundity but actually signifying nothing. This is understandable at first until we grasp that the Fathers expressed their ideas on the firm foundation of their own experience, strictly avoiding the obscure and the arcane.

The underlying idea here is that the human mind, as any other 'part' of Man, is fallen. Indeed, it is the mind's schism with the heart that lies at the centre of the human condition itself. Here we might think that Man, made in the image of God (Gen1:26ff) and as God's *icon* in the physical universe, mirrors something of the creator, namely, that as God has his *essence* (what he is by nature i.e. divine), so has Man; and as God has his *energies* (his manifesting powers), so does Man. This follows the clear teaching of St. Gregory Palamas. Thus, in Man, the heart is his essence and the mind his energies. So in paradise, Adam could know God through his energies, directly and could contemplate in his heart the uncreated light of God. But given free will as the necessary corollary of being able to love or reject the Creator, Adam chose to disobey the commandment, imagining in his mind how his happiness might lie more in his own will rather than in the path that God had established for him. From hereon in, his heart is defiled and there is a separation from the mind: the mind enticed by concupiscent desire for created *things* rather than the creator; the heart, left alone, unsure of its purpose. Having not just fallen, but actually fallen apart, Man tumbles into this world from paradise, where he evolves into the creature alienated from God, yet, in Blessed Augustine's felicitous phrase, still possessing a sense that God has made us for Himself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Him.

From all this springs the idea that our fractured self must strive for its salvation in finding God, the only one who can repair what he has created. It becomes obvious, also, why there are so many religions and other systems of salvation in the market place of ideas. The human mind, no longer in contact with its heart, becomes schizoid, splitting in two directions: either into the beliefs and practices of natural religion or onto the discursive path of empirical reason. That latter has been triumphing slowly since the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with roots going back to the Humanist ideas of the Renaissance, if not before. Indeed, it often seems that the former has had constantly to adjust as the sum of scientific knowledge has advanced. It is for this reason that Orthodox Christianity sees itself as the ultimate stage of a continuous revelation of the Creator to Man, beginning with the call of Abraham. All natural religion, useful in that it points out the religious need in Man, nevertheless cannot save, for it is ultimately grounded in a misguided vision, a false evaluation of the natural world and its meaning. The second approach can only deal with the measurable phenomena of *things*, laws and dimensions, which can only miss the point and cannot ascribe meaning to our existence.

Revealed religion on the other hand, transmitted through Holy Tradition, is precisely the experience that confirms the truth about our condition and the means of our cure. Part of the Orthodox tradition clearly relates to the fundamental split in the soul of Man. In her teaching on prayer, the Orthodox Church analyses the deepening engagement of the soul: we start with the simple recitation of words, as

we might start a young child in prayer and progress to the firm engagement of the mind's attention and engagement. Finally, the one who prays lets the mind descend into the heart, where the continuous prayer of the heart, integrated with the mind, gives expression to the healing of the soul. This reunion may be true of solitary or liturgical prayer.

It is in this reunification of mind and heart that the mind for the first time can see clearly, like one waking from a dream; this is the true enlightenment for the soul begins to become once again, *like God* as well as bearing the image of God. And if to some this appears esoteric, even arcane, far removed from the simple faith of the gospels, then how else might we interpret John 1:9 which speaks of Christ coming into the world precisely for this purpose. So, just as the eye is the lamp of the body, now the mind can see creation as an integrated whole: not as mere physical phenomena, the accidental turn out of chance events. In his fallen state, modern and even post-modern Man especially, understands the creation in this limited way, where, through the serendipity of circumstance, nature appears to have given rise to an intelligent ape, albeit one capable of reflecting on the unlikelihood of his own temporal and temporary existence. But on the other hand, the enlightened mind is able to peer beyond the veil of natural phenomena. The integrated mind becomes capable of perceiving all things, reflecting not merely natural light but now effulgent with the light uncreated, the very energies of God Himself: the same that Moses saw in the Burning Bush; the same that the apostles beheld on Tabor. This enlightenment is potentially open to all who have been baptized, indeed it is inherent in the Orthodox rite of baptism where the candidate is specifically told, *'You are enlightened.'*

For most followers of Christ perhaps, this reintegration of the self must await the resurrection. The Orthodox Church has never taught that the only ones to be saved will be those who have realised in themselves the full mystical experience of repentance, the perfection of obedience, reunion of heart and mind and enlightenment. As St. Paul tells us, Christ will give life to our mortal bodies for the sake of the Spirit who dwells in us (Rom.8:11). For Salvation, our merciful God requires of us repentance and a striving to keep his commandments; he asks for faithfulness, not necessarily success. Even if all our thoughts and actions were fully in accord with God's will, what would we achieve without grace apart from a state of pride and hubris? (St. Luke 17:10) In the resurrection, therefore, our hearts and minds will be reunited; the spiritual will dwell with the physical and the physical will put on the spiritual (1 Cor.15: 53ff). It is then that we shall all know ourselves and know fully the shame of our sins, how for so long, they kept us from advancing. Yet, more to the point, we shall, for the first time also become aware of ourselves fully revealed as intended by the Creator, in the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom.8:21).

*'After the resurrection, when our bodies will be reunited to our souls, they will be incorruptible; and the carnal passions which disturb us now will not be present in those bodies; we shall enjoy a peaceful equilibrium in which the prudence of the flesh will not make war upon the soul; and there will no longer be that internal warfare wherein sinful passions fight against the law of the mind, conquering the soul and taking it captive by sin. Our nature then will be purified of all these tendencies, and one spirit will be in both, I mean in the flesh and in the spirit, and every corporeal affection will be banished from our nature.'*

St. Gregory of Nyssa