

CONTEMPORARY TRADITIONALIST  
ORTHODOX THOUGHT



by  
Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna,  
Bishop Auxentios of Photiki,  
and Archimandrite Akakios

CENTER FOR TRADITIONALIST  
ORTHODOX STUDIES

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## Chapter 5

### SAINT GREGORY PALAMAS ON THE HESYCHASTS<sup>1</sup>

*by Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna  
and Bishop Auxentios of Photiki*

In the Orthodox Church, we set aside the second Sunday of Great Lent to honor the memory of the fourteenth-century Archbishop of Thessalonica, Saint Gregory Palamas. We laud this miracle-working Saint as a pillar of the Church (“Εκκλησίας τὸ στήγιμα”) and as a great luminary (“Ορθοδοξίας ὁ φωστήρ”) in our hymns. And again on November 14, so important is his contribution to the exposition of the mystical tradition, the Church calls to memory this remarkable Saint. Yet Saint Gregory is not well known to the common pious, and his study by theologians is scant in comparison to the tomes that have been dedicated to other Church Fathers. In Greece, it was not until the recent past that anyone showed any critical attention toward a collection of the Saint’s writings. And, greatly owing to his rejection by the West and the proverbial “Western captivity” of many Orthodox theologians, some Greek theologians have only a rudimentary familiarity with Saint Gregory and his immense importance to Orthodox thought. (Happily, the state of Palamite studies in the Slavic traditions is better developed and more profound.<sup>2</sup>) It is no surprise, then, that considerations of Saint Gregory Palamas in the

<sup>1</sup> “Saint Gregory Palamas on the Hesychasts” originally appeared in *Diakonia*, Vol. xv, No. 3 (1980), pp. 220–228. Reprinted by permission.

<sup>2</sup> Thus, the author was pleased to see that the late Archbishop Averky of Syracuse, Rector of the Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Seminary in Jordanville, New York, used Palamite imagery and references in his awe-inspiring sermons. See, for example, “What is Orthodoxy?”—a sermon by His Eminence, in *Orthodox Life*, Vol. xxxvi, No. 3 (May–June 1976), pp. 1–5.

English language are limited and few.<sup>3</sup> To the Orthodox in America, Saint Gregory Palamas remains largely unknown and the object of a liturgical commemoration void of that understanding insight by which the seed of worship blossoms fully into a flower of Divine knowledge.

What we wish to do in this short essay is introduce a few of the thoughts of Saint Gregory Palamas regarding Hesychasm or the monastic tradition by which the mind (νοῦς) is cleansed, enlightened, and perfected, as this process is characterized in the *Philokalia*.<sup>4</sup> In so doing we will turn to the richness of the original Greek, not wishing in this endeavor to present a systematic Palamite theology (for what is systematic is too often artificial and begets the limitations to which we have alluded [note 3]), but rather simply hoping to familiarize the reader with some of the pertinent, trenchant observations of Saint Gregory. To this end,

<sup>3</sup> The most familiar English-language volume on Saint Gregory Palamas is, of course, [Father] John Meyendorff, *A Study of [Saint] Gregory Palamas* (London: Faith Press, 1974), which originally appeared in French. Its limitations are numerous, and Father Meyendorff's misunderstanding of many Palamite concepts and his errors in translation have been brilliantly discussed by Father John Romanides, particularly in the second part of his essay; see The Rev. John S. Romanides, "Notes on the Palamite Controversy and Related Topics—II," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. ix, No. 2 (Winter 1963–1964), pp. 225–270. The Reverend Professor Georges Florovsky also dedicates the last chapter of his *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, Vol. 1 of his *Collected Works*, ed. Richard S. Haugh (Vaduz: Bichervertriebsanstalt, 1987) to a consideration of Saint Gregory and the Patristic Tradition. Unfortunately, the chapter is very short and Father Florovsky, with an acute awareness of the West's unfamiliarity with Palamite thought, proceeds with such caution in presenting the Saint's "daring" thought that the impact of Saint Gregory's thought is almost totally lost. Moreover, in comparison to the other chapters in the book, there is a dearth of primary source references. A few other texts are also available in English, but again, these presentations are also not free from the same misunderstandings and errors that mark the better-known studies mentioned above.

<sup>4</sup> The *Φιλοκαλία* (*Добротолюбіе* in Russian) is a collection of the writings of the Eastern Fathers on the spiritual practices by which the aspirant achieves θεώσις (divinization), ultimate mystical perfection, and union with God.

we will summarize the words of the Saint in a short essay entitled, “On the Sacred Hesychasts” (“Ὑπὲρ τῶν Ἱερῶς Ἠσυχάζοντων”).<sup>5</sup> In this one small example of his works, we find that Saint Gregory, though profound and often demanding of us in his thought great attention and care, touches on issues of contemporary import with such clarity and brilliance that we almost unconsciously proclaim his outstanding beauty for the spiritual aspirant (“τῶν μοναστῶν ἡ καλλονή”).

In our spiritually barren times, we lack those great “stars” of holy asceticism by which spiritual strugglers in the past, both monastics and pious laymen, guided their ascetic practices. We lack the perfect examples to emulate and therefore often lose sight of the very goals of our endeavors. So it is that we hear more and more often the accusation that monastic asceticism presupposes a kind of hate of the body, a denial of the very substance of the flesh. Having lost so many times the very purposes of our acts, we the religious give by our ignorance and our misguided (or unguided) efforts substance to such accusations. And, sadly enough, many of us begin to embrace such thought and abandon, for want of justification, the ascetic life on the grounds that it just might, indeed, involve an unconscionable rejection of the very flesh which Saint Paul calls the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> But this great confusion comes to us because we do not essentially understand the relationship between the body and the mind and because, by tradition in the West and by improper learning in the East,<sup>7</sup> we have

<sup>5</sup> *Φιλοκαλία*, Vol. iv (Athens: Aster, 1977), pp. 121–131. Translations of some of the writings of Saint Gregory have appeared in English, including a translation of Saint Gregory’s essay on the Hesychasts *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, trans. E. Kadloubovsky and G. E. H. Palmer (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1954). Most of these translations are very inadequate, and the Kadloubovsky and Palmer translation omits much of the original text and uses a vocabulary that more often than not obscures the depth of the Greek text.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 6:19.

<sup>7</sup> Father Romanides notes that the eastern “mystic” (a term used here with caution) does not seek a life of contemplation as such and does not seek visions.

tended to seek, outside of our own bodies and in a frenzied searching for the ecstatic, Divine knowledge, setting aside and reviling the immediacy of the flesh. And bound up with this tragic process is the tendency, when the ecstatic is not attained or is even unsatisfying, to cast aside ascetic discipline as abnormal.

In Saint Gregory's essay on the Hesychasts, he decisively points out for us the importance of the body and its quintessential rôle in the cleansing of the mind and the attainment of perfection. In so doing, we begin to understand the ascetic life (with its common disciplines of fasting, prayer, vigils, *etc.*), not as a means merely of casting off the body, but of preparing it for the interaction with the mind that forms the foundation of spiritual enlightenment. In Saint Gregory, we find that perfect harmony of mind and body in which ascetic practice becomes, not a negative struggle, but a positive instrument. Although Saint Gregory's essay is specifically aimed at answering certain objections to the Hesychastic method,<sup>8</sup> we find these fruitful answers shining with brilliant hope to the modern monk, as though they were written specifically in response to the problem of mind and body as we have posed it above.

Rather, he simply emphasizes *πρᾶξις* (ascetic practice). And while there is, for the eastern "mystic," an ecstatic union with God, this is not the ecstatic experience of the West (as championed by Saint Gregory's famous adversary, Barlaam the Calabrian), in which the intellect is raised up and beyond the body; see Romanides, "Palamite Controversy—II," pp. 225–232 *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> Many of Saint Gregory's writings (such as his essay on the Hesychasts) were directed to people who grossly misunderstood the Hesychasts and thought that they were teaching a method by which Divine Grace could be breathed by the nose ("διὰ τῶν μυκτῆρων") and by which mere bodily functions could effect Divine union. Interestingly, the exchange between Saint Gregory and his detractors represents the development of two "mystical traditions," as it were, one emphasizing the instrumental importance of the body, the other considering the body an impediment to spiritual vision. Most of the detractors adhered to the very concepts of the body that led to the unbalanced notion of the relationship between body and mind of the less-productive monastic traditions, the fruits of which we see in much of the contemporary demise of ascetic life.

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“This collection of essays provides an important independent perspective on a number of central aspects of Christian thought, including the relationship of humanity to God, the Scriptures, the Sacraments, Christian tradition, and mysticism. The book, written from a traditional orthodox point of view, dispels some Western misunderstandings of the Eastern Church, and it will be read with profit by Roman Catholic and Protestant, as well as by Eastern Orthodox, readers.”

*Jeffrey Burton Russell  
Professor of History  
University of California,  
Santa Barbara*

“All who meet...[the author]...must be impressed with his deep spirituality and broadmindedness, which are indeed reflected in this book. Generally, he lays great stress on tradition and moderation, both dominant traits of Orthodoxy.”

*The Reverend Mother Alexandra  
Orthodox Monastery of the Transfiguration  
(formerly Her Royal Highness,  
Ileana, Princess of Romania)*