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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

May you always be consciously aware of the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love and mercy of God the Father, and communion with the Life-Giving Holy Spirit dwelling within your heart!

LUMINOUS DARKNESS: THE APOTHATIC WAY

Apophatism: From the Greek verb *apophanai*, “to speak out or to deny.” Apophatic is usually translated as “negative” in contrast to *cataphatic* theology, which is one of positive assertions about God in relationship to us human beings, drawn chiefly through Sacred Scripture and the use of human rational knowledge. Apophatism denies that such positive knowledge is our ONLY human knowledge about God. More importantly it asserts that there is a positive, experiential knowledge in the mystical order, an infused knowledge given by God to those who are “clean of heart” for they shall “see” or experience God in “luminous darkness.”

Cataphatic: From Greek *kata*, “positive,” “according to,” and *phanero*, “to assert” or “affirm.” It refers to the positive theology that the Eastern Fathers derive from the perfections we find in creatures; from this limited knowledge we are able to know something about the infinite perfections of God.

Divine Energies: God in his essence is unknowable by us human beings and is immutable. Yet God as Trinity freely consents to communicate with us in his uncreated energies of love. These are not merely God’s actions. God-Trinity is one nature yet three distinct persons, communicating each of themselves in the unity of perfect and eternal love that allows God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to give us not only created beings, but to give themselves gratuitously as primary grace, free gifts of the divine persons in their active energies immanently at work within each creature.

Perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of Eastern Christian mysticism is its apophatic quality. Similar to Far Eastern mysticism, Eastern Christian mysticism insists that the highest union, the infused union in which God speaks to us directly about Himself, is not achieved in any conceptual knowledge, but in an immediate, experiential knowledge wherein he opens himself to us. We can never come to this knowledge through any mere rational concept, through any discursive method of our own. God, purely and simply and in his transcendence, reveals himself to us when and how he wishes to do so. After years of our own preparation and cooperation through continued purification, God reveals himself to us. In utter humility before the awesome Source of all being, we are so open to his presence as to see him in everything and to see ourselves as “a participator of God’s own nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

A KNOWING BY NOT KNOWING

Against the heresy of Eunomius in the fourth century, the great Cappadocian theologians Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa developed an apophatic theology as a necessary corrective against Eunomius’s teaching that the essence of God could

be clearly known by us human beings. This is not merely the *via negationis* of Saint Thomas Aquinas, who, with the Cappadocians and all other true Christian theologians down through the centuries, insists on a negative theology to correct the affirmative theology that attributes perfections to God. Such a method is necessary to correct the manner of speaking in human concepts which never can exhaust the infinite perfections found in God. Such theology attempts to speak of God by what he is “not,” rather than by what he is.

For the Cappadocians, God is superior to all other essences. The biblical description of God, the “One” who is, expresses the divinity that is infinite and above all not knowable on the part of finite creatures. God is the only truly authentic being that is opposed to all other nonbeing.

The “father” of Christian mysticism, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, opened theology to the positive elements of the apophatic approach. He developed in his writings a mystical theology that would form the basis of that dialectical, mystical experience of God, a knowing, by not knowing, that Pseudo-Dionysius evolved and bequeathed to Saint Maximus the Confessor, to Scotus Erigena, to the fourteenth-century Rhenish and Flemish mystics such as Meister Eckhart, and Jan Ruysbroeck, and to the anonymous writer of the fourteenth-century English classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

Such a dialectical, mystical apophatic theology holds that the “not” is the beginning of a knowledge of God by experience. It is based on the impossibility of adequately defining God by human concepts, but not on the impossibility of somehow knowing him. Such an approach is based, not on an absolute no, but on a relative no, a *pas encore*, to quote the Russian theologian Cyprian Kern.

