The theology of asceticism

etropolitan FILARET, Patriarchal esarch of Bielorussia

Bose, 9 September 2009

XVII Ecumenical Conference

Lecture by Metropolitan FILARET, *Patriarchal esarch of Bielorussia*

The meaning of asceticism consists not in developing the capabilities of the “old man”, but in being joined to the new humanity in Christ

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I sincerely thank the father superior Enzo Bianchi for the invitation to participate in the work of today’s 17th international forum on Russian and Orthodox spirituality. I wish to express sincere gratitude to all whose efforts during these seventeen years have made this forum possible ? a forum significant for our times and very important for Christ’s holy Church. I feel great joy at having the possibility to be here among you and to share some reflections on how the Orthodox tradition views the spiritual struggle.

“Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

With these words begins the divine liturgy in every Orthodox church. But every address to God should be preceded by this initial doxology, because, according to Nicholas Cabasilas, it “puts aside oneself and everything that is one’s and glorifies the Lord for the sake of the Lord Himself, for the sake of His power and glory”. Two reasons impel me to begin my reflections on the theology of asceticism with exactly this consideration of this God-bearing father. First of all, the aim of asceticism is dispassion. As we know, the acquisition of dispassion is defined as the highest virtue in many cultures, among them also in those that are in no wise connected with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Only in Christianity, however, the sources of dispassion are centered in the divine-human nature of the Son of God–Son of Man. That is, the aim of Christian asceticism is not the development of personal human capacities, but something entirely different. This aim is the seeking of ways of communion with God: man’s Creator, man’s Savior, man’s Comforter. For this reason the glorification of the Lord for the sake of the Lord Himself, for the sake of His power and glory comes as man’s peculiar response to the evangelical invitation: If you want to follow me, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me (Mt 16, 24).

Secondly, we have turned to the thought of St Nicholas Cabasilas because the subject of our reflections – the spiritual struggle – obligates the Christian to be particularly attentive with regard to one another and with regard to oneself. This spiritual, I would even say evangelical attention receives its ideal incarnation in the divine liturgy. In this divine service the Lord Pantocrator Himself gathers us into one whole. It is namely for the sake of this gathering, for the sake of this eucharistic uniting of the faithful that He gave His only-begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish, but might have eternal life (Jn 3, 16).

The unity of all and of each is not only compared to the harmony of members of one body, but becomes absolutely objective, because the holy Church is the Body of Christ, the Body of the Son of God, given to the world of men, for God so loved the world (Jn 3, 16). This is the Orthodox vision of the chief aim of asceticism and of the means commanded by God to achieve it. With this ideal as our point of reference, we will try with spiritual sobriety and with humility to draw nearer to the common Christian understanding of what is the spiritual struggle.

The Christological foundations of asceticism

One of the oldest testimonies about Jesus Christ as God and Man comes in the letter of St Paul to the Philippians: verses 2 to 11 of chapter 2. New Testament scholars are in agreement that this hymn to the Savior included by St Paul in his letter is a glorification that had been composed earlier of the Lord Jesus Christ.

For that reason, before reading this passage, I would like to stress the context in which it was placed by the Apostle. At the beginning of the chapter St Paul writes about the unity that Christians find in Christ when they love one another and humble themselves one before another: In humility let each one consider the other greater than himself (Php 2, 3). The foundation for this, according to the divinely inspired author, is that in us there should be the same sentiments as in Christ Jesus (Php 2, 5).

Thus, Christological considerations are preceded by a clear indication of their aim: we are supposed to conform ourselves to Christ. In addition, it seems to us that in the Apostle's words there is an invitation not only to follow Christ's moral example, but also to live Christ, as Paul himself lives him: For me to live is Christ and to die is gain (Php 1, 21). Here it is impossible not to underline the continuation of this thought in the personal eschatological plane: I have a desire to die and to be with Christ, because that is incomparably better". And then ? here it is, St Paul's self-denial: …to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sake (Php 1, 23–24).

And now, we pass from the context to what the Philippians are told about Christ, whose sentiments are to be shared by Christians, transfigured by asceticism. He, 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. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Php 2, 6–11).

This fragment has been many times the object of careful theological analysis. Today it is not my task to enter into discussion on the various aspects of interpretation of this hymn. I would like, however, to draw from this ancient christological account a theme that is essential for a better understanding of the problems posed by the theology of asceticism.

This theme is found in the reply to the question: why did God exalt Him and give Him a name above every other name? Why does every Christian people confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is for the glory of God the Father? In general terms it is a question here of why the humanity of Christ became worthy of divine glory.

I understand that this formulation smacks of the Nestorian separation of the "humanity of Jesus" from the "divinity of Christ". I would like nevertheless to leave the question just as it is, so that we can determine with the utmost clarity the essence of the "human nature" in the one "divine and human hypostasis" of Christ. And this is just what turns out to be a divine lesson of ascetical being.

In the text of the letter to the Philippians Christ's divine glory is described as the consequence of His humility and obedience to the very death, an excruciating and shameful death. St Paul lays particular stress on that.

His divine glory, however, is not only the consequence of humility. Not by chance does the passage at the beginning speak about the equality of Jesus Christ with God. Death on the cross, impossible for divine nature, is possible for human nature. And it is just for this that God sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin and condemned sin in the flesh (Rm 8, 3), as St Paul explained this mystery to the Romans.

Thus, the death on the cross of the Son of Man becomes the death of the deathless Logos Himself. We can draw a little nearer to the mystery of the death of Him who is deathless, to the mystery of the ascetical struggle of the passionless God-Man by listening attentively to the words of the prayer in Gethsemane: My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will (Mt 26, 39).

Here can be heard the "I want" of human nature, here breathes the "possible" of human freedom, and here also the "You" of the self-humbling of the God-Man. In this self-humbling of God nature is healed and the freedom of all humankind, ill with sin and suffering from passions, is renewed. In this ascetical humility of the Son of God the freedom of man's will and his natural being find the possibility of eternal deathlessness before the Face of the Creator.

The obedience and humility of Jesus Christ appear in Gethsemane not simply as the self-humbling of the Son of Man before the Father's Divinity. Such utter humility and total obedience are the very mode of being of the Eternal Logos. And here in the garden of Gethsemane on the night of His arrest came the predetermined time when the Word of God carried them out by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form.

In this way, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every name, because the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth was realized in full measure, bared before the all-seeing eye of God.

Asceticism as life in Christ

We must now interpret the significance that the divinization of Christ's human nature has for Christians.

The first step that unites us with Christ not abstractly, but in fact, we take in the sacrament of baptism. The letter of St Paul to the Romans, read during the celebration of this sacrament, says: We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life

(Rm 6, 4).
In these words, as well as in the threefold immersion of the person being baptized we see an indication that an active joining to Christ occurs through our personal participation in His death and resurrection. Further on the Apostle develops this thought: So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rm 6, 11). Joined to the Body of Christ through the sacraments of baptism and chrismation we are called to assimilate and to develop the gifts of the Holy Spirit that we have received. In this consists the meaning of the asceticism of repentance, metánoia in Greek, which means “change of mind”. Our old man (Rm 6, 6) in repentance transforms his mind, so as to have the right to say together with St Paul, We have the mind of Christ (1Cor 2, 16).

From this it follows that the meaning of asceticism consists not in developing the capabilities of the “old man”, but in being joined to the new humanity in Christ. The way to this humanity lies through the struggle with the passions, which are the false essence of the “old man”. Repentance is perceived as death in connection with the necessity to renounce the way of life, the form of being of the “old man”, who in the final analysis is closed in upon himself. I believe that it is just to define such a way of being, such a form of life as individualistic, all the more so if we take into consideration the meaning of the Latin word individuum: indivisible, individual. The source of individualism resides in man’s desire himself to be god, apart from the Creator; it arises from the craving to subject the world to oneself rather than to stand in a defined hierarchical order ordained by God; it is expected to relieve the fear of losing one’s personal power in the face of the necessity of sharing it with other souls placed in the same order.

The “old man” defends himself from this fear by his pride. This is the very passion that is the tie that gathers into one the swarm of all the other passions and forms in the individual’s consciousness the illusion of equality with God. In such a condition man is not able to rejoice in the truth (1Cor 13, 6), that is, to love another human being. After all, for him another human being is always a threat to his own sovereignty. In this prideful system the coordinate “another” becomes an object of envy, irritation, and hate, feelings that among the spiritually blind not infrequently are viewed as the manifestation of a strong character. In placing the Church on a solid foundation, the Lord revealed another logic of inter-personal relations. I call to mind the words of the prayer in the divine liturgy for the fraction of the Lamb, which to my mind clearly display this logic:

The Lam of God is fragmented and divided, He who is fragmented by remains indivisible, always eaten but never consumed, He who rather sanctifies those who communicate.

Here we see the refutation of individualism, for which sharing is like death. At the same time there is here a paradox: the Lamb of God is fragmented and at the same time remains indivisible, He is eaten but is no in wise consumed. This is the paradox of sacrifice, the paradoxical character of readiness to sacrifice oneself as a mentality and a way of life. Giving up, thus, becomes the source of receiving, and dying the source of life. In following this logic we refrain from pandering to one’s own “I” in whatever way such indulgence may be expressed: in the form of interior experiences or in the striving for bodily comfort. The sense of this abstinence is the Lord Himself: we deny ourselves something for the sake of freeing a place for Gods grace. This abstinence together with the will’s aspiration towards Christ is called fasting, which, according to St John Climacus, is “the origin of dispassion, the forgiveness of sins, the gates of paradise, and heavenly delight”.

Fasting, however, will bear fruit only when it is joined with discernment. Discernment, like a sharp spear, must cut off the passions and reveal to the repentant soul its true condition.
We may say that by fasting we bring our flesh as a rational sacrifice to God. In Russian the word “flesh” (*plot’*) has the same root as the adjective “dense” (*plotnyj*), which in our context we may interpret as impenetrable to light. Thus, the dismemberment of the fleshly man with the spear of fasting with discernment leads to rendering the flesh penetrable to the light of divine grace. Then the words of the Sinai elder John Climacus about fasting as “a lamp in the darkness, the return to the right path of those who have lost their way, the illumination of those who have been blinded” take on a particular meaning.

Separating good and evil in our soul, we can gather the soul together in a new way. This newness will affect even the passions as forces of our soul. The passions, after all, appear as evil and bring suffering when they arise from man’s sinful nature. They can and should, however, have a good direction for their activity. Not by chance there exists in ascetical literature the expression “passionless passion”. By this is signified that aspiration of men to God that is not clouded by pride.
Just as the offering of a sacrifice is accompanied by the shedding of blood, so the spiritual sacrificial offering is accompanied by the shedding of tears for oneself and for the world. The fate of the world and of man are mutually bound by such inscrutable ties, such slender threads and heavy chains that no one except God can grasp their all-embracing essence. In dividing oneself in an ascetical sacrificial offering to God, hence, the individual meets the Risen God, who in an embrace has opened wide before him His pierced hands and turns to him with the words: you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master (Mt 25, 21). The master’s joy is the joy of resurrection and immortality, it is eternity, shared by the Creator with all: an eternity in which, as St Paul says, Christ is all in all (Col 3, 11). Asceticism, thus, turns out not to be the withdrawal of men from the world. Through asceticism man is joined to Christ, whose human nature is the same as the nature of each one of us. This means that the joining to Christ of one man has in its perspective the unity in Christ’s Body of all transfigured humanity.

Thus, the words of St Seraphim of Sarov: “Acquire a peaceful spirit, and thousands around you will be saved” have not only a moral, but also a profound ontological meaning.
The invitation by Nicholas Cabasilas to glorify the Lord for his own sake again brings us to this: asceticism is not in itself the aim of human existence, but a way leading from humanity to humanity-divinity. The evangelical triad “way, truth, and life”, thus, is made evident in our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, to whom be glory for all ages. Amen.

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