

Orthodox Monasticism

Hesychasm on Mount Sinai

St John Climacus

The person and teaching of St John Climacus exercised a powerful influence on the whole ascetic tradition of the Orthodox Church. It can be asserted that, as well as articulating the tradition current in his day and living it with great asceticism, St John Climacus also influenced the monastic life of later generations. This is why the Church decreed that his memory be celebrated in Great Lent, on the Fourth Sunday of the Fast, to underline that he is a model not just for every monk, but also for every Christian on the way to deification according to Christ.

The biography of St John Climacus was written by the monk Daniel, a brother of the Monastery of Raithu. He was a contemporary of St John, so his account is authentic. We also see there the impact of his personality on his fellow ascetics.

St John Climacus lived in the 6th century and was a hesychast in the Sinai desert. Initially he was tonsured as monk in the Monastery of St Catherine. After the death of his Elder, however, he continued his asceticism in a cave near the Monastery. At an advanced age he became Abbot of the Monastery of Mount Sinai, the God-trodden mountain. His fellow ascetics admired him and regarded him *“like some newly appeared Moses”* because just as Moses ascended Mount Sinai, entered the darkness and received the divine law, so St John too ascended the mountain, *“entered the unapproachable darkness and, mounting by spiritual steps, he received the divinely written law and theoria.”* As Moses led the Israelites, so this new Moses guided the new Israelites, the monks. In one re-

spect, however, St John Climacus differed from Moses. Whereas Moses could not enter the Jerusalem below, St John entered the Jerusalem above. It is stated that “*many were saved through him, or are even now still being saved.*”

This divinely written law that St John Climacus received from God and expounded to His new people is everything written in his book of spiritual delights, the *Ladder*, which is a summary of the monastic way of life. The *Ladder* is a gem of ascetic literature, a priceless treasure for the whole Orthodox Church. In plain words and concise phrases it sets out the whole of man’s journey to deification.

The range of themes covered by this book is well-balanced and reveals its author to be a great theologian of the Church. He begins with renunciation and moves on to detachment, exile, obedience, repentance, remembrance of death and mourning which causes joy. Then he penetrates deep into the world of the passions, before proceeding to expound the virtues. There are two amazing chapters in which he speaks “*about discernment of thoughts, passions and virtues*”. Towards the end the *Ladder* presents the more perfect stages of the spiritual life.

The arrangement of these themes is significant and shows that nobody can speak about the spiritual life unless he begins with renunciation, detachment and exile, in its full dynamic character and meaning. Obedience, the different types of struggle against the passions, prayer and illumination, the theoria of God and theology cannot become a reality unless preceded by this renunciation. Studying St John Climacus’s book carefully, we find no gap through which self-esteem and pride can slip in. All the hidden aspects of the spiritual life are clearly and comprehensively expounded. St John Climacus explores the depths of the human soul, and knows all the innermost details of the spiritual

life. It is therefore unfortunate that we do not have a profound knowledge of his book. If we were familiar with it, we would not need any other method of psychoanalysis or psychotherapy.

I would like to restrict myself, however, to mentioning the teaching of St John Climacus on hesychia, prayer and illumination, so as to make clear that the hesychast tradition has been cultivated on Mount Sinai since the earliest times.

Referring to hesychia, he says that the hesychast is *“he who strives to confine his incorporeal being within his bodily house.”* Hesychia is the return of the scattered nous to the heart, its true home. Both hesychia of the body and hesychia of the soul are required for this purpose. Hesychia of the body is a science of behaviour and sense perceptions, whereas hesychia of the soul is a science of thoughts. When a hesychast leaves his cell out of necessity it is as though he did not leave it, as he is gentle, full of love, reluctant to speak and unmoved by anger. A hesychast is someone who constantly declares, *“O God, my heart is ready”* (Ps. 61:8) and says, *“I sleep, but my heart is awake”* (Song of Songs 5:2).

When speaking of hesychia St John Climacus is also aware of delusion, and makes superb observations about the discernment of different sorts of hesychia. The spiritual wisdom of the Abbas of Sinai and all the saintly ascetics, who know the devil’s tactics and so can distinguish truth from error, is again in evidence here.

The prevailing opinion is that hesychasm is that theological movement which discusses the particular means used to concentrate the nous in the heart. This is not an invention of the more recent Fathers, but forms an integral part of the Church’s tradition.

When speaking of noetic prayer, St John Climacus mentions the Jesus prayer and uniting the prayer with breathing. Referring

to the name of Jesus he says, *“Flog your enemies with the name of Jesus, for there is no stronger weapon in heaven or earth.”* We should have remembrance of death and the Jesus prayer at all times. *“Always let the remembrance of death and the single-phrased prayer of Jesus go to sleep with you and get up with you; for you will find nothing to equal these aids during sleep.”* In other words, it is possible to be wholly given over to the remembrance of death and the single-phrased Jesus prayer even during sleep. However, the fact that St John Climacus was very well acquainted with the hesychastic method of concentrating the nous by means of the Jesus prayer is most expressively revealed in an amazing passage where this new Moses exhorts: *“Let the remembrance of Jesus be present with each breath, and then you will know the value of hesychia.”*

This inner prayer gives rise to great contrition, which makes tears flow. St John says that he knew certain monks who, while practising obedience, did not neglect to *“keep in mind the remembrance of God”*. When they stood in prayer their nous was immediately concentrated and they *“shed streams of tears.”* Tears are a sign that the nous has been united with the heart, so the ascetics accord them great significance. Prayer in the heart is a fire of longing. Through this fire prayer is taken up to heaven and then another fire descends, the fire of the Holy Spirit.

St John Climacus, belonging to the Orthodox Tradition, does not see the spiritual life as a dry, ethical life, nor an outward observance of God’s commandments, but as a state inspired by divine love. He uses two images to demonstrate this living relationship between man and God. One image is that of someone in love. *“Blessed is he who has such love and yearning for God as an enraptured lover has for his beloved.”* The second image is taken from the great love of a mother suckling her child. *“Even a mother does not so cling to the babe at her breast as a son of love clings to the Lord at all*

times.” Referring to the familiar passage from the Song of Songs, he says that this is the sort of intense longing experienced by the person who loves God and is in a state of noetic prayer. Thus his body sleeps “because nature requires this”, but his heart is awake “in the abundance of love”. These words of St John’s express an early hesychastic tradition, according to which man’s nous, detached from its dependence on the senses and dwelling in the heart, prays without ceasing, even if he is asleep. This is actually man’s natural state, and such a person is a natural human being.

According to St John Climacus, the prayer of the nous in the heart is not a merely human condition, nor something that a person does himself. It is an energy of the uncreated grace of God. When we speak of illumination we do not mean enlightenment of man’s reason, but illumination of the nous brought about by the energy of uncreated grace. The saint writes, “*Illumination is an ineffable activity which is unknowingly perceived and invisibly seen.*” St John is also dogmatically exact because it is obvious that he is referring here to the distinction between the uncreated energy and uncreated essence of God. Man shares in God’s uncreated energy and not in His essence, which remains unknown and invisible. God’s energy is visible, but not His essence.

The theology of St John Climacus is authentic because when he speaks about exalted states of the spiritual life, about divine love and illumination, he places them in the traditional Orthodox context of obedience, repentance and the struggle to purify the heart. His description of the place where the penitents lived, which is one of the most amazing passages in the *Ladder*, shