

# WHERE ARE WE GOING?

By Aidan Hart

*Thou wast transfigured, O Christ, and hast made the nature that had grown dark in Adam to shine again as lightning, transforming it into the glory and splendour of Thine own divinity.*

(A hymn from the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord)

## ***The Promised Land: Union with God***

Why are we on this earth? Where are we supposed to be going? And how do we get there?

These are the most essential questions of our existence. And yet the rush and muddle of secular life offer us little time to ask them, let alone find the answers. Sadly, this ignorance can also affect Christians. I fear that many of us who are baptised are like the Israelites of old. Although miraculously led through the Red Sea out of slavery to the Egyptians, we forget the Promised Land and wander around in the desert. It is too easy to live as though life is mere survival in a fallen world and forget there is a land of indescribable beauty, flowing with milk and honey, a land which we can begin to enter even this side of death.

However, there are people who have pressed on and entered the Promised Land. In the radiance of their love these saints give proof of its existence. In their words they provide the path to it, and in their mercy they walk with us. According to the saints, what is this Promised Land is? They say that it is nothing less than for us to become gods by grace, to be united to our Creator in a union of love, to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to be radiant with His glory dwelling within us. The milk and honey is God Himself. Our inner being cannot be satisfied with being merely a good human. We are created to be caught up into God and mingled with Him like iron in the fire, to be so enamoured of Him that we forget ourselves. To be fully human is to have God as our head. Saints have variously described this mystery as *deification*, *theosis* (from the Greek *Theos*, meaning God), “acquiring the Holy Spirit”, and “becoming partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

## ***God’s descent and man’s ascent***

How can we be deified? God is beyond all human categories and conceptions. This is why God became man, why the Second Person of the Holy Trinity took into Himself our human nature. Can we climb up to the sun on a ladder? No. And so the Sun has come down to us. We cannot know the sun by entering into the fiery orb itself, but only by participation in its rays of light and warmth. Likewise we cannot know and love God as some distant

object, but only through participation in the rays of joy, life, love, compassion which come to us from Him, the Divine Sun.

The Fathers have called the unknowability of God His *essence*, and the rays which come to us as His *uncreated energies, uncreated light, or grace*. This uncreated light is what Peter, James and John saw when Christ was transfigured, and which many saints have seen, experienced and themselves shone with. Each of us also experiences these uncreated energies, but tragically we are mostly insensible to them and we do not acknowledge their source. Everything is a bush burning with God's grace without being consumed, only we do not see it.

So what do we have to do to make God's descent into our nature a reality? Our part is to clean out the house of our humanity so that God can dwell in us. We are made in God's image, but our wrong attitudes and actions have distorted this image. We are like a tailor-made glove which we have deformed. As a result God cannot fit His hand into it without ruining the glove. Our part is to co-operate with the Tailor in restoring this glove to its pristine form, so that the hand can painlessly fit in. This process of restoration is called repentance.

But perhaps the most common image which the saints use to describe their experience of repentance is warfare. We are called to repossess a land which has been occupied by enemy forces. We are the land, God-made beings of remarkable splendour and potential. But in our foolishness we have handed this land over to fallen angels, who despoil it. These angels are madly envious of the incredible beauty of our human nature, and so they set out to destroy what they cannot have themselves. They were once unimaginably beautiful, but forfeited this by their pride. Christ has purchased us back, but the demons will not hand over our soul-land without a fight. "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might," writes Saint Paul. "Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Ephesians 6:10-13).

So what path do we take on this campaign? What are the weapons and the armour of this warfare? Who are the enemies and what tactics do they use? And what tactics are we to use against them? In this article we will first look at where we are going - the stages of this journey. Then we will briefly consider who we are - the means we have to make this journey and fight this battle. Finally, we will consider the basic elements of how attacks or temptations come to us and how we can rebuff them.

The ascetic tradition of the Orthodox Church provides us with an Ordnance survey map of the soul. And it is not just monastics who need this map, but every person who wishes to make his or her journey back to the Promised Land. Although there is a vast quantity of ascetic literature on this subject, this literature repeatedly returns to the same themes. Unfortunately much of the

ascetic tradition has been lost in the west over the past centuries, so that our English language does not have as rich a vocabulary of “spiritual medical” terms as Greek does. This makes it all the more difficult for us westerners to understand the workings of our spiritual anatomy. So we will sometimes refer to Greek terms, used in such works as “The Philokalia”.

### ***The Three Stages of the Journey***

The saints have identified three main stages in man’s return to God. The first they call *practical theology* (from *praktiki*, to do with action, and *theologia*, knowledge of God). It is also called *purification*. Repentance is the keynote of this stage - the keeping of the commandments. It concerns things we do, like keeping the ten commandments, partaking in the Holy Mysteries of the Church, and repelling bad thoughts.

Essential to this stage is a belief that the commands of God are not a restrictive force but to the contrary convey the spiritual light, water and nutrition needed for us to blossom. We are made in God’s image, and the commands of God are like a description of His divine nature. If we remodel ourselves - or rather, let God model us - by following this description, we shall become living portraits of God.

This purification leads to the second stage of the journey, *natural or physical theology*. In western mystical writers this is often called *illumination*. At this stage we perceive the inner essences of each thing and person in the natural, created world (hence the terms *natural or physical*). What are these inner essences? God brings each thing into existence with a word, a *logos*. But this divine word is not like a human word, which passes away once spoken; rather, it remains forever within the thing it creates. This *logos* keeps in existence the thing or creature within which it dwells, and guides it towards its fulfilment. So in a real sense God is incarnate in everything He has made, from stone to angel. There is of course a hierarchy here - an animal is a fuller revelation of God than a stone, since it has life as well as mere existence. Nevertheless, absolutely everything has its unique *logos*, which can be perceived by the purified heart.

Why is it necessary to pass through this intermediate stage before beholding God face to face? We cannot behold the sun rays of Divinity straight away, so God mercifully veils Himself in His creation. As we emerge from the darkness of ignorance, we cannot straight away behold the full brightness of the day. God mercifully grants us the lesser light of the moon so that we can adjust our eyes. As we are purified things begin to appear to us, as though the sun were rising. We begin to behold the world in a beautiful way. Everything shows itself to be a love-gift from our Bridegroom, a poem wooing us. At first we discern just individual words or lines in this poem. But gradually everything comes together and the whole creation reveals itself to be a single poem, written on paper fragrant with the Bridegroom’s love.

It is not possible to experience these *logoi* before repentance, before *practical theology*, because we can only know them with our purified spiritual senses. Before repentance, we are all muddled up. Perhaps we let the

pleasures of the body rule us to the extent that we quite forget that we even have a spirit and heart. Or perhaps in our presumption we think that everything can be known through the power of reason. Subsequently we reject anything that does not fit through its sieve and deny that there are spiritual realities at all.

The saints write of a third and final stage, one which has no end, called *mystical theology*, or in western writings, *union*. This is when we are granted to behold God face to face. We have allowed ourselves to be led by the multiple *logoi* to the Logos, to God Himself. As a child my friends and I used to play the game treasure hunt. Mum or Dad would hide clues around the place, which if we understood properly, would lead us to the next clue. Eventually, if we didn't give up hope, we would come to the Grand Prize itself. Such in a way is the move from natural theology to mystical theology. The divine word within each thing promises the existence of the divine Speaker. Or to use another image, if we follow His footprints, we will come to Christ Himself.

But who among us has come this far? Who among us has even progressed a few steps on the ladder of purification, the first leg of the ascent? It is easy to write and read about these things, but in reality blood and much labour are required to experience them. "Give God your blood and He will give you His Spirit" say the ascetics. Relentless struggle against temptation, hunger and thirst for God, ceaseless crying out to God from the depths of our heart, and non-judgement of others are some of the pre-requisites for the journey.

This journey is an inward one, albeit one which bears outward fruit in love for others. And because it is an inward one, we now need to turn our attention to the different aspects of our human person.

### ***The Divine Image and Likeness***

"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ...so God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:26,27). Speaking from their own experience, many Church Fathers make a distinction between image and likeness. They say that *every* person is made in God's image, regardless of their beliefs and actions. By contrast, *likeness* to God is something to be acquired by God's grace acting through the right use of our freedom. Wrong action is the wrong use of a God-given faculty, a misdirection of the image to make the person unlike God. Right action is a wise use of God-given faculties, a right use of the divine image which makes us God-like. This is why the Slavonic word for saint, *prepodobny*, means "much like." The saint is much like God.

It follows from this that nothing is bad in itself; evil and wrong are the misuse of the good. What specifically are the various God-given faculties of the human person?

## ***Our Spiritual Anatomy***

*Body (soma* in Greek). Along with the whole material world, the body is created by God and as such is good. It has many roles in our deification. The body provides us with a means of expressing our love for God and for one another - we build a church or give food to the hungry. It is also as a means of God revealing Himself to us through the material world - we look at a tree with our bodily eyes and praise its Creator. Thirdly, it is because we are flesh as well as spirit that we are united to the material world as well as to God, and so are able to be priests and mediators of the universe.

As a result of our departure from God however, our present body is not as it was originally created. It is now subject to corruption, and is heavier and more dense than intended. It is in fact the “garment of skin” given by God to Adam and Eve after the fall. This unnatural state of our bodies in part explains the struggle which we must wage in order to submit our bodies to our spirits, to return to our true nature. The fasts of the Church, the prostrations, not to speak of the more vigorous ascetic feats to which the saints have often submitted themselves, all have the purpose of returning the person to a healthy relationship of body with the soul. *Asceticism* is this discipline and exercise of the body and soul so that they work together harmoniously (the word comes from the Greek *ascesis*, which means to train or to exercise).

The mortality and unnatural density of our present bodies is not all negative however. God allowed this to come upon us to humble our hearts. For example, a sickness comes upon us because of some sin we have passionately followed; this same sickness might return us to our senses and inspire us to repentance. A bodily illness then produces a spiritual healing.

*Reason (dianoia)*. This is also sometimes rendered as mind, sometimes as intellect. Reason is the faculty of logic which conceptualises about things, which analyses and sees patterns. The information on which the reason works can come either through the physical senses (I see a weed in my garden and my reason tells me to pull it out), or by spiritual revelation.

Church Fathers have sometimes formulated spiritual truths in the form of dogmas, in order to defend people against inaccurate or heretical teachings. But these spiritual truths do not however come to us in the first place through the reason. They come through other spiritual faculties as revelations. The reason can then formulate these revelations, but the Church only does this as much as this is possible and useful. Words can never adequately express the mysteries of the spirit. The reason can know *about* things, people and God, but it cannot itself know them. It cannot for example perceive the inner essences of things, let alone God himself. Blessed Father Paissius of Mount Athos more than once told me how most westerners whom he met live too much in the logical faculty and neglect the heart. If we believe that divine and spiritual things can be contained in the reason, in reality we end up lopping limbs off the thing we are trying to house, and are left not with something living but a carcass. Or else, if something cannot fit through the door of

reason, we say it does not exist. Atheism and secularism is a natural fruit of this tyranny of the brain over the spiritual heart.

*Nous.* There is really no satisfactory English word for this. The English translation of the Philokalia renders it as intellect, while some other writers as mind or simply as nous. Whichever word is used, the *nous* is essentially the innermost aspect of the heart, the eye of the heart or soul. It is that part of us which, if purified, knows God and the inner essences of things in a direct and unmediated way. It is the organ of contemplation. It is the highest faculty we have because through it, as from a spring, the living waters of the Spirit can flood our whole being.

*Heart (kardia).* This is the faculty in which the whole spiritual battle is fought. It is profoundly deep, “an immeasurable abyss” says St Macarius, our deepest and truest self. It can be likened to the sanctuary of a temple - the whole human person, body, soul and spirit, being a single living temple of God. Our nous, reason and body, as well as demons and angels, all meet in the heart. In the purified heart dwells the Holy Spirit. In the unpurified heart the Holy Spirit works, as it were, from the outside, encouraging and empowering it to fight against sin. The heart can also contain all those people whom it loves, rejoicing there with their joys, weeping with their sorrows, even knowing the state of their souls as it prays for them. In a spiritually healthy person, the whole being, including the body, has been drawn back into the heart and is there, as on an altar, ceaselessly offered to God in thanksgiving and praise.

*Fantasy (fantasia).* This is a faculty of our soul, and is perhaps one of its most ambiguous aspects. Basically it is the faculty able to receive images - a sort of neon television tube . There are a number of possible sources for these images. They may be simple memories of objects, people or events. Or they may be provoked by demons, assuming forms from either the external world or directly from the nether world. Alternatively, images may arise from the subconscious, reflecting deeper forces, memories, angers, fears and so on. This is often the source of dreams. But these “soul” images may also surface when someone removes themselves from external distractions - entertainment, television and so on - to pray, or even just to be still. These images which arise from the subconscious usually reveal the disordered and unresolved state of the soul. The Fathers advise us to pay no attention to these images, but continue patiently in prayer, directing our being to Christ rather than entangling ourselves in them. A common source of delusion and madness is when a person believes to be from God images which in fact come from the psyche or from demons

A final source of images, though rare due to the impurity of our hearts, is divine inspiration. Some of the visions of the prophets were of this nature - projections from the heavenly realm onto a purified imagination, given either when awake or when asleep.

*The soul.* This word has many shades of meaning, depending on its context. But in general it refers to that part of the human person which is beyond the mere physical. For our present purposes, it is relevant to note that

the Fathers, following the tripartite division described by Plato, say that there are three powers or energies of the soul. These are all God-given, but may be used constructively or destructively, depending on the direction we give them. (i) There is the *appetitive* or *desiring power* (*to epithymitikon* in Greek). Ultimately, the highest use of this is desire for God. The Fathers often use the word *eros* to describe the soul's yearning for unity with its Creator. (ii) Secondly, there is the *incensive power* (*thymikon* in Greek). Its most common expression is anger, which in a healthy soul is directed against the demons and their suggestions. More generally, it is that faculty which provokes powerful feelings. (iii) Thirdly, there is the *intelligent aspect* (*to logistikon*). In some writings this term more or less corresponds to the *nous* (due to the etymological link between *logistikon* and the divine Logos). In some other writings it seems to refer more to the reason. Sometimes the first two powers of the soul are together referred to as the soul's *passable* aspect, since they are more vulnerable to the passions. The sins of the intelligent aspect are more subtle, though no less destructive.

### ***Our adversaries and the obstacles***

So the whole course of our lives on this earth consists of a right use of the faculties which make us in the image of God so that, through the Holy Spirit, we may enter union with God. Unfortunately, this passage which ought to be a natural growth into an ever more profound likeness of God is made difficult for us by four factors.

Firstly, there are the fallen angels who are extremely envious of this high estate given to us by the merciful Creator. So by every means of guile, trickery and lying they try to keep us from receiving the glory which they themselves once had, but forfeited by pride.

Secondly, through the fall, we do not inherit a human nature in its pristine condition. We have inherited a faulty human nature, a nature subject to corruption, weakened by sickness. Though essentially good, our diseased human nature does not respond so readily to the good as it ought. It is true that God has allowed this sickness so we can learn humility; even death itself provides us with a way of escape from what would otherwise be an endless living death. Nevertheless, we walk with a limp.

Thirdly, we can be influenced for the worse by our own past actions and habits. For example, our conscience is pricked that we should not judge others, so we make a resolution to stop. But we find that it is not a very easy thing to change the habit. We learn, at least in the beginning, that we must make an effort to do what should be natural to us. We find that we have to struggle to cast off the old man's habits so that we can become the true, inner man.

Lastly, the effects of our environment can mitigate against us doing and believing the good. To take an extreme example, if a child has been abused by its father, it will be all the more difficult for it to see its heavenly Father as loving and kind. In a healthy family the child would make a natural correspondence between its loving earthly father and its loving heavenly

Father. In reality, the poor child's earthly father has become an obstacle rather than a help. To take a more common situation, we want to do some good, but someone urges us not to do it, or mocks us when we do it. Or perhaps we are not sure what is the good thing to do, and we get bad advice. It is still possible to live beautifully amidst all these difficulties, but it will be a struggle, needing much discernment.

And so our experience teaches us that our walk with Christ into deification is not a Sunday stroll but an ascent up a great mountain, not a nine to five job, but a life-long battle. In essence this journey is very simple - we are asked to do the will of Christ and not the will of the fallen world and the demons. The journey with Christ is beautiful and full of peace, because Christ has conquered death. But it also needs much watchfulness, labour and courage because of the obstacles and enemies. In the end, our only enemy is ourselves, the wrong use of our free will. Circumstances and demons may tempt us, but we are left with the choice: yes or no. So let us now pass to the basic tactics of this warfare: how temptations come to us and how we can rebuff them.

### ***Temptation and spiritual warfare***

A harmful action is preceded by a harmful thought; a defeat in action is preceded by a defeat in the heart. What are the stages of this inner warfare? The Fathers vary a bit on the labels they give to each of these stages, but they agree on the essentials.

(i) *Provocation (prosvoli: an attack or approach)*. This is the initial suggestion to do evil. This stage is without blame, for Eve experienced such provocation even in paradise. The suggestion may come directly from the demons, or from something which we have heard or seen, like an advertisement. Whatever its source, if this prompting to do harm is rebuffed, the process is cut off at its source. Even if we were to be plagued every day of our lives by that same thought, we would not be culpable for it if rebuffed each time, and it would in no way harm the soul.

Often people get confused and lose their peace just because they have had a bad thought, thinking themselves morally responsible for having had it. This creates an inner agitation and confusion. If we let this and other thoughts accumulate by neither agreeing to them nor disowning them, then complexity enters the soul. - even though we have not agreed with the thought's suggestion as such. It helps to say to such thoughts immediately we are aware of them: "That is not my thought, I have nothing to do with it." We can't stop planes flying overhead, said Father Paisius of Mount Athos, but we don't have to make a runway for them. By this disassociation from the thought we acknowledge that it has no power over us. This explains why *watchfulness (nipsis in Greek)* is so stressed by the ascetic writers. If we are watchful, we recognise a bad thought when it comes to us, disown it, and so diffuse it straightaway.

(ii) *Prepossession (prolipsis)*. This is a suggestion or impulse to sin which comes because we have committed that sin before, perhaps even many



times before, even though we have repented of it . It is a provocation through memory of past sins. We are still not morally responsible at this point of temptation. In practice, this type of temptation is normally associated with a certain attraction, either because we recall the pleasures (albeit fleeting) associated with this sin's committal in the past, or because of a particular wound or weakness in our character. Thoughts which come through such prepossession therefore require more effort to resist than those provocations which come entirely from without.

(iii) *Conversation (homilia in Greek); coupling (syndyasmos)*. At this stage the person has not yet assented to the provocation, but is mulling on it and considering it. No decision has yet been made to rebuff it or assent to it, but in most cases, when someone reaches this stage they are being attracted to the thought.<sup>1</sup> Instead of using their will to resist the thought when it first came to them, they are tasting it a little, they are playing with it. This process begins to wound the soul, and there is a sense of moral responsibility for allowing the thought to get this far.

(iv) *Consent (synkatathesis)* At this point the person commits himself to act on the suggestion. Even if circumstances do not allow him to fulfil his intention, he has nevertheless wounded his soul by submitting himself to its power. This approval causes a degree of inner disintegration. And if he does act, others will be affected directly by what he does. And even if he cannot act out the sin, the attitude itself will affect others, given that we all share the one, single human nature.

(v) *Passion (pathos)*. If a harmful thought is acted upon often, it and its corresponding action will take control of the person. He will suffer under its force as though it were part of his nature (passion means to suffer from something). Much effort and grace is needed to be freed of passions. They are like the rhizomes of bracken which go deep into the soil and can still grow elsewhere even if severed from the mother roots. Passions are the outcome if a person does not vigorously rebuff the suggestions of prepossessions.

## **Conclusion**

Speaking from their profound experience, the Fathers counsel us to acquire a number of basic virtues and skills so that we can safely come to the harbour of rest in Christ. *Obedience* and a *humble attitude* are fundamental. This includes participation in the sacraments, following our spiritual father's advice, and considering ourselves less than all others. *Watchfulness* means that we keep an eye on the factory of our mind and heart, insuring that only good quality materials go into it and good quality goods come out of it, and that the enemy does not sabotage it. The saints have always praised

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<sup>1</sup> In very rare cases, a spiritual father will give a blessing for a disciple to allow himself to enter this stage of considering the temptation, knowing that he will in no way be attracted by it, but will thereby come to a deeper understanding of the temptation's cunning, so that he can later be a spiritual guide to others

*discernment* (*diakrisis* in Greek) as a great spiritual gift. It consists of the ability to distinguish between the different thoughts which come to us, and to know how to treat them. The discerning person will know which thoughts are from God, which from demons, which are from the healthy soul, and which are from the unhealthy soul. Discernment is like being a good general. A good general knows how to read the lay of the land he is campaigning on; he discerns and even anticipates the tactics of the adversary; he listens to his advisors and discriminates what is useful in their advice.

*Simplicity of heart* is also praised by the saints. This is born of a child-like trust in God's care for us. The simple heart does not scheme, judge, or manipulate, but loves all beings without guile. The Fathers urge us to *pray*, not just Sunday prayer, but continual prayer, as much as lies within our power.

*Hunger and thirst* for Christ is fundamental. Such divine eros is perfectly natural to the human person, for Christ is our Bridegroom. If we clear away the stones of attachment to created things from the wellspring of our heart, an indescribably sweet longing for the Beloved begins to permeate our whole being. He opens our eyes to see His beauty within each created thing, even within people we previously found quite unattractive. Seeing that we are drawn by this longing for Him, the Bridegroom safely guides us through the valley of sorrows into His Kingdom. The Comforter will come to those longing with nostalgia for their homeland, which is nothing other than God Himself.