

## BEAUTY AND THE GOSPEL

By Aidan Hart

*While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see the city full of idols ... Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new ... Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you."*

(Acts 17:16,22-23)

How does the Church declare the good news in an age full of idols and idle ideas? How does it communicate in a language whose vocabulary is being debased by profanity? This was the problem facing Saint Paul at the Areopagus, and which faces Christians today.

Communication assumes that a word which we use means reasonably the same to our listener or reader as it does to us. But so often this is not the case when we speak about God to the secular world. Even the word "God" itself has for the secular man lost its true colour, zest and fullness. The word no longer evokes for him the One who is the Source and Sustainer of the beautiful universe, the Lover of mankind, the One who sprinkles the heavens with stars and says, "This is good and beautiful," the One who is so great that He can become small. Instead, the modern pagan is likely to associate the word God with a distant, impersonal and rather bland cosmic clock maker; and even this prerogative as Artificer of the universe is being rapidly usurped by that demigod called evolution: the god of time, chance and energy.

However, even if the devil has, as it were, changed the lock combination of many linguistic and imaginal doors to divine mysteries, the mysteries still remain. And furthermore, the Holy Spirit is always at work in every culture to preserve or create other doors. What words or images do then remain which can evoke in the modern man's imagination what God really is like? What combinations remain that will unlock the neo-pagan's imagination and open the door of his heart? I suggest that God as the source of beauty and as Beauty itself is one such key to modern man's heart. Theophan the Recluse, a great saint of Russia from the last century wrote that:

*The spirit which knows God naturally comprehends Divine beauty and seeks to delight in it alone ... To contemplate Divine beauty, to partake of it and delight in it is a requirement of the spirit, and is its life and heavenly life.<sup>1</sup>*

In this essay I will attempt to sketch the main features of the Gospel in terms of this divine beauty. Because the secular man has by and large repudiated belief in his being created by God, in favour of belief in time, chance and energy being his progenitors, we will have to start from the beginning-with the creation of the world. Only then can we pass onto the fall, man's nostalgia for paradise lost, God's incarnation, death and resurrection, the Church, and the final recapitulation of all things in Christ. This is for the simple reason

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<sup>1</sup> St. Theophan the Recluse, *Letters to a Young Woman*; IX; quoted in Epiphany Journal (California, Spring, 1990).

that if someone does not believe that they and the world are created, then the fall and salvation become utterly meaningless. If we are the result of chance then love does not exist. And our contemporary Stoicism-evolution by chance-is eroding just this very sense of our origins in God's love.

But before we go on to do this, perhaps it would be fruitful to convince ourselves more firmly of the need to be creative in finding the best way of proclaiming the Gospel, instead of glibly using religious language without thought of whether we are really communicating to our twentieth century neighbour.

How the Apostle Paul spoke to the Athenians is a good case study in proclaiming the Gospel, because Athens then was very like our secular West is today. For example, the Epicureans whom Paul met in Athens had, by his time, come to preach that the supreme good is momentary pleasure and sensual life; does not this sound familiar to us in the twentieth century? And then there were the Stoics also; these taught people to live in harmony with nature, to suppress their desires, and to believe in their self-autonomy. In its supreme exaltation of man and its exclusion of God's grace, this primitive form of Pelagianism is again redolent of our own times. And there is a third parallel between Paul's Athens and our epoch: "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas," the Book of Acts tells us. Admittedly modern society is not for the most part doing nothing-to the contrary, it does too many things!-but it certainly is more interested in searching than in finding, in ideas than in the truth.

How then did Saint Paul proclaim the Gospel to the Athenians at the Areopagus? Luke writes that Paul was "greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols." Did then Paul launch straight into an attack against idolatry? It seems not. Saint Luke says that he reasoned with the people, beginning with the good that they believed in already and only then exhorting them to repent of their errors.

In the account of his address to the Areopagites we are given a sample of just how he reasoned.

Paul says to them that he had looked carefully at their objects of worship. Why had he done this? Judging from what he goes on to say, it is safe to assume that he was looking for some germ of truth in their religion that would serve as a common ground with which to begin; he was looking for a sort of rock in the middle of the river on which to place the bridge of the Gospel as he stretched it out towards their bank. He was searching for a truth which these seekers had already gleaned in their intuitive search for Truth; this he would then use as the key with which he would introduce the Gospel. Paul found this key in the inscription, TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Instead of beginning with what was wrong in the people's beliefs, Paul began with what was right-in this case, their admission that there was something beyond their home-made system of gods. Admittedly, to make as much of this inscription as he did Paul had to exercise some imagination and generosity because, as far as the Athenians were concerned, the purpose of this inscription was to ensure that they did not offend any god by omitting him in their litany of doxologies. But in fact this makes our point even more poignant: Paul used even the smallest doors of intuitively discovered truth through which to carry the full truth of the Gospel. Paul's whole approach is clearly characterized by love, by a love that "hopes all things," by a desire to seek out all that is good in his hearers before gently showing them their mistakes. The twentieth century Saint Silouan the Athonite suggested this same approach to a certain inexperienced Orthodox preacher who tended to berate his hearers with words like, "Your

faith is all wrong, perverted. There is nothing right, and if you don't repent, there will be no salvation for you." In his reply to him Saint Silouan said,

*... people feel in their souls when they are doing the proper thing... so if you condemn their faith they will not listen to you ... But if you were to confirm that they were doing well to believe in God ... and then gently point out their mistakes and show them what they ought to amend, then they would listen to you, and the Lord would rejoice over them ... God is love, and therefore the preaching of His word must always proceed from love.<sup>2</sup>*

To return to the Areopagus, after establishing a common point of contact, Paul begins in love and gentleness to expose the errors in his hearers' religion. His emphasizing, for example, that God created and ordered the world was doubtless for the sake of the Epicureans, who believed that the world's origins and continuance was a work of Chance.

The purpose of God's providential dealings with the nations of the world, Paul says, is that "men should seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him." Our proclamation of the Gospel in the West must similarly, as with Paul, presuppose that the Holy Spirit is at work in our culture, nurturing its thirst for God as much as its limitations and sins permit. This attitude will often lead us to discover that through its art, philosophy and literature, our culture already knows, and even believes, half the Gospel. This faith may not be held in a conscious religious form, but it is there nonetheless. A story once told to me by my spiritual father illustrates my point. He once met a group of builders who, on seeing his monastic garb, began to jest and to boast of their disbelief in God. To their surprise he crossed to their side of the road and spoke to them. "Are you married?" he asked the ringleader. "Yes, sir," came the reply. "Do you love your wife?" "Why yes, of course," the burly man replied. "You have children?" "Yes; two." "You love them?" "Very much." "Excellent," replied the old monk; "Then you do believe in God, because you believe in love, and God is love." There are many atheists whose god they do not believe in Christians also do not believe in!

That this prophetic attitude towards a culture's art is correct is proven by Paul's quoting two Greek poets as part of his preaching the Good News. "For in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28) is from the Cretan poet Epimenedes (c.600 BC.) in his *Critica*. The second quote-"We are his offspring"-is from the poet Aratus (c.315-240 BC) in *Phaenomena*, as well as from Cleanthues (c.331-233 BC) in his Hymn to Zeus.

How successful was Paul's preaching? The response was mixed: some of his hearers sneered, some wanted to hear more, and a few "became followers of Paul and believed. And among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus." This Dionysius was to become the first bishop of Athens and a martyr. So let us begin our story of beauty, of its beginnings, its defacement, of our nostalgia for it, and of its restoration in Christ.

## **1. THE BEAUTY OF CREATION**

### ***Creation as Theophany***

*And God saw all that he had made, and it was very good and beautiful. (Genesis 1:31)*

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<sup>2</sup> *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, by Archimandrite Sophrony, (Essex, 1991), p. 64.

*If through delight in the beauty of these things men assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. (Wisdom of Solomon 13.-3)*

Before anything else, creation is a theophany, a revelation or showing forth of God. And the above words from the Book of Genesis suggest that it is particularly a revelation of His goodness and beauty.<sup>3</sup> Even the eating of the fruits of the earth has its ultimate meaning as reception of God's goodness: God could have created us like angels, having no need of physical sustenance, but instead he chose to reveal his love towards us humans in a more concrete manner-through the material world. The material world is one of many crystallizations of God's invisible and immaterial love. We can say that the creation of the heavens and earth was a forerunner of the supremely tangible theophany, the Incarnation of God the Word. Saint Maximus the Confessor wrote in his Ambigua that "always and in all His Word, God wills to effect the mystery of His embodiment." At the creation of the cosmos, the Word embodied himself through imbedding his words (logos in the Greek) within each individual thing and person. This miniature incarnation of God's words was a prelude to the full Incarnation. Whilst in the preparatory creational incarnation only the words of the Word were embodied, in the ultimate incarnation it was the will of the Father that the Word himself be embodied in a personal or hypostatic way. Creation acted a bit like a beautiful scent coming from a loved one, smelt just before the beloved himself comes into view. It is significant that the psalm verse used by the Orthodox for the prokimenon in a service to an Apostle-"Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the earth" (Psalm 19:4)-refers in fact, in the psalm itself, to the constellations of the heavens and not to a person. The preceding verses are:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament declares his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth...*

The church's inspired liturgical wisdom interprets creation as an apostle, sent by God to man to bring good news; its voiceless message is a forerunner of the supreme Gospel.

All creation may be viewed as a single body, with man as its face. Man is the contemplating eye of the cosmos; through humanity, all creation beholds its First Cause. Along with many other Orthodox saints, St. Barsanuphius wrote that the pure in heart become "all mind, all eye, all living, all light, all perfect, all gods." To behold God indirectly in the beauty of his creation, and directly through his indwelling, is the aim of man and, through him, of all the universe. But how do we regain this spiritual vision, tragically lost through our fall from Paradise?

For the Old Testament Hebrew, sight was not the mere reception of reflected light rays: he understood the eye as an organ which shed light upon that which it contemplated, and thereby illumined it. Sight was thus seen to be an activity, and not simply a passive reception of rays. Another primitive understanding of sight believed that to see an object there had to be harmony between the rays coming from the eye and the rays coming from the object contemplated; empathy preceded knowledge and vision. It is perhaps in

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<sup>3</sup> The sense of beauty as well as goodness in this verse is especially evident in the Greek Septuagint version: the word used is *kalos*, as distinct from *agathon*, which only has the sense of goodness and not of beauty. The Hebrew, *towb*, has similar connotations of beauty.

these two ways that we are to understand Christ's words, "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness" (Matthew 6:22,23). If man is full of spiritual light he will radiate his light upon the cosmos and so be able to see it as it is, sustained and directed by God's grace from within. We need God's light to see God's light; we need to be gods to see God.

If, therefore, man contemplates creation properly, he will meet the Creator. Beholding beauty sacramentally, he is led to Beauty himself. Fully in line with the Orthodox spiritual tradition, Blessed Theodore of Edyssa says that those who seek to contemplate God directly must first learn to contemplate him indirectly, that is, contemplate him in his creation:

*For the investigation of the nature of creatures purifies from passionate attachment to them, gives freedom from their beguilement, and leads to their origin, making one see, as in a mirror, in the beautiful, great and marvelous, the most beautiful, greatest and most marvelous, or rather, that which is above all beauty, greatness or marvel.<sup>4</sup>*

The essence of this vision of God's face in his creation is love: God has given creation to us as a gift of love, as a voluntary self-disclosure. It is therefore only when we behold the universe with love and thanksgiving that we experience it as it really is: a gift from and self-expression of the Holy Trinity. For there to be sight the light coming from our heart must be in harmony with the light coming from God. God's, shall we say, reckless generosity in spreading out such a feast of creation's beauty needs be met by man's thankfulness if this feast is to be joyous rather than debauched. Purely cerebral knowledge of the world is not in fact knowledge of the world as it really is, but is knowledge of a false world truncated and desecrated by proud minds. To love creation as something autonomous is idolatry; to love creation because it is a gift of love is gratitude. The wise Solomon assures us that we can love everything created because God has loved it first:

*Thou lovest all things that exist, and hast loathing for none of the things which thou hast made. (Wisdom of Solomon 11:24)*

The beauty of creation is not then a self contained and apersonal beauty; its beauty is rather in its being a manifestation of the personal God. The cosmos is not a show of vanity, but a showing forth of love. But in what ways does the cosmos reveal God's nature to us?

### **God's Existence is Known by His Works**

God in his wisdom reveals Himself to man in manageable stages, in digestible, bite-size morsels. Creation is one of the first and most fundamental revelations of God to man in this progressive theophany. It should not therefore be surprising that Saint Maximus the Confessor says that the creation does not of itself reveal that mystery of mysteries, the Trinitarian nature of God: "It does not belong to the nature of the created order to contain the uncreated" (Ambigua). But what the universe does reveal, according to St. Paul, are the more basic characteristics of God's existence, power and glory (cf. Romans 1:20).

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<sup>4</sup> Blessed Theodore (St. Theodore of Edessa?), in *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, (Faber, 1954), p. 391.

Knowledge of God himself can only come through participation in him, that is, through deification. The beauty of creation is therefore not of itself able to lead us into experiential knowledge of God, but only to knowledge of His existence. Its beauty leads us to the threshold of the Bridegroom's house, but it is only we who can, in a voluntary act, cross this threshold and be married to Him. Creation woos our wills to love God, but it cannot force them.

This conditional aspect of created beauty explains its ambiguity, at least in its exterior aspect: since it is given freely to all people, irrespective of their spiritual state, natural beauty can be abused or ignored as well as received as it ought to be, with thanksgiving. Created beauty exists to be received and given in love, and not simply admired as an entity in itself.

### ***Dynamic Beauty***

Wherein lies beauty? It is largely in a sense of movement in the proper direction, of a thing's orientation toward its divinely intended goal. The world was made with a specific skopos or purpose, and this purpose was that it commune with God through the freely chosen worship, obedience and thanksgiving of man, who is its priest. And this communion is actually a participation in God; through man the created energies of the cosmos can unite without confusion with the uncreated energies of God. Though by its own nature the world is mortal, it yearns for immortality through participation in man's grace-given immortality. This dynamic calling of the cosmos explains why man was made its master; part of man's calling is to conduct the cosmic orchestra in a symphony of praise to God. For Saint Maximus the culmination of every created thing, no matter how apparently insignificant it might appear, is to participate in God's incarnation and man's deification:

*God created us that we should become partakers of the divine nature (II Peter 1:4) and of His immortality, and that we should be like him (I John 3:2) through deification by grace; to this end everything is created and exists, and things as yet that are not, are brought into existence and born ...*<sup>5</sup>

The ultimate image of creation's history that we ought to have before of us is not therefore of a wheel endlessly revolving about a stationary axis (this is the image adopted by most pagan religions and philosophies) but of a pilgrimage. Our image of world history ought to be directional rather than cyclical. The cycles which undoubtedly do exist in life are wheels moving within a mechanism which is not itself going in a circle, but is being directed by God in a line, in a path out of mortality into immortality, from the west of corruption to the east of resurrection. This is why churches are traditionally oriented towards the east. This cosmic pilgrim nation consists not only of God-loving humans, but also of animals, plants, hills and all manner of creation's furniture, food and arts. When man follows the pillar of fire and cloud, which is God's glory, then he and all creation move towards the Promised Land. All the details of creation's beauty in this life serve this one aim, as did the temple for the Israelites in the wilderness: to carry us through to the Promised Land and the New Jerusalem of the age to come.

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<sup>5</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor, "Contemplative and Active Texts," #99, from *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, tr. Kadloubovsky and Palmer, (Faber & Faber, 1954).

This intended movement of the world towards the New Jerusalem explains the apparent instability inherent within creation, the potential for it to fall back into chaos. It answers the question of why did God not secure the world against any malfunction by making it a machine of inevitability, or like a wonderful marble statue, an immobile edifice beautiful in its measurement and proportion. The reason for this divinely appointed instability is love, for there can only be love where there is freedom, and there can be no freedom in a system that is locked into inevitability. We have said earlier that man's acme is deification, to become like God through participation in him. But God is Trinity, a community of three Persons. It therefore follows that for man to be in God's image and likeness he too must be a community in harmonious relationship; the unity of loving relationship rather than the numerical One of Plato is the end to which history is moving. The full beauty of creation is therefore the joy of a community. Supreme beauty is the sound of God and man at table sat down at their wedding feast, celebrating their spiritual love over the joys of the cosmos transfigured. This is the image with which the last book of the Scriptures leaves us, the holy city upon earth:

*I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people (Apoc. 21:2,3).*

And so dynamism is inherent in creation; creation will always be active and moving-the question is only in which direction it will move. As we shall discuss in more detail later, the tragedy of the fall is that man allowed this divinely appointed movement to be reversed: instead of conducting the orchestra of the cosmos, fallen man allowed the lower cosmos to conduct him. Creation's natural skopos was thus destroyed. This is why the Fathers have used the word passion to describe sins which dominate us; we literally suffer from, become passive slaves to, our lower nature. We cease to act, and become acted upon. We foolishly abdicate our power to rule, and submit to being ruled, and ruled by hard taskmasters.

And so beauty is a fruit of love, whether it be the uncreated beauty of the Holy Trinity, or the created beauty of Paradise.

### ***The Logoi of Creation***

The splendour of the world lies not merely in its outer, phenomenal order and proportion but in its inner spiritual essences; in fact the outer, observable beauty of the cosmos is but a material expression of these archetypal essences. As we have discussed earlier, these essences are the divine words or logoi which have been spoken by the Logos himself. Through his logoi the Logos gives direction and meaning to all things. If a creature acts contrary to its logos and thereby turns from God, then it forfeits its potential to be filled with the Logos; it loses its spiritual beauty. Instead of being bathed from within by the uncreated light of God - as Christ's body and garments were at his transfiguration - such rebellious creatures become darkened.

These spiritual words or essences are distinct from God, and yet come from him. Through them creation is indwelt by God. But at the same time we must also say that because of them creation is utterly distinct from God. We could call these logoi the plans or blueprints for each thing, plans which have eternally existed in the mind of God but which are not the things themselves; the things themselves have come into existence in time by the will of God. There was a time when the universe was not, but there has not been a time when the logoi of the universe were not. These logoi are not to be corporately understood as some personal being - Wisdom or Sophia - which is distinct

from God; they exist rather in the mind of God himself. Paul considered his task to teach the nations precisely that Christ is this wisdom. Christ, he taught, is the revelation of the wisdom which had been hidden in the mind of the Father. He told the Ephesians that grace was given him

*to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord... (Eph. 3:8- 11)*

Christians believe in pan-entheism - God in all things, rather than pantheism - God is all things. This divine radiance is what will be restored in full at the end of time. As St. John wrote concerning his vision of the New Jerusalem:

*And in the Spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God... (Apoch. 21:10,11)*

It could also be noted here that it was only because John was "in the Spirit" that he could behold such spiritual beauty. As we mentioned earlier, spiritual vision requires a correspondence between the spiritual state of the viewer and the object of contemplation. By its particular logoi each unique thing was created, is sustained, and is directed towards its goal. By these many logoi all creatures and things are united to one another and to God. These divine thoughts which sustain each existing thing-from human to stone-are silken threads uniting the world into a single organism and uniting the world with God. But besides uniting, or rather, as a corollary to their uniting function, these logoi each retain the utter uniqueness and distinction of the thing they sustain. The words of God are unifying in that they come from the one God, and they are simultaneously diversifying in that they are different from each other.

The logoi are an expression of God's wisdom; we might say that they are the fashioning fingers of the Master Artist. By these fecund words of wisdom the Lord created the world. But we must not mistake the arbitrariness of secular words for divine words; the words of God are themselves powerful, containing the very thing they express. These words contain the uncreated energies of God and do not return to God void; they fulfill what they speak. God's words contain God's breath and spirit.

These seminal essences which God has planted in the world are far from the forces which pagans seek to tap through witchcraft, cultic religion, or whatever. Through the fall of man a breach in the world's defenses was opened and demons subsequently gained a certain foothold in the material cosmos. Much of the power which paganism is tapping is precisely this demonic power nestled within the primal elements. Icons of Christ's baptism often show demons lurking in the waters. Indeed, one of the first tasks of the priest before baptizing anyone is to exorcise the waters. Making the sign of the cross over the water, he says "Let all adverse powers be crushed beneath the sign of the image of thy cross." But the logoi of which we have been speaking are wholesome and good. These are what Solomon is referring to when he writes of the "generative forces of the world:"



*For He created all things that they might exist, and the generative forces of the world are wholesome and there is no destructive poison in them. (Wisdom of Solomon 1: 14)*

Another note must be made here concerning paganism and Gnostic religions. Most of these regard matter itself as having no real existence; matter is considered by them as either a shadow, or a principle of life which has to be overcome and obliterated by pure spirit. Christian teaching is otherwise. Once God wills some corporeal object or being into existence, an intimate and permanent union is formed between its logoi and its material expression. Though a righteous person's soul does depart from his body at death and enters heaven, and thereby gains a certain salvation from the sufferings of this world, nonetheless his salvation remains incomplete until his body is resurrected on the Last Day and united with his soul. Salvation is not disembodiment, but a true re-embodiment in which the pristine harmony of soul and body is restored, where the flesh obeys the sublime directives of the soul toward God.