This is a question of true theological knowledge, but it is more in the experience of God as giving himself to the repentant mystic who approaches God in a state of brokenness and interior poverty of spirit. Vladimir Lossky describes the knowledge of God beyond all conceptualization that Saint Gregory of Nyssa called “theognosis,” knowledge taught by God: “Having failed to recognize the One it desires among the intelligible and incorporeal beings, and abandoning all that it finds, it recognizes the One it is seeking as the only One he does not comprehend.... Union with God is presented to the area where knowledge is suppressed and love alone remains—or rather, where *gnosis* becomes *agape*.”

We must note that the overwhelming infinity of God is nevertheless a presence of God as experienced by the contemplative. The modality of recognizing this presence is, however, a new and higher form of knowledge that surpasses the powers and experiences of human beings. Thus Saint Gregory resorts to such paradoxical terms as “luminous darkness,” “sober inebriation,” etc. He describes this presence without seeing in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*: “The Bride is surrounded with the divine night in which the Bridegroom comes near without showing himself...but by giving the soul a certain sense of his presence while fleeing from clear knowledge.”

TRANSCENDENCE AND PRESENCE MEET

This is the positive dialectical (the art or practice of arriving at the truth by the exchange of logical arguments) side to the apophatic theology of the Eastern Christian Fathers. The Incomprehensible One is present and is experienced by the Christian. It is this very presence that is spoken of. It is that very transcendence that brings darkness to our human reasoning powers. The emphasis is not on our incapacity to know God, but rather on the overwhelming infinity of God that is nevertheless present.

Presence and transcendence are one in apophatic theology. In paradoxical fashion, the closer one gets to union with God, the more blinding God becomes. This is not a matter of our

knowledge of God becoming more abstruse, but of the nature of God itself becoming more present as a gift of the Holy Spirit to the pure and humble of heart. That presence brings to us the realization of the absolute awesomeness of the goal of our earthly journey...Theosis! Divinization! (**theosis**: the Greek word, coined by Saint Clement of Alexandria in the third century, used to describe the process of divinization whereby we are able to become gods by grace and our cooperation (2 Peter 1:4).

Saint Gregory of Nyssa describes this as a going beyond oneself, as in ecstasy, a state similar to drunkenness, sleep, and even passion. He speaks of Abraham in ecstasy before the "God who transcends all knowable symbols." Having purified himself and studied all that there was to know of the divine attributes (the cataphatic, or positive approach), Abraham finds faith in the transcendent God. It is this that is ecstasy: "And so, after this ecstasy, which comes upon him as a result of these lofty visions, Abraham returned once more to his human frailty. I am, he admits, dust and ashes, mute, inert, incapable of explaining rationally the Godhead that my mind has seen.

After purification and study, God comes to Abraham in faith, and this carries Abraham beyond himself in that he sees himself as nothing and inert. This ecstasy is really brought on from outside. Passivity is this strange activity. Purification and illumination do not bring on ecstasy, but rather faith alone makes possible the experience of God coming to Abraham. The coming of the vision is what makes Abraham realize that he is nothing before God. The incomprehensibility of God overawes and mutes the fleshly mind and senses.

It is especially in Saint Gregory's *Life of Moses* that we have a full presentation of the soul's journey up the mountain to meet God in the darkness of unknowing. In this work, Gregory develops the meaning of darkness. Although it does mean that the Christian possesses an incapacity to know God intimately, it primarily means that God is absolute unfathomable, the fullness of being, and we can "understand" this only in the darkening of our controlled faculties of imagination and intellection.

Like Moses' ascent to Mount Sinai, the movement of the individual toward enlightenment begins in the darkness of sin. He sees a ray of light of God that beckons him to leave the foothills and start climbing upward. The higher states are degrees of his entrance into the darkness of God's incomprehensibility. Gregory states this in his work on the Cantic of Canticles: "Our initial withdrawal from wrong and erroneous ideas of God is a transition from darkness to light. Next comes a closer awareness of hidden things, and by this the soul is guided through sense phenomena to the world of the invisible. And this awareness is a kind of cloud, which overshadows all appearances, and slowly guides and accustoms the soul to look toward what is hidden. Next the soul makes progress through all these stages and goes on higher, and as she leaves behind all that human nature can attain, she enters within the secret chamber of the divine knowledge and here she is cut off on all sides by the divine darkness. Now she leaves outside all that can be grasped by sense or by reason. And the only thing left for her contemplation is the invisible and the incomprehensible."

It should be noted that for Gregory of Nyssa the movement is not from darkness to light solely, but it is a continued process from darkness to light and then to shadow and again to light.

EPECTASIS: LOVE ALWAYS GROWING

Epectasis: Greek for "stretching out," as Saint Paul uses the word "I *stretch out* for what is still to come" (Philippians 3:13). Gregory of Nyssa builds a Christian mysticism of a process of ever-continuing growth, both in this life and in the life to come as we grow "from glory to glory."

A key doctrine of Gregory of Nyssa regarding the apophatic dialectical movement from darkness to light, from absence to presence of God, from absolute transcendence of God to his immanence is what he calls epectasis. This means a “stretching out,” an exceeding of one’s level of attained love of God, based on Saint Paul’s statement: “My brethren, I do not consider that I have reached the goal; but this one thing I do know, forgetting those things which are behind, I strive for those things which are before me. I press toward the goal to receive the prize of victory of God’s highest calling through Jesus Christ. Therefore let those of you who are perfect think about these things; and if you reason in any other way, God will reveal even that to you. Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same path and with one accord” (Philippians 3:13-16). The love of God is a force in us human beings expanding our being and making us infinitely capable of possessing God in an unending process of greater and greater growth, both in this life through contemplation and also in the life to come. Gregory describes true perfection as “never to stop growing toward what is better and never to place any limit on perfection.” **“Progress itself, is Perfection.”**

The reasons he gives for this continued growth are first that Beauty, God Himself, is infinite. The second is that the Beautiful is of such a nature that the desire for it can never be fully satisfied. Gregory writes: “The soul that looks up toward God and conceives that good desire for his eternal beauty constantly experiences an ever new yearning for that which lies ahead and her desire is never given its full satisfaction.”

This stretching forth to possess more and more the Unpossessable is described in antinomical terms. For Gregory, this unrest and the stretching forth to higher perfection and greater assimilation into the Absolute, this motion toward greater being, is the same as stability. Motion for Gregory means more than moving from one stage of perfection to another. The very transcendence of God is the reason that perfection itself is constant motion. God is eternally at rest; yet he exists in an outgoing motion of love to share himself with the other. Thus after the contemplative soul has been purified of all taint of self-absorption, God attracts it continually to: “...keep rising ever higher and higher, stretching with its desire for heavenly things to those that are ahead (Philippians 3:13), as Saint Paul tells us, and thus it will always continue to soar ever higher...and thus the soul moves ceaselessly upwards always reviving its tension for its onward flight by means of the progress it has already realized. Indeed, it is only spiritual activity that nourishes its force by exercise; it does not slacken its tension by action, but rather increases it.”

It was to the mysterious personage that history has called Dionysius the Areopagite that these insights of Gregory of Nyssa would be handed down in the famous small treatise called *The Mystical Theology*. In this treatise, apophatic theology reaches its peak in transforming theology into a contemplation of the mysteries of revelation. Mystical theology is not a branch of theology dealing with the aspects of higher contemplation and hence applicable only to a few gifted persons.

By placing the accent so completely on the unknowability of God’s essence without yielding to agnosticism (a refusal to allow a real knowledge of God), by emphasizing a higher knowledge attainable by human beings as a gift from God, the Eastern Fathers, whose doctrine Pseudo-Dionysius aptly summarizes, saw theology never as abstract and working through concepts, but as contemplative. It raises the mind to those realities which pass all understanding. Lossky writes: “It is not a question of suppressing the antinomy by adapting dogma to our understanding, but of a change of heart and mind enabling us to attain to the contemplation of the reality which reveals itself to us as it raises us to God, and unites us, according to our several capacities, to Him.”

In a classical passage, Pseudo-Dionysius describes the mystical side of true apophatic theology: “Nevertheless, he [Moses] did not attain to the Presence of God himself; he saw not

him (for he cannot be looked upon), but the place where he dwells. And this I take to signify that the divinest and highest things seen by the eyes or contemplated by the mind are but the symbolical expressions of those that are immediately beneath him who is above all. Through these, his incomprehensible Presence is manifest upon those heights of his Holy Places, that then it breaks forth, even from that which is seen and that which sees, and plunges the mystic into the Darkness of Unknowing, when all perfection of understanding is excluded, and he is enwrapped in that which is altogether intangible and noumenal (a posited object or event as it appears in itself independent of perception by the senses), being wholly absorbed in him, who is beyond all, and in none else (whether himself or another); and through the inactivity of all his reasoning powers is united by knowing nothing he knows that which is beyond his knowledge.”

A LIVING THEOLOGY

In a correct apophatic theology there is no opposition to *cataphatic*, or positive theology. It encourages a positive theology expressed through rational concepts, but it constantly tells positive theologians that the expressions used by them are not really the way such and such a perfection or relation exists in God. It stimulates them to open up to the mystery of a living contact with the immanent God, who comes in a living experience.

The apparent conflicts between a speculative theology and that of a more mystical, experiential nature are resolved or made “livable” in the Divine Liturgy of the Church, the experiential drama of dogma that takes the faithful into the heart of mystery to meet the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob beyond any concepts. “No language knows how to praise you, O God, worthily and the mind, vaster than the world, becomes dizzy in celebrating you.” During the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, the priest prays the first antiphon prayer: “O Lord our God, Whose *might and power* are beyond description, Whose *glory* surpasses all understanding, Whose *mercy* is without limit, and Whose *love for mankind* is beyond expression; O Master, in Your kindness look down upon us and this holy church with divine pity and forgiveness, and bestow upon us and those praying with us Your abundant mercies and compassion.”

Dogmatic, speculative theology can tell us the distinction between substance and accidents and work out for us a **theory** of transubstantiation, but it is only in the immediate experience of celebrating the Eucharist and in receiving the Most Pure Body and Precious Blood of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ that we come into a resolution of the antinomies of how eternity and time-space (created and uncreated, divine and human, corruptible and incorruptible) meet. We experience how divinity can be joined with humanity in the person of the Theotokos by the power of the Holy Spirit, how Jesus Christ is both perfect true God and perfect true man, eternally in glory and yet always coming into our lives to touch our human bodies with his glorious Body and Blood, how we are the Church, with many members and yet each member uniquely loved by God. We wait for the full “eschaton” to come, and yet in the Eucharist it has begun. We are granted the Future Kingdom...Now...in the present moment!

For one who has experienced the living theology so present in the Eastern Orthodox Holy Week and Pascha services, the reconciliation of cataphatic and apophatic theology is an experience that brings together antinomies. It allows us human beings to live in the power of such antinomies, which function at the heart of our most transcendent human experiences. On the Vigil of Pascha, when the church is flooded with lighted candles and ascending clouds of fragrant incense and the priest sings out, “Christ is Risen! He is truly Risen!” one experiences the new and complete victory of Christ over death. Jesus Christ has destroyed “death by death.” The Christian can find it easier to believe also that the same “divinizing process” has

already begun in his or her life and in the lives of all those sisters and brothers praying together.

Not only do we believe it to be possible, as when we sing the Nicene-Constantinople Creed each Sunday (The Day of the Lord), but we know it through experience, through our liturgical and ecclesiastical situation and circumstances. “The God-Man lies in Sabbath repose and yet is risen. Creatures lament, the sun hides its rays, stars are lightless, but for us, this Sabbath is blessed among all since Christ sleeps, to arise on the third day.”

After the priest concludes the Proskomedia, he prays: “While in the tomb with Your Body, and in Hades with Your Soul, and in Paradise with the penitent thief, yet since You are God You are also enthroned with the Father and the Holy Spirit O Christ, filling all things, because nothing holds You bound. O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth; Who are in all places and fill all things, treasury of blessings and giver of Life, come and dwell within us and cleanse us from every blemish and save our souls, O Blessed One. Glory to God in the Highest and on Earth peace, good will towards mankind. O Lord Open My Lips and My Mouth shall declare Your praise!”

CLARIFICATIONS OF APOPHATIC THEOLOGY

There are several points that need to be stressed that can highlight the main characteristics of true apophatic theology that could have great impact on our theology today.

1. Apophatic theology does not of itself suffice, for it is merely a negation of the knowledge of beings and is not yet a knowledge of God.

2. The knowledge which the Christian has of God is spiritual and existential, not conceptual. “It is not to any formal criterion, defined by Aristotle, that one owes the knowledge that God is unknowable, but through a religious experience, which may be in part due to a true understanding of beings, but which equally constitutes a revelation of the living God.”

The existential ways in which one may “know” God are the keeping of all his commandments and above all through prayer. “Prayer offers [this union]...being the link between the rational creature and God.”

3. Such knowledge, therefore, is not based on a split between the senses and the intellect, as in a platonic view, but rather between the created and the uncreated. Saint Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century summarized the traditional Orthodox teaching of the early Greek Fathers on apophatic experience of the incomprehensible God. He must be viewed as a holistic theologian who saw the imageness of God, not only in the human intellect, but in the whole person, made up of body, soul, and spirit relationships. He writes: “The word “man” is not applied to either soul or body separately, but to both together, since together they have been created in the image of God.” Man is an “embodied being.”

4. The knowledge of God which the Christian possesses in Christ is a direct vision, and not, as Palamas’s adversary Barlaam and his followers held, a vision mediated by angels. Palamas, contrary to a teaching that seemingly was credited to Pseudo-Dionysius, namely, that angels mediated human knowledge of God, taught that the coming of Christ had inverted the natural order of the universe (in which angels served as mediators between human beings and God) and had substituted in its place a totally new hierarchy wherein human beings surpassed angels and had a direct vision of God in Christ.

5. This knowledge, finally, is no mere “symbolic” knowledge, but a real knowledge of God as he is in himself. Against the “intellectual symbolism” which Barlaam held to explain the mediated knowledge that we have of God, Palamas held that God was present in Christ. He himself had broken down the separation between the “up there” and the “down here,” and

Christ had made it possible for God to be forever present in our material world. In Palamas's Incarnational view of history, Christ himself was the symbol uniting us (all humanity) and God. It was Christ and his Holy Spirit who illuminated the hesychastic mystic. Jesus Christ, for Palamas, is the "sacrament" of God making God present to us in a direct knowing and experiencing of God.

In next month's *Inscape* we will turn to the divine energies whereby the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit, touch us human beings and communicate themselves to us in a real, direct way that still preserves the unknowability of God in his essence. It is in Palamas's articulation of this dialectical antinomy that we can gain great insight for our modern theology. In our personalistic world of today we yearn to encounter God immediately, person-to-person, through a knowledge that is beyond all concepts. We have seen how Palamas and the other Greek Fathers maintained that God is in himself, in his "essence," unknowable and "nonparticipable," while at the same time God is in his manifestations or "energies" knowable to us. Archbishop Basil Krivoshein summarizes this apophatic approach to true experiential knowledge: "The divine substance is incommunicable and yet is, in a certain sense, communicated; we partake of the nature of God and yet at the same time we do not partake of it at all. So we must maintain both [affirmations] and lay them down as the standard of piety."

"It is proper and just to sing to You, to bless You, to praise You, to worship You in every place of Your Kingdom. For You are God ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, ever existing yet ever the same..." [Prayer at the Anaphora of Saint John Chrysostom Divine Liturgy]

May Christ our True God illuminate our hearts with the pure light of His divine knowledge!
Father John Michael Zboyovski