Because the material world is made by God, Christianity has always affirmed its essential goodness; we could say that the material world is one of God's freely willed crystallizations of his wisdom-the angels are another expression of this wisdom. In the following verse Solomon affirms simultaneously the unity of wisdom with God-by using the word "breath"-and its distinction from God's essence, by using the word "image:"

*Wisdom is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty ... an image of His goodness.  
(Wisdom of Solomon 7:25,26)*

The directive function of the logoi is strongly put in another passage of Solomon's sayings:

*When God prepared the heaven, I [wisdom] was present with him ... and when he strengthened the foundation of the earth: I was by him, joining myself to him (harmozousa in the Septuagint). I was that wherein he took delight and daily I rejoiced in his presence continually. (Proverbs 8:27,29,30)*

This word harmozousa has very rich associations which are relevant to our subject. It means to join, to woo, to espouse. The logoi do just this, prompting, without force, each thing towards its goal in Christ. But as we have said before, this movement depends not only on God, but also on man. The covenant between God and man requires both their signatures. The beauty of God's creation can woo, but it does not force. By his logos it is natural for man to desire God, but it is possible for him to resist this movement and to desire other things instead. This unnatural movement of the soul is called passion by the ascetic writers. St. Isaac the Syrian writes concerning this:

*If the nature of the soul was once translucent and pure by the reception of that blessed light, it will be found the same when it returns to its original state. Therefore, when the soul is moved in a passionate way, she is confessedly outside her nature, as the children of the Church maintain.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> St. Isaac the Syrian, from *Ascetical Homilies of Isaac the Syrian*, Homily Three (Boston, 1984), p.17.

Part of man's natural response to God's divine Eros for him is to discern God's song of love which is comprised of all the beautiful musical notes which God has planted within each created thing. St. Isaac wrote that "the natural state of the soul is understanding of God's creatures, both sensory and noetic. The supernatural state of the soul is her movement in the divine vision of the transubstantial Deity."<sup>7</sup> Listening to the divine song leads man to the divine Singer.

In discovering this hymn of love the Church not only herself draws nearer to Christ her betrothed, but she also completes the beauty of the individual notes and tunes. Furthermore, she composes a reciprocal hymn of praise out of these same spiritual notes. She forms out of these good notes and tunes an infinitely more sublime symphony. In this way man's prophetic work leads the material creation through the last leg of its journey, the end of which is for the Father to unite all things in heaven and earth in Christ (cf. Eph. 1: 10). This prophetic potential of man is what that great saint of Russia, Seraphim of Sarov, is speaking about when he describes Adam's lot before the fall:

*... by the breath of life Adam could see and understand the Lord walking in Paradise, and comprehend his words, and the conversation of the holy angels, and the language of all beasts, birds and reptiles and all that is now hidden from us fallen and sinful creatures, but was so clear to Adam before his fall.*<sup>8</sup>

This central role of the human person in the fructifying of the world's beauty is so important that it now requires our closer consideration.

### ***Man the Conductor of the Cosmic Hymn***

*When the light becomes his pathway, the real man rises to eternal heights; he contemplates metacosmic realities without being separated from matter which has been part of his being from the beginning. Through himself, man leads the whole creation to God.*<sup>9</sup>

This important passage from St. Gregory of Palamas give us the clue as to how God intended man to fulfill his calling. As we gaze on God we rise toward him. As St. Paul puts it, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another" (II Cor. 3:18). But since we are a union of flesh and spirit, when we rise toward God the flesh rises with us. But it is not only our own body which rises; the whole material world is transfigured with our body. The cosmos ascends towards God with, or rather, in us, because, as Palamas says, we rise toward God "without being separated from matter." Being kings and priests of the world, we contain in ourselves the whole material world. Spiritual kingship is not a matter of mere external authority, but of the lower being incorporated in the higher. It consists of a hierarchy of concentric circles in which the smaller are included in the larger; if the larger moves, the smaller moves with it.

We humans ascend to God not as mere spirits, but as persons, who by the wisdom of God are a unity of spirit and matter. As Palamas says, matter has been part of man's

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 18

<sup>8</sup> From *Conversation with Motovilov* (Jordanville, NY, 1962), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> St. Gregory of Palamas, quoted by Paul Evdokimov in *The Art of the Icon* (Oakwood Publications, CA, 1990), p. 304.

being from the beginning. St. Gregory of Nyssa held that man's body and soul were created simultaneously. He suggests that the time lapse between their creation which the Genesis account of man's creation seems to suggest is there to affirm the distinction of body and spirit and not to assert their independence from one another. This intimate hypostatic union of body and soul is one reason why Christians reject reincarnation; this erroneous belief makes the body a mere shell, with no real ontological connection with the soul.

It is true that spirit is of a higher nature than the material realm, but this in no way implies that the latter is dispensable and is to be despised. What this superiority of spirit over matter does mean is that the more dense, material forms of creation are to be divinized by God through what is higher than them, that is, through the spirit. The classical pattern for the spiritual life corresponds to this principle: firstly the ascetic, with God's help, brings his body back under the control of his mind. The mind is then drawn back into constant remembrance of God. This communion of the mind with Christ opens the channels for God's grace, which floods the ascetic's whole being and deifies him or her. Man's repentance moves the body and mind back into the spirit, and God's grace moves the spirit back out into the mind and body, transfiguring them with uncreated light.

This was a vital doctrine for Palamas in his defense of the Hesychasts. He refuted his opponents' accusations of gross materiality on the one hand, and that God could not be participated in as uncreated grace on the other. He asserted that through repentance and asceticism – In particular the attentive recitation of the Jesus Prayer - the Hesychasts aimed to quiet (*hesychia* in Greek) themselves and thereby prepare themselves for the reception of God's uncreated light. Physical order preceded spiritual order. Speaking of the bodily resurrection, St. Paul taught a principle which applies to the spiritual life in general: "It is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual" (I Cor. 15:46). But once the physical realm has been pointed in the right direction, toward God, then it is the spirit's work to transfigure it. St Gregory of Palamas wrote that

*Through the intellect [nous] the body linked with it is made more divine.*<sup>10</sup>

Just as God's goal for each human person is their deification as a unity of flesh and spirit, so too is it His plan that heaven and earth be united together into a single community. This is what the New Jerusalem will be. It will be neither an earthly utopia nor a heavenly cloud; it will be the marriage of heaven and earth. "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem," writes the Apostle John, "coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Apoc. 21:2). The beauty of the world depends on the beauty of man. The human heart is the artery between heaven and earth. Though smaller by measurement, man is actually larger than the whole universe; the universe is contained within the human person. Spiritually man is in fact a large world within a small world, and not a small world within a large world. When functioning properly, the human community is the head or face of creation. As St. Elias the Presbyter writes:

*Within the visible (world), man is as it were a second world ... For man is the herald of heaven and earth ... Without man and thought both the sensible and the intelligible worlds would be inarticulate.*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> St. Gregory Palamas, "Defense of the Hesychasts," 1.3.33, quoted by G.I. Mantzaridis in *The Deification of Man* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, NY. 1984) p. 55.

Man's unquestionable superiority over other creatures upon earth must be understood in the light of this spiritual artistry, rather than as a license for tyranny. Solomon reminds us of this God-oriented aspect of man's mandate on earth when he writes:

*Thou hast formed man, to have dominion over the creatures thou hast made, and rule the world in holiness and righteousness.  
(Wisdom 9:2,3)*

Solomon wisely interprets the robes of the Hebrew priest with these cosmic dimensions in mind. The following verse speaks metaphorically of the three roots of man's priesthood: his unity with the material world ("upon his long robe the whole world was depicted"); the keeping of the holy tradition ("the glory of the Fathers"); and deification, which is his royal diadem. The first of these is man's by nature, the second is man's by his free choice, and the third is man's by God's grace:

*The blameless man ... brought forth the shield of his ministry, prayer and propitiation by incense ... For upon his long robe the whole world was depicted, and the glories of the fathers were engraved on the four rows of stones, and thy majesty on the diadem upon his head.  
(Wisdom 18:21,24)*

The following quote from St. Maximus beautifully sums up what we have been saying so far:

*Since man is composed of soul and body he is under the action of two laws, that is, the law of the flesh and the law of the Spirit ... acting in a sensory manner, the law of the flesh habitually links man with matter, whereas the law of the spirit, acting mentally or spiritually, brings about direct union with God. Thus it is quite in order that if a man "shall not doubt in his heart," that is, shall not interrupt the direct union with God accomplished by faith, he, being passionless, and above all, having become godlike through his union with God by faith, shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall move.<sup>12</sup>*

The moving of mountains by a word is therefore normal to those walking in God. A graphic example of how this is given in an account about one of the desert fathers of old. A certain hermit receives a visitor who has been in the world. "How goes it in the world?" he asks his guest. "Are there miracles? Do people still believe?" "Alas, father, there are few miracles," answered the guest. The old man sighs, and muses, "In days of old, the fathers of faith would speak to the heavens and it would rain; wild animals would obey them; when they said, mountain, be moved, it would move; they healed the sick..." As he spoke thus there was a great rumbling. To the astonishment of the guest, he saw a mountain nearby them moving: so eager was it to obey the holy man that it obeyed a word of his uttered only in passing conversation. "Return to your place!" commanded the elder, and the mountain returned.

### ***Eucharistic Beauty***

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<sup>11</sup> St. Elias the Presbyter, "Gnostic Anthology," IV: 112, from *The Philokalia, Vol. III* (Faber), p. 61.

<sup>12</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor, "Contemplative and Active Texts," 130.

The purified heart beholds the world with tears of thanksgiving, for it sees the kindness of God manifest in the beauty of created things. Even humble stones speak to him of God. Humility wells up within him, for he feels unworthy of such abundant gifts. The sweetness of God's generosity which he sees in the created world enters into his own soul, and remains in him. He is incapable of despising anything, for it comes from the hand of God, and has its special purpose within the beauty of the whole. Even those people and things which, in this fallen world, have been distorted by corruption move him to tears, for he still sees their true inner nature and cries with compassion that they be released and allowed to blossom forth.

This state is witnessed to by many of the holy writers included in *The Philokalia*, that spiritual classic whose very title means "the love of the beautiful and good." Take Elias the Presbyter for example:

*When the soul is engaged in ascetic struggle it begins to be struck with wonder at the Creator because of the magnificence and beauty of created things, and to savour the delight that comes from them, it too cries out in astonishment: "How beautiful You are, my Bridegroom, paradise of Your Father..."<sup>13</sup>*

### **Creation as Metaphor**

*... that by the beauty and majesty of the things he saw man might trace out that power of the Maker which is beyond speech and language.<sup>14</sup>*

Many things cannot be aptly expressed by the written or spoken word; they are better embodied in objects, in matter. This is precisely one of the purposes of the cosmos; it acts as a metaphor of God's love to us. The material creation literally "carries across" to us – *meta-phora* - spiritual truth. The Lord used images from nature in his teachings not only as didactic tools, but also to show us by way of example how we ourselves ought to view creation. Through his parables and illustrations Christ opens the world to us like a children's picture book, teeming with life.

But we need the grace of the Holy Spirit to keep fresh in us that childlike spirit which allows us to continually delight in the world in this way. The heart of a saint, that is, of a normal human, spontaneously traces back the beauty of each thing to its corresponding logos in God. As St. Gregory of Nyssa writes:

*... travelling through creation he has been led to the apprehension of a Master of the Creation ... when he observed the beauty of this material sunlight he had grasped by analogy the beauty of the real sunlight.<sup>15</sup>*

Every created thing has its prototype in the character of God: physical light is a reflection of God's spiritual light, as wind is of his power, as leafy trees are of his abundance.

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<sup>13</sup> Ilias the Presbyter, from *The Philokalia Volume III* (Faber), p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man".

<sup>15</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "On Infants' Early Death," found in Eerdman's Series, p. 377.

Life in Christ is supremely concrete and real. In it there are no "isms" and concepts and ephemeral philosophies. Even the deepest feelings of the inner heart are experienced as something supremely concrete. The Scriptures are full of accounts of God revealing himself to man in quite unmistakably, even terrifyingly, solid ways. As that inspired clown of wisdom, G.K. Chesterton, has put it:

*The test of true religion is that ... it is always trying to make men know truths as facts; always trying to make abstract things as plain and solid as concrete things; always trying to make men, not merely admit the truth, but see, smell, handle, hear and devour the truth.* <sup>16</sup>

### ***The Beauty of Persons and Faces***

*Christianity is the religion of faces ... To be a Christian is to discover, even at the very heart of nothingness and of death, a face which is forever open like a door of light - the face of Christ - and surrounding Him, penetrated with His light, His tenderness, the faces of sinners who have been forgiven and who no longer judge others, but simply welcome them into their hearts. (Olivier Clement)*

Platonism, and indeed most philosophies, consider the essence of beauty to consist in the relatively static qualities of order, balance and right measure. By contrast, Judaic-Christian beauty is ultimately rooted in something more personal; beauty is perceived primarily as a quality of persons, as a radiance of a relationship. Even the seemingly unbeautiful things of life are seen to be beautiful if they end up strengthening the ties of love between persons. Take for example the apparently disordered acts of fools for Christ - things like throwing rotten cabbages, living in squalor, saying what appear to be ridiculous things, eating raw red meat outside church on Holy Friday and then offering some to the Tsar of Russia. These prophetically inspired deeds are in fact considered by the Church to be spiritually beautiful, for they led people to salvation. As a result of these God-inspired deeds bishops stopped throwing rotten slander at each other, people repented of worldliness, veiled prophecies came true, and Tsar Ivan the Terrible for a while mitigated his slaying of humans.

Something is truly beautiful inasmuch as it is a gift of love. Though the creation is beautiful of itself, as is a wedding ring, its chief beauty for the Christian is the fact that it is the seal of a covenant of love from God to man; it is a symbol in the fullest sense of that term, for it "throws together" (*sym-bolos* in the Greek).

The richest way to contemplate the world's beauty is not therefore in the insular, subjective way enjoined by the Romantic aesthetic. That way is lonely, diffusive, addictive; it cuts rather than opens the lifeline between heaven and earth for it makes a feeling the object of our contemplation rather than the personal God. By contrast, once we have met Christ, in whom all things exist, we begin to see him in all things. Christ becomes the object of our life and we begin to see natural beauty shining with the supernatural light of Christ's face.

The ascetic struggle aims to strip away the accrued passions which replace the face of Christ with the face of our fallen ego. This move from inner noisiness and chaos towards stillness and simplicity is essentially a move away from possessiveness towards thankfulness. For great ascetics like St. Macarius, all of life simply becomes a single act of seeing God and worshipping him:

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<sup>16</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Alarms and Discursions* (Methuen, 1918), p. 29.

*The soul which has been perfectly illuminated by that indescribable beauty of the luminous glory of the face of Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit ... is all eye, all light, all face.*<sup>17</sup>

We become real persons through this contemplation of Christ in creation, for to be person rather than individual means that we behold another face. Both in the Greek and Latin languages the word person means face, and the face's function is to see, hear, smell, taste and kiss another. Every Christian - indeed, every human - is called to be monastic in that he or she is called to see everything in Christ, and so in a sense be "alone" with Christ. (The word monastic comes from the Greek *monos*, meaning one who is alone). Instead of experiencing the multiplicity of the world as disjointed fragments, the saint beholds only Christ, adorned in a single rich garment of the transfigured cosmos. This is what Didymus of Alexandria means when he tells us, "After God, see God in every man and woman." This vision reveals the essential unity of everything, for it sees the wisdom of the one God in the multiplicity of created things. The integrity of each created thing is in no way compromised by this singular vision; each thing's uniqueness is instead preserved and fulfilled by being experienced as it is in the mind of God.

The sabbath day was appointed by God for the very purpose of drawing the multiplicity of the six days of creation into a single point. In this point God sits down and contemplates the world, and the world sits down and contemplates God. The sabbath is "to the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:10). It is the altar of the week, sanctifying it and giving it meaning. We could call the sabbath the face of the week; without the sabbath our work becomes meaningless, like a married couple slaving at work trying to buy a house whilst never allowing themselves the leisure to enjoy it together. The Lord blessed the sabbath and made it holy, so that through its sanctification in particular, all the other days of the week might become holy in relation to it. St. Seraphim of Sarov said that the aim of the Christian life is to acquire the Holy Spirit, and good works are a means to this end, inasmuch as they are done for love of Christ. The sabbath rest symbolizes this acquisition of the Spirit, and the days of work symbolize the work undertaken in preparation for this infilling.

We have described some of the salient features of true beauty, of life in Christ. But clearly we have fallen very far from that state, that state which is natural to us and to the world. What has happened that this should be so?

## **II. PARADISE LOST**

### ***From Theophany to Cacophony***

We said earlier that God created the cosmos with a purpose, with a direction or *skopos*. God placed man in the midst of the world, in paradise, as its prophet, priest and king. Man was given the helm: he could either lead himself and, in himself, all of creation into deification and transfiguration in God's uncreated energies, or he could direct the whole world away from God into disintegration and hell. He could offer everything to God and so be permeated with divine beauty, or he could deface himself and the world by immersing himself in darkness. Sin, and its virtual synonym, ugliness, is precisely the alteration of this divinely appointed order and movement. Sin is civil war. St. Maximus well expressed this pitiful state when he wrote:

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<sup>17</sup> St. Macarius the Great, Homily 1, 2, PG 34, 451 AB.

Quoted by Michael Quenot in *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, p. 155.

*As self-love and men's minding of the flesh have separated men from one another and, having distorted the law, have split the single nature (of those endowed with a single nature) into many parts; they have been the origin of that hardness of heart which now possesses everyone, and through this quality have set nature against itself.*<sup>18</sup>

Modern art's unwitting prophetic role has been to reveal to us man's loss of dignity, his spiritual de-face-ment. Francis Bacon's screaming Popes and caged, besmeared humans are stabs of pain from man's self-inflicted wounds. Such artworks will not heal (unless one believes in the Classical Greek concept of catharsis, in which it is believed that the emotions are purged through stage tragedy), but they are graphic, albeit violent, witnesses to the effects of the Fall. The French writer, Rene Huyghe, expresses well the tragedy of this state of affairs when he writes:

*As fast as the human face, above all its nobility, has disappeared from contemporary art works, its opposite - the Beast - has substituted itself in a strange way, appearing frequently as if to witness to a tacit obsession of our times.*<sup>19</sup>

Ugliness is thus profoundly unnatural, for it is the forcing of nature to go against its natural current of movement towards God. This natural movement is a paradoxical movement out of the confines of the world's created nature into a unity with the uncreated nature of God. The impulse of creation to go beyond created nature is due to God's logoi within creation; it is the world's "supernaturally natural" impulse. It is the natural end of nature to become supranatural. Creation was made to become, through grace, uncreated, its created beauty to be crowned with the uncreated beauty of God's energies. The world's proper movement is away from itself, yet to carry itself with itself.

But the cosmos can transcend its natural boundaries in this way only through man's deification. And conversely, man's voluntary fall from grace leads to discord because it interrupts this divine-human liturgy. Sin brings syncopation to the music of the cosmos because it maims man, its conductor, and even attempts to alter the divinely written music score itself.

And so it transpires that one tragic effect of the fall is the spiritual decapitation of the world. When man lost God as his spiritual head, as his principle of personhood, the whole universe also lost its head; it lost its capacity to become part of the body of Christ. Creation became orphaned. God of course remained the world's sovereign ruler, but in order to restore man to his proper place he wisely directed creation against man, so as to stop his worship of it. As Solomon wrote:

*In return for their foolish and wicked thoughts, which led them astray to worship irrational serpents and worthless animals, thou didst send upon them a multitude of irrational creatures to punish them, that they might learn that one is punished by the very things by which he sins. (Wisdom of Solomon 1:15-16)*

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<sup>18</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor, "Contemplative and Active Texts," #101, from *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*.

<sup>19</sup> Rene Huyghe, *L'art et l'ame* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), p. 342, quoted by Michael Quenot.



The cosmos is not of itself personal; it has its own nature, but it has no hypostasis of itself. Christ, and in Him, man, was intended to be the hypostatic principle of the apersonal world. This Christian teaching contrasts with the more extreme versions of so-called Gaia hypothesis, which claims that nature has its own personhood. It also contrasts with pantheism, which teaches that nature is God, and also animism, which teaches that there are many gods animating creation. All these systems are man's attempt to recreate the beauty of the original symphony of God, man and the universe. But all of them ultimately fail.

Man's capitulation of the world is only successful if he himself finds his head in the Logos. Our present humanist industrialism is essentially an attempt to capitulate the cosmos without God; secular industrialism and secular science is a new Babel. Inasmuch as it rejects God, secularism fragments the world; instead of unifying the community of humans in God, it exhorts people to vie for their own vested interests in the riches of the material world. Materialism changes persons into individuals. The very material world which was created to be a means of sacramental unity between heaven and earth is made by man's greed and covetousness into a means of division:

*But ungodly men summoned death ... For they reasoned unsoundly, saying to themselves ... we were born by mere chance ... Let us take our fill of costly wine and perfumes ... let our might be our law of right, for what is weak proves itself to be useless. (Wisdom of Solomon, chapters 1 and 2, passim)*

Instead of rising towards the single Creator of the world through thanksgiving and spiritual contemplation, man dispersed himself by becoming obsessed with the multitude of the world's riches in and of themselves.

Reading the reverse of St. Basil the Great's words "... a mind which is not dispersed among external things, returns to itself, and from itself it ascends to God by an unending path,"<sup>20</sup> we can say that a mind dispersed among material things departs from itself and descends into the chaos of the void.

### ***From Community to Tyranny***

Since it is love which unites the world and brings it to fulfillment we can expect that the world's fall has been preceded by a loss of love, or at least by a misdirection of love. And indeed, St. Maximus speaks of the fall in terms of a falling away from the double command of love: love of God and love of one's neighbour. Opposed to love of God, he wrote, is self-love (*philautia* in the Greek), and opposed to love of neighbour is self-pleasing (*autareskeia*). The basis of brotherly love is our single, shared human nature. From the realization of this ontological identity of nature comes compassion. Greed and such passions arise from ignorance of this shared nature, for if I realize this communality of the human society, then I will consider my neighbour's gifts as my own and my gifts as theirs. I will not feel the need for anything to become my own exclusive possession.

### ***From Conductor to Sufferer***

We have discussed how man was created to participate in the uncreated divine energies and so to lead the whole cosmos into transfiguration. But when man sundered his link

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<sup>20</sup> St. Basil the Great, quoted by St. Gregory Palamas; translation in *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, p. 404.

with God, this movement of energies reversed; the chaos which underlies raw, undirected matter, began to extend into the world. Man the mover under God allowed himself to be acted upon and moved by the world. This is why the Church fathers call a deeply rooted sin a passion: the word passion means to suffer, to be acted upon, to be passive as distinct from having the power to act. St. Gregory of Nyssa describes this sad condition:

*Thus so long as one keeps in touch with the other [the body with the soul], the communication of that true beauty extends proportionately through the whole series, beautifying by the superior nature that which comes next to it; but when there is interruption of this beneficent connection ... then is displayed the misshapen character of matter ... and so the transmission of the shapelessness of matter reaches through to the mind itself.<sup>21</sup>*

When man acts in a godlike way, he grows into the likeness of God. But when he acts in a carnal, materialistic way, he makes himself into the likeness of mere matter and "the shapelessness of matter reaches through to the mind itself." Man is made both out of the soil and the breath of God; if he allows that divine breath to direct him, he will be raised up into glory, his body included; if on the other hand he follows the material part of his nature, he will hear the terrible words, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." The shapelessness of matter will impress itself upon man's soul.

If man determines not to repent of this gross materialism, then he will devise theories of his origins and end that will justify his folly. As St. Dionysius of Alexandria has observed,

*Men have fashioned the figure of Chance as a cloak for their own folly, for by nature Chance fights against judgement.<sup>22</sup>*

The contemporary theory of the world's evolution by chance is just such a cloak of folly, a secular attempt to make sense of a state of sin and ugliness which by definition has no sense or order.

Let us now summarize this section on the Fall. Man's chief glory is his composite nature; he is a personal or hypostatic unity of flesh and spirit. This makes him potentially higher than even the angels, who are pure spirit. If this composite nature is man's strength, it is also his potential weakness, for it is the thing that Satan is most envious of and will try to cut asunder. The account of his tempting Eve, given in Genesis 3, reveals how he attempts to break this bond. He first tries to distort our image of God's beauty and goodness, to make God repellent: "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" By this deliberate misquote Satan insinuates that God is a spoil-sport, lacking in generosity, and altogether a singularly unattractive and stingy master.

In his second manoeuvre the serpent convinces Eve that God doesn't want her to be deified, to become like him: "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God..." In fact the whole purpose of Paradise was precisely this deification; that through love of God and partaking of the grace-filled fruits of Eden, Adam and Eve were called by God to be deified. If man is convinced that he cannot ascend, then his eyes can only turn downwards to the earth, to let his lower nature (but by no means thereby despicable nature) rule. And this third thing is precisely what happened to

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<sup>21</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man," XII: 10.

<sup>22</sup> St. Dionysios of Alexandria quoting Democritus in "On Nature," tr. C.L. Feltoe in *Translation of Christian Literature* series (NY: SPCK, 1918).

Eve; she acted purely on what her physical senses told her. She "saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes."

Eve's subsequent taking of the fruit, an act personally repeated by us all, was not so much a transgression of some arbitrary law established by God, but was a mutual declaration of civil war, body and soul sundered. It was the beginning of a human and cosmic disintegration brought about by us sundering the love-link with God; by turning his face away from God, man turned his face away from himself for he was made in God's image and likeness. Man departed from himself when he departed from God. This explains why the immediate aim of the monastic life - a life centred on the restoration of man to his divine beauty - is for the monastic to return to himself, to know himself. As that great spiritual master, St. John Climacus, has written:

*The hesychast is an incorporeal being who strives to keep his soul within his bodily home.*

## **PARADISE SOUGHT**

If man's proper end is deification, then we can expect man's inner being to thirst for this, even when he has encrusted his false, outer self with sin. As many of the Church fathers have said, all people are created in the image of God, even those who have not sought to be in the likeness of God. This deep seated divine image in man cries out for its prototype, despite what the fallen outer man does. In the section that follows we will consider some of the ways in which this thirst for divine beauty is expressed in human culture.

### ***The Nostalgia of Human Culture and Art***

Art's literal meaning is to fitly join together (from the Latin *ars*). It is not therefore surprising that the natural desire to recreate and rediscover the pristine unity of man and the cosmos will be expressed through art. Most art as we now know it in the West is really this cry of nostalgia for Paradise lost. Whereas the sacred iconography of the Orthodox Church is a fruit of Eden rediscovered, art as such is the fruit of Eden sought for. Many thinkers have recognized this nostalgic basis of art. I quote but two here:

*Romanticism is rooted in a sense of the rift between the actual and the real.*<sup>23</sup>

*Art is half effaced recollection of a higher state from which we have fallen since the time of Eden. ( Hildegard of **the Riine**)*

Some other thinkers go further than this, and see art, true art, as an actual glimpse of Paradise. The twentieth century English painter of the sacred, Cecil Collins, certainly believed this:

*Art sets free an instant of vision, things seen in their archetypal essence in the sacrament of image and colour.*<sup>24</sup>

*... with all its urgency, it is this act of orientation towards the Sacred Centre of Life that contemporary culture will find confirmation of that*

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<sup>23</sup> Roger Cardinal, *German Romanticism* (Studio Vista, London, 1975), p.28.

<sup>24</sup> Cecil Collins, in *Cecil Collins*, the Tate Gallery retrospective exhibition catalogue, 1986.

*universal Reality, the rediscovery of which, alone, will save our civilization.*<sup>25</sup>

The Russian novelist, Nicholas Gogol, asserted the spiritually transforming power of genuine art:

*Art reconciles us with life. Art is the introduction of order and harmony into the soul, not of trouble and disorder ... If an artist does not accomplish the miracle of transforming the soul of the spectator into an attitude of love and forgiveness, then his art is only an ephemeral passion.*<sup>26</sup>

Theophan the Recluse, a Russian nineteenth century saint, described true beauty in art in this way:

*Works of art are delightful not just for the beauty of outward form, but more particularly for the beauty of inward composition, the intellectual-contemplative beauty, the ideal. Where do such visitors come from in the soul? They are visitors from another realm, from the realm of the spirit.*<sup>27</sup>

He goes on to say that the soul then forms ways of reflecting this primal beauty which it knows. These forms in turn "elevate the soul up to the spirit and spiritualize it." It is part of our incarnate nature to wish to express incorporeal beauty in fitting corporeal forms. This is the true calling of art.

But there needs to be sobriety in this matter. Something vividly imagined - especially when the real thing imagined is an interior state of such subtlety as spiritual vision - can be mistaken for the real thing. The image of the imagination can be mistaken for the image's archetype. But nevertheless, those artworks which are the most faithful images of the sacred need to be recognized and encouraged by the Church, just as St. Paul did to the Greek poets whom he quoted on the Areopagus. This is part of the Church's prophetic role. It is also part of her priestly role, discovering, completing and offering up to God the fruits of natural human endeavour.

But how does one discern the true beauty from the false, the natural from the uncreated? Theophan points us toward the imprint of divinity within our own soul as the criterion:

*The spirit cannot definitively prove what Divine beauty is, but by carrying within itself the design of it, it definitively proves what it is not, expressing this evidence by the fact that it is not satisfied by anything which is created ... Having received information about Divine beauty through its binding with the spirit, the soul too follows it in its steps; and comprehending Divine beauty by means of its own mental image, it leaps with joy because within its domain it is presented with the reflection of that Divine beauty.*<sup>28</sup>

### ***The Spiritual Role of Scientific Knowledge***

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.38.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Gogol, extract from a letter to the poet Zhukovskii; January 1, 1848.

<sup>27</sup> Theophan the Recluse, *Letters to a Young Woman IX*.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

The fact that, since the so-called Enlightenment, science has been used to reinforce a godless view of the world creates a psychological difficulty when the western man tries to find the true role of scientific knowledge in the spiritual life. But to rediscover this role we must. It is not enough to criticize the abuses of science and technology; the Orthodox Church needs to teach the true spiritual role of mental knowledge of the universe. The following quote of Blessed Theodore from *The Philokalia* gives one of the best indications of such a role that I have so far come across. Speaking of how we can be extracted from the snares of a carnal life, Theodore writes:

*To escape all this we need three means, of which the first and greatest is turning our eyes to God ... putting all trust in him ... the second, which, I believe, is the cause of the first, is constantly feeding the mind with knowledge. By this knowledge I mean knowledge of all that is, both sensory and intelligible, as it is in itself and in relationship to the First Cause, since it has its beginning in It, and for It; and contemplation, as far as is accessible to us, of the Source of all that is, by induction from that which comes from It. For investigation of the nature of creatures purifies from passionate attachment to them ... And the third, which must accompany it, is ~nc)rtificatioit of our co)tipaiion, the flesh; for otherwise it is impossible to see, clearly and distinctly, such heavenly blessings as they come. <sup>29</sup>*

Here Theodore has described in descending order the three classical stages of the spiritual life: mystical contemplation of God himself ("mystical theology"); contemplation of God in his creation and providence ("natural theology"); and repentance ("practical theology"). He includes science in the middle category, its chief purpose being to link together creation's sensory and spiritual aspects, to see things as they are in themselves and in relation to their Creator. Science and even to an extent medicine (with its promotion of abortion) have reached their present state of godlessness because they are failing to base themselves on moral repentance and to orientate themselves towards contemplation of the First Cause of what they are researching. Having thus lost sight of its beginning and its end, secular science wanders in the wilderness of endless investigation of the phenomena without acknowledging the *logoi* that these phenomena "show forth" (which is that word's literal meaning). But the investigation of nature of which Theodore here speaks is true science, a search for the spiritual *logoi* of each thing, and not its mere external aspect. Put more positively, the sacred scientist will perceive the wisdom of God behind and within the sensory data that he is studying, and this will rebound to praise and thanksgiving in his heart.

Theodore relates the six work days of the week to natural theology and the sabbath to mystical theology:

*For those keeping spiritual Sabbath and resting from all their activities, as far as is fitting, suspend the diversified movements of the soul, especially in relation to collecting information, to all sensory receptivity, and in general, to all movements of the body, which are in our control. <sup>30</sup>*

The week is a sort of nostalgia and preparation for the Paradise of Sabbath, when we finish the labours of Martha and join Mary to sit at the feet of Christ. True science leads us towards "the one thing needful."

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<sup>29</sup> Blessed Theodore, *ibid*, page 392.

<sup>30</sup> St Gregory Palamas, trans. from *Early Fathers from the Philokalia* (Faber), page 405.

When properly taught, scientific knowledge of the universe increases our sense of mystery and awe; it does not seek to encapsulate the living in a tomb of deadly rationalism, but rather serves to magnify the mystery of life. As St. Basil told his listeners in his series of great talks on the six days of creation (the Hexameron):

*When we discover the manner by which are done those things which seem to us strange, our admiration for the great creatures of God is not at all diminished.*

## **Romanticism**

It was inevitable that the worldly and rationalistic orientation of the Enlightenment would be eventually countered by a movement of nostalgia, of otherworldliness. Romanticism was Europe's answer. For all its failings - for example, its individualism, its tendency towards pantheism, its mistaking of emotion for genuine spiritual feeling - we find in Romanticism many intuitions of truth, not least of which is its association of beauty with truth.

If the Church is to bring the Gospel to our western culture I believe that it is important that she has some understanding of Romanticism, both its strengths and its weaknesses. Romanticism, in its many neo-pagan guises, is increasingly becoming the religion of the populace. For those in the West, Romanticism is the equivalent of what the Greek religions were to St. Paul in Athens. More and more people are being raised in virtual ignorance of Christianity, and those of this new generation of pagans who are seeking for something spiritual frequently look to Romanticism for an answer. These people are thirsting for a way of life that is beautiful, that unites opposites, that feeds the soul, that refreshes them from the toil of meaningless labour and consumerism. Debased Christianity presents to them a rather legalistic and institutional face, and so these searchers for the sacred often turn to nature religions; nature for them is the one innocent, good and beautiful thing left in the world.

Taken as a whole this neo-paganism is of course inadequate for salvation. In fact the perennialism which it is increasingly adopting denies the divinity of Christ. However, when talking with genuine spiritual seekers involved in neo-paganism, we can the more likely direct them away from its false teachings by first affirming its genuine discoveries. What keys to the Gospel are then hidden in Romanticism? What is its altar to An Unknown God?

In the words of the writer Roger Cardinal, "Romantic thought revels in unity being born of opposites." Anyone acquainted with Orthodox liturgical texts would say the same of Orthodox theology. The whole faith is based on paradoxes like the Trinity, the Virgin birth, and Christ being fully God and fully man.

The need to contemplate the inner logoi of created things was intuited by the German Romantic painter of the sublime, Caspar David Friedrich (d.1840) when he wrote:

*Close your physical eyes so that you may first see your picture with the spiritual eye. Then bring to the light of day that which you have seen in the darkness, so that it may react upon others from the outside inwards.*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Cardinal, p.70.

This is similar to how an icon is made; within the inspired tradition of the Church, the great iconographers have seen with their spiritual eyes the transfigured world which they portray. These images of Paradise then "react upon others from the outside inwards" as they venerate and pray in front of them.

Man's prophetic role of discerning the voice of God in creation was appreciated by the writer Sais. He writes about a master who tells his pupils to gather stones and leaves, and who then teaches them to read these things' spiritual signatures. The Christian would add that by putting these signatures together, man can read the whole text written by God. Of course, without sobriety and spiritual discernment, this reading of nature can deteriorate into such aberrations as astrology, fetishism and magic. But since these false practices are distortions of true sacramentalism, the ultimate counter to them is for Christians to live and teach the genuinely sacred life.

Romantic Nature philosophy exhorted scientists to translate phenomena into comprehensible sentences, by discerning the syntax and order in created things taken as whole. Because this nature religion lacked a robust sense of both the immanence and the transcendence of God, it tended towards pantheism and anthropocentrism. But nonetheless, in the midst of this lack of balance, the Romantics, in an albeit primitive way, discerned the ontological link between man and the rest of creation. Ritter, for example, wrote that "the earth exists for man's sake. The earth is but man's organ, his physical body. The earth is man!" This statement is redolent of the patristic teaching that the destiny of the cosmos lies in man, who is its priest. They taught that the universe is capitulated, headed, in man-or more specifically, in the God-man Christ.

The philosopher Schelling discerned this inner link between man's spiritual state and the material world when he wrote that "the system of nature is equally the system of our mind." The state of the world is an image of the state of man's mind, we might say.

#### **IV. THE BEAUTY OF THE INCARNATION**

The image of God in man has been disfigured, both in individual persons and in the human community as a whole. The cause of this disfigurement is man's willful dislocation from God, who is man's true source of glory, beauty and unity. Man could not of his own power regain this beauty because, being uncreated, this beauty is not within the grasp of creatures. This beauty is God's uncreated light, a light which can only be received as gift. To be sure, God in his mercy only gives this gift to those who, with his help, have prepared themselves to receive it; the unprepared would only be consumed by the splendour of this fire if it were given them. We see this clearly shown in the contrasting icons of Transfiguration and Pentecost. In the first icon, Peter, James and John are shown falling backwards in confusion at the sight of Christ's glory. Without full repentance and the grace of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection they were not able to bear for long the divine vision. In the Pentecost icon, however, they and the other apostles are arrayed in harmony. And they are not only witnessing the descent of God, but they are even able to receive him into themselves without being destroyed.

Because of the impossibility of man climbing to God, God descended into the world and became man. The vine of Beauty planted himself on earth, and, through the Holy Spirit, the Father grafted onto him the wizened branch of our human nature that it might again blossom and bring forth fruit.

#### ***God Made Man***

The hypostatic union without confusion of God and man in Christ has created a radically new order of existence for man; his created human nature is now forever seated on the right hand of the Father in Christ. As a text of the Feast of Nativity puts it:

*Sharing wholly in our poverty, Thou hast made our clay godlike through Thy union and participation in it.*<sup>32</sup>

It follows from this radical change in the state of man's material flesh that the role of the rest of the material world must also change. The beauty which the Word's incarnation has restored to priestly man extends to the whole creation. St Gregory of Nyssa affirms this when he writes:

*... by means of the flesh which he has assumed, and thereby deified, everything kindred and related may be saved along with it.*<sup>33</sup>

The Feast of Nativity says that:

*Uniting the world to the immaterial essences, (Christ) has made the Father merciful to the creation.*<sup>34</sup>

What Adam failed to do, Christ the second Adam achieved; through obedience to the Father he led man's nature into deification and thus recapitulated the creation that had become headless and faceless through the Fall.

### ***Christ the Teacher***

The Word's incarnation redeemed, once and for all, the single human nature, which we all share. But as we said earlier, spiritual beauty is the fruit of love. Man's glorification needs, therefore, man's participation; the marriage of God and man needs the consent of both partners. It is in this context that we can understand the Lord's teachings; they are his merciful guide to man, showing him how he can step forward to receive the gift of deification. As Archimandrite Sophrony has said in one of his books, the commandments of Christ are God's uncreated energies given to us.

By walking in God's commandments we eat and drink divine light. The commands of God are not therefore a restriction on man's nature, but the means of man's blossoming; they offer the way by which we can be delivered from self-gazing individualism and return to God-gazing personhood. Even the ascetic struggles of the Christian life, like fasting, vigils and bearing calumny without reproach, are all means by which we direct every aspect of our lives - eating, sleeping, speaking and so on - back towards God. The ascetic struggle literally trains us to offer everything in love to Christ, so that the categories of the secular and profane no longer exist. All of life becomes eucharistic, filled with thanksgiving.

### ***Christ Transfigured***

Christ did not come merely as a moral teacher: He Himself is man restored to glory. By His assumption of our flesh, Christ is what we can be by our assumption of his divinity. He is a bush of created substance burning with the fire of divinity without being consumed. This is what Christ revealed to Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration. Christ's transfiguration was not an isolated miracle, an interruption of the

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<sup>32</sup> From *The Festal Menaion*, trans. Mother Mary and Arch. Kallistos Ware (Faber, 1984), p. 275.

<sup>33</sup> St Gregory of Nyssa, *Great Catechism*.

<sup>34</sup> *The Festal Menaion*, p.276.



norm; it was rather a manifestation of the normal mode of being which God had intended for man from the creation of the world. A text of the Feast puts this fact beautifully:

*... 'I am he who is', was transfigured today upon Mount Tabor before the disciples; and in His own person He showed them the nature of man, arrayed in the original beauty of the Image.*<sup>35</sup>

"I am He who is" is in fact the name which God gave to Moses at the burning bush, which for the Jew is the unutterable name of Yahweh.

By his transfiguration the Creator of all things unveiled the serpent's lie, namely that God jealously did not wish man to be like him. Christ showed us the glorious end, albeit only in part, to which he is guiding us. The miracle of Mount Tabor is not so much that God shines with light brighter than the sun, but that a man shines with this same divine light. As one text for the Feast expresses it:

*Thou hast put on Adam entire, O Christ, and changing the nature grown dark in past times, Thou hast filled it with glory and made it godlike by the alteration of Thy form.*<sup>36</sup>

For those who behold this uncreated beauty, created beauty fades, or rather is sublimated in the vision of Beauty himself.

*"Having uncovered, O Saviour, a little of the light of Thy divinity to those who went up with Thee into the mountain, Thou hast made them lovers of Thy heavenly glory."*<sup>37</sup>

In *Ambigua 10* Maximus says that as Christ's garments shone along with his person, so also do the logoi within the Scriptures and within the created world shine along with him when he reveals himself to the human soul. The event of the transfiguration is therefore a foretaste of the recapitulation of all things in Christ; in it we see all things that are associated with him shining with his uncreated light. A hymn of Matins says that the three Apostles "trembled with fear before the beauty of the divine kingdom." Christ in glory is the kingdom of God, albeit only experienced now in a limited way.

But the experience of beholding everything as it is in Christ is not automatic. just as only Christ's three closest disciples were invited by him to ascend Tabor to receive the revelation, so also only those who obey God can now receive this revelation; a moral preparation is required to behold the fullness of beauty. Being the very energies of God rather than a natural phenomenon, the beautiful light of Tabor can only be to the extent of our purity of heart. The same beauty which ravishes the soul of God-lovers destroys the godless. The transfiguration is not so much a change in Christ as it is a change in the disciples, change which enables them to see what Christ has been all along:

*Enlightening the disciples that were with Thee, O Christ our Benefactor, Thou hast shown them upon the holy mountain the hidden and blinding light of Thy nature and of Thy divine beauty beneath the flesh ...*<sup>38</sup>

### **Christ Crucified and Risen**

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.476.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.483.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.481

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., Sessional Hymn of Matins, p. 479

*The resurrection is the reconstruction of our nature in its original form.*<sup>39</sup>

This short sentence by Gregory of Nyssa sums up the purpose of Christ's coming in the flesh. By his incarnation, suffering and death he gathered our fragmented human nature as pieces of a once splendid sculpture. By his rising from the dead on the third day he drew all these pieces back into a single whole, reconstructing our nature. But this reconstructed nature is not a simple return to what was before the fall, because it is now joined in an indissoluble hypostatic union with the second person of the Holy Trinity. This was not the case with Adam, innocent of sin before the fall though he was. Our nature is no longer a human nature living in isolation—it is a human nature joined forever with the divine nature of the Holy Trinity. This is the significance of the third day of the resurrection—three is the number of divinity. It also explains the import of Sunday being the first day of the week. Christ died on the sixth day, the day that man was created. And when he rose he did so not on a day within that primitive seven day cycle, but on a day of a wholly different order, on the first day of a new week, the week of eternity. This first day is not the first in a sequence of many other days, for it is the single day of eternity, which is beyond time and does not therefore know the chronological time of fallen existence. The Bright Week which follows Pascha is a liturgical icon of this eternity. During it all the doors of the iconostasis are left open, betokening the opening of the doors of Paradise to earth. Everything is joyfully sung and nothing spoken in the services, and all the lamps are lit. During the course of the week all eight liturgical tones are used, making it a sort of capitulation of all Sundays. At least in the early Church, and sometimes still now, the newly baptised would remain in Church all week, dressed in their garments of white and receiving further instruction in the mysteries. Bright Week is the brightness of the kingdom of God.

Saint Maximus taught that Christ's resurrection fulfilled the second of his hierarchy of five mediations, the mediation between paradise and earth. After his resurrection Christ moved freely between earth and paradise, appearing to his disciples on earth, and then disappearing in order to commune with those in paradise. Maximus goes on to say that man can participate in this union of paradise and earth through practice of the virtues. The life of virtues is a divine way of life which reveals paradise in an anticipatory way. By the virtues we reveal the union of paradise and earth, for through this divine way of life we participate in Christ the Logos who has assumed within Himself the once divided opposites. It is not our virtues in themselves which bring about this union, but Christ Himself, in whom we are united through the virtues. We can ourselves become works of art, in which all things are "fitly joined together," only through participation in Christ, who "is before all things, and in whom all things hold together" (Col.1:17).

The human body fulfills a two-fold purpose in our relationship with God. Our body delineates the uniqueness of each one of us; our faces and bodies are all different. But our body also provides the means of our union, for we come from the one body of Adam. Through the fall this union-forming aspect has been weakened, since each person uses his body in an individualistic way, seeking the gratification of its desires. But Christ's resurrection objectively restored the dignity of our body, clothing it with light, making the body of flesh a bearer of grace, a sacrament. By his resurrection, Christ made the body once again the means of genuine distinctiveness and genuine unity, hence the Church being called the Body of Christ. This is one reason why we offer kolava at a Panakhida (Requiem), for this single mass of individual grains of wheat reveals both our union and our distinction.

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<sup>39</sup> St Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection*.

## ***Christ Ascended***

In Ambigua 41, St. Maximus says that the ascension of Christ from earth to heaven effected their reunion. And as he ascended through the different realms of angelic orders he also effected the reunion of the intelligible and the sensible realms. And when he presented himself to the Father, he effected the final mediation, the union of the Creator with his creation. He emphasizes that this final union, theosis, can only be effected through love; deification consists not in knowledge primarily, but in a relationship of reciprocal love. It is a mutual interpenetration of one into the other, without confusion of either. This perichoresis of each human with God is analogous to, and has been preceded by, the perichoresis of the divine and human natures in Christ. All the other four mediations were a restoration of what man, by his nature, had possessed before the fall. But this deification could only have been effected through the incarnation; the en-goding of flesh could only have been gained through the enfleshment of God.

This union of God and man, and the whole creation's subsequent transfiguration, is the ultimate beauty possible. It is not only the artistic state where things of the same nature are "fitly joined together;" it is the work of art in which the natures of the most extreme possible opposites-created and uncreated-are brought together in a union more intimate than anything conceivable.

Summing up his wonderful panoramic view of God's economy, Maximus writes:

*Christ recapitulated in himself all things, showing that the whole creation is one, as if it were also a man, achieved through the coming together of all its members, according to the unique, simple, undefined and indifferent principle, stating that the whole creation can have one and the same, absolutely indistinguishable logos: that of having the "non-being" before the being.*<sup>40</sup>

## ***Repentance***

In his letter to the Ephesians, St Paul writes, using the past tense, that the Father has made us alive together with Christ, that He has raised us up together with Christ, that He has made us sit with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (cf. Eph. 2:4-6). All these things were achieved in the historical Christ; they are as much fact as the birth and death of Julius Caesar.

And yet, if this is the case, why is it that we still see a world blurred and smeared by sin? It is because salvation and the beauty of the Kingdom is not so much the restoration of a certain state, or a removal of man to some other place, but is the restoration of love between God and man. Repentance is nothing other than a person reciprocating God's love.

Repentance is the Prodigal Son coming back home, to be with his Father. Repentance is to be defined positively rather than negatively: we turn away from worshipping idols so that we can worship and adore the true God.

Repentance is the soul's miraculous resurrection from the degrading state of being acted upon) into the spiritually normal life of being active, of being a ruler. It is a restoration of man's proper dignity, for, like the Prodigal son, a person "comes to himself" through repentance; he allows himself to follow his true nature, which is to love God. It is a voluntary acknowledgement of our need for God's uncreated grace, of the fish for water, of the bird for air.

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<sup>40</sup> St Maximus the Confessor, Ambigua

When even one single person turns back to God the whole universe is affected. As we have already discussed, man is prophet, priest and prince of the world; the destiny of the vast cosmos follows the destiny of us seemingly little people. All creation awaits the repentance of us so that it may be granted immortality and beauty:

*For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God ... the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. (Romans 8:19,21)*

Dostoyevsky describes this cosmic effect of human repentance in his book, *Brothers Karamazov*:

*It was as if threads from all the innumerable worlds created by God were suddenly reunited in his soul, and that it was all aquiver at this encounter with other worlds.*

This transformation can happen in a flash, and against all apparent odds. A person steeped in sin can suddenly turn towards Christ. There is a sudden softening of the heart brought on by a grace-given taste of God's sweetness. The Russians have a special word for this sweetness which precedes such dramatic change: *utnileiie*. By it someone sees the beauty of God, and their self laceration immediately becomes apparent. This taste of God smites the sinner's heart with indescribable pain for so desecrating the beautiful sanctuary of their own and others' soul, and at one and the same time gladdens him at seeing the beauty of the Lord.

Though this repentance is born in the heart, it effects the whole gambit of man's activities-his industry, scientific exploration, art, everything. This call for total cultural conversion, of extending everything into the realm of uncreated grace, was the last exhortation of the newly canonized martyr, Metropolitan Benjamin of Petrograd:

*We must now go beyond our science and self-sufficiency, leaving the field open for grace.*

Most of the Orthodox Church's liturgical year is defined in relation to Pentecost-the first, second, third Sunday after Pentecost, and so on. Why is Pentecost thus regarded so highly? It is because the creation of the Church at Pentecost is the fulfillment of all the economy of God: toward the formation of the Church leads the whole of creation, the Old and new Covenants, the work of Christ. The Church is the restoration to man of the divine image and likeness, for in the Church's divine-human community man is granted to be like the community of the Holy Trinity. It is necessary, therefore, to complete this survey of beauty by considering the beauty of the Church.

## **V. THE BEAUTY OF THE CHURCH**

### ***Paradise Restored***

Tertullian describes how in baptisms of his own time (c.200 AD) the newly baptised and anointed were given milk and honey as a token of their entrance into the Promised Land. Life in the church was therefore considered to be life in the true Promised Land; baptism was the crossing of the Jordan into the land flowing with spiritual milk and honey.

As life in the Promised Land for the Israelites was characterized by all aspects of daily living being permeated by love of God, so it is in the Church. One divine function of the

Hebrew cycle of feasts was to sanctify every corner of life: wheat harvesting (Pentecost), bread making (Passover), and so on. In Slavonic there are words which express this permeation of all life with divine beauty: **blagolepie, istovost, blago-obrazie**. These words describe a state in which all of one's life is imbued with a spiritual beauty and order; life becomes a liturgical event, a sober dance in praise of God.

As we have already mentioned, as part of the Church's restoration of the proper order in creation the priest at baptism exorcises the evil spirits from the waters. This prepares the way for the descent of the Holy Spirit, who will make the waters grace-bearing rather than death-bearing. Through man's fall, demonic spirits gained a certain foothold in the material world. Prior, therefore, to blessing the waters for baptism, the priest cleanses them of these demonic forces through the prayers of exorcism. This purging of the material realm was typified in the Old Testament by the Hebrews driving out the pagan nations from the Promised Land before they could inhabit it: "The Lord your God himself will go over before you; he will destroy these nations before you, so that you shall dispossess them; and Joshua will go over at your head, as the Lord has spoken" (Deut. 31:3).

In the Creed the faithful declare that they believe in "One, holy, catholic and apostolic Church." These four words describe the beauty of the Church.

### ***The Beauty of Church Unity***

*See now! What is so good and beautiful (kalos) , or what so pleasant, as for brethren to dwell together? (Psalm 132:1, LXX)*

The Church is man in the likeness of the Trinity, because in the Church individual human persons dwell in unity, just as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit dwell in unity. Church unity is not to be defined finally as the absence of discord, but as the positive acquisition of Trinitarian life. This is one of the reasons why the church baptizes into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Our entrance into the body of Christ is an entrance into the divine unity and community of the Trinity. The unity between humans in the Church is a manifestation of this eternal divine community: Church unity is a theophany of Trinitarian unity.

### ***The Beauty of Holiness***

*... at times a comforting warmth coming from the heart would penetrate my whole being, and I would feel the presence of God all around me ... every external thing would also appear in a glorious aspect and would continually invite me to love and to sing the praises of God ... everywhere I recognized the mark of Christ. (The Way of the Pilgrim)*

The man who spoke these words was a humble Russian pilgrim who had set his heart on learning how to pray without ceasing. Through obedience to an experienced spiritual guide and with God's help, he advanced rapidly towards his goal by using the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me a sinner." The holiness that was subsequently granted to the pilgrim opened his eyes to see the Lord in his creation and to know him in his heart-"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Through this holiness which is granted through life in the Church, every person can likewise experience all things spiritually, both material and incorporeal things. Concerning this spiritual vision, St. Isaac the Syrian wrote:

*Here is the sign that you are approaching the borders of this mysterious country; when grace begins to open your eyes so that they see things in their essence.*

Perhaps the most graphic expression of the Church's holiness is her iconography. Icons depict people who are radiant with the uncreated light of God. No shadows exist, because the light of grace within the saints dispels darkness, and the atmosphere in which they move and live and have their being is this same brilliant grace. Hills, plants and animals are shown with their logoi or spiritual essences clearly revealed. Iconographic style is spiritual realism rather than carnal naturalism. The carnal viewer may think that icons distort the world, or at best idealize it through the use of the imagination. However, in reality the Church, through her iconographers, depicts the world as she really experiences it. This is why iconographers must be members of the Orthodox Church, chaste, and people of prayer; if icons are to be a genuine witness they must be painted by people who have seen what they are painting, and this is only possible through the Body of Christ. The (1551) Russian Council of Moscow, or "Council of 100 Chapters" as it is better known, stipulated that

*the painter of icons must be humble, gentle and pious, avoiding immoral conversations and mundane scurrility; he must be neither quarrelsome nor envious of others, neither a drunkard nor a thief; he must practice both spiritual and corporal purity.*

If we can say that the imagination has a role in iconography it is only if imagination is understood in the literal sense of the word: the capacity to receive images of things which really exist, rather than the attempt to create something out of nothing, to create fantasies. This is why the iconographer prays earnestly that through adherence to the Church's inspired tradition and through purity of heart he may be protected from delusion and fantasy. He prays that he may know the saints whom he wishes to portray. He can only know the saints through the Holy Spirit, and so he constantly prays to be in the Spirit. The prayer for iconographers before painting asks precisely for this inspiration from on high:

*O divine Master of all that exists, enlighten and direct the soul, heart and mind of your servant; guide my hands so that I might portray worthily and perfectly Your image, that of Your Holy Mother and of all the Saints, for the glory, the joy, and the beautification of Your holy Church.*

### ***The Beauty of Catholicity***

Though the word catholic has now come to mean universal, its root meaning is wholeness, completeness; the universality of the Church is but a natural fruit of this completeness. This belief in her fullness is not arrogant, nor does it close the Church's eyes to the beauty and truth which can be found in human endeavours like religions, philosophies, art, and so on. To the contrary, the Church has the duty to discover and to affirm truth wherever it is found—even if in pagan philosophies like Platonism—and use this partial revelation to lead them towards the full revelation of God in Christ Jesus. The Church can discern truths because she has dwelling within her the Truth Himself, the Incarnate Word. She knows that the Holy Spirit seeks to draw every person close to Christ wherever they are, revealing to them as much of the truth as their spiritual state can absorb. As we recall from our introduction, St. Paul said that God has determined

that nations "should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him" (Acts 17:26,27).

The fullness of truth in the Church is really Christ himself. The Church is not a group of created humans who follow a God who is separate, but is a union of God himself with humans. If Christ is the head of the Church, then the Church includes Christ: he is its face, its hypostasis. And again on the individual level, a human person cannot be truly human unless he or she is deified, unless they are united to God. The created human nature was formed by God with a thirst for the uncreated nature of God. Corruption is an inevitable result of this union remaining unaccomplished, and incorruption of it being accomplished. The Apostle Peter writes that

*[God the Father's] divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him [Christ] who has called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature. (2 Peter 1:3,4).*

We cannot be fully human outside of the Church. The godless philosophy which calls itself humanism because it exalts humans as autonomous beings, is in fact dehumanize. Without God a human person is defaced, incomplete.

The material world is likewise incomplete and prone to corruption and defacement if it is not sacramentally united to man who is its prophet, priest and king. The fullness of the cosmos's beauty is therefore only to be found in becoming flesh and blood, within the Body of Christ. As we have discussed, unlike man the natural world is without its own autonomous hypostasis: man is to become its hypostasis. This union of man with God, and of the material world with man, finds its hiatus, of course, in the Holy Liturgy. A Russian poet has said,

*Every time the priest celebrates the Eucharist, he holds in his hands the whole world, like an apple.*

The Church is then the treasure house of beauty because in it man and the cosmos finds its fullness. The Church is the mystery of the Father's will, for she is the fulfillment of his plan "to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10).

### ***The Beauty of Apostolicity***

The Great Commission which Christ gave to his disciples, "Go into the world, and make disciples of all nations," is a renewal of the command given to Adam and Eve, to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. The Upper Room of Pentecost was the soil in which God planted the new Paradise in the midst of the earth; the growth of the Church is the extension of the boundaries of this new Paradise into all the world. The disciplining of nations is a sort of spiritual agriculture whereby the ugliness of the sin-distorted world is changed to the beauty of harmonious synergy between God, man and the cosmos. This extension of a Paradise planted by God is the heart of Apostolicity.

The word apostle means one who is sent. We mentioned earlier that spiritual beauty has a lot to do with the proper direction of movement, a movement towards the recapitulation of all things in Christ. Apostolicity is to be understood in the light of these two poles, of a right beginning and a right end: the apostles, and the Church in general, have been sent out into the world by Christ at his first coming, with the mission of preparing the world for Christ's future second coming. Apostolicity in this perspective can

be recognized as something more than theological conservatism; it is the dynamic continuation of the life of God the Holy Spirit in the Church, preparing the Church so that she become in truth "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Apoc. 21:2). Metropolitan John of Pergamon has expressed this eschatological aspect of Apostolicity in this way:

*The Church recalls a time called "apostolic"; whether she relates to it through various media or by way of copying as faithfully as possible this normative period, the fact remains that in this approach her apostolicity comes from the side of the past. On the other hand the eschatological approach implies no sense of transmission or normativity. Here apostolicity comes to the Church from the side of the future. It is the anticipation of the end ... It is the Risen Christ that is related to apostolicity, i.e., the final and ultimate destiny of all that exists.<sup>41</sup>*

## VI. THE SECOND COMING

### ***Judgment***

Today's world avoids the subject of judgment, heaven and hell. A God who judges cannot be a God of love and beauty, the secular man says. But judgment will not be a matter of God imposing something upon us, but rather his revealing and granting what we have already chosen for ourselves. It will be a full revelation of the power of human choice, word and action. Rather than denigrating human dignity, the Day of Judgment will reveal the great power which God has bestowed upon the human creature. On that day we will be astonished at the import of even our smallest deeds and words, be they good or evil. On that day each person will hear the completed recording of the music which he or she has made of their life on this earth. St. Isaac the Syrian uses the image of a manuscript in his exhortations to repentance:

*Life in the world is a manuscript of writings that is still in rough draft. When a man wishes or desires to do so, he can add something or subtract from it, and make changes in the writings. But the life in the world to come is like documents written on clean scrolls and sealed with the royal seal, where no addition or deletion is possible .... As long as we are in this world, God does not affix His seal either to what is good or to what is evil, even up to the moment of our departure ....<sup>42</sup>*

This present age is not an age of justice but of mercy; God protects us from our own sins by covering us with a mantle of forgiveness. But in the age to come all will appear as it is in itself. A man's torments in hell are ultimately the torments of his voluntary departure from God's inexpressible beauty and glory. St. John Chrysostom testifies to this when he writes:

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<sup>41</sup> Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1985), p. 130.

<sup>42</sup> *The Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian*, trans. by Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, 1984), Homily 62, p.301.



*I know that many are terrified only of Gehenna; but I think that the deprivation of that glory [of the Kingdom of God] is a torment more cruel than Gehenna.<sup>43</sup>*

In fact, hell itself can be considered as a merciful concession to those who did not in this life wish to dwell with God; if God were to force such people to live with him in eternity, they would be in even greater torment, being burned rather than delighted by the fire of divinity. The content of heaven is God himself:

*Acknowledge the Resurrection, the judgment, and the awarding of the righteous by the Judgment of God, and this awarding for those who have been purified in heart will be light, that is, God visible and known according to the degree of one's purity, which we also call the Kingdom of Heaven, but for those who are blinded in mind, that is, for those who have been estranged from God, according to the degree of their present nearsightedness, there will be darkness.<sup>44</sup>*

### **Recapitulation**

Man's destiny lies in God, and the destiny of the universe lies with man, part of whose task is to lead it into a more intimate union with God. Man was given the image of God at his creation, but man's likeness to God was to be achieved through synergy, through co-labouring with God. Man's full likeness to God, his deification, can therefore only come when all things are fulfilled. As Origen has said:

*Man received the privilege of the image of God at his creation, but the total perfection of a resemblance to God will be conferred on him only when all things are fulfilled.*

The end of all things is their being gathered together into Christ, without diminution in any way of each thing's uniqueness. As St. Paul has written,

*[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, things in heaven and things on earth, visible and invisible ... all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the Body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Col. 1:15-19).*

Because of the fall of man from his pristine role as the unifier and capitulator of the world, God became man, a second Adam, and fulfilled what we had failed to do. Each stage in Christ's life, from his conception in the Mother of God's virgin womb, through to his ascension to the right hand of the Father, is a gathering in, a recapitulation, of all creation and of those who believe. St. Maximus describes this great span in a characteristically poetic passage:

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<sup>43</sup> St John Chrysostom, *Homily 23 on Matthew's Gospel*, quoted in *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, by Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky, trans. Fr. Seraphim Rose (Platina, 1984), p.348.

<sup>44</sup> St. Gregory the Theologian, Homily 40, "On Holy Baptism," quoted in *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, page 348.

*And with us and for us [Christ] embraced the whole creation through what is in the center, the extremes as being part of Himself, and He wrapped them around Himself, insolubly uniting them one with another: Paradise and the inhabited world, heaven and earth, the sensible and the intelligible, having Himself like us a body and sensibility and soul and intellect ... He recapitulated in Himself all things, showing the whole creation is one, as if it were also a man*

...<sup>45</sup>

Because all this will happen in Christ, and Christ is now, in this present age, the head of the Body, the Church already tastes in an anticipatory way the glory which is yet to come. She already has begun to live outside created time and has begun to live in eternity, that place where no walls of days, months, or years exist. She paradoxically "remembers the future." This experiential remembrance of the past and present deeds of God is central to the Eucharist. To sacramentally remember the works of God in the Holy Liturgy, and to offer to him the world, is the last and greatest act that man can perform. Through this remembrance and offering, God the Holy Spirit descends upon man and upon the holy gifts. In the Orthodox Liturgy, just before the epiclesis or the descent of the Spirit upon the Holy Gifts, the priest prays:

*Remembering, therefore, this commandment of salvation, and all those things which came to pass for us; the cross, the grave, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, the sitting on the right hand, and the second and glorious coming, Thine own, of Thine own, we offer unto Thee, in behalf of all, and for all.*

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<sup>45</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua 41*, in Thunberg, p.90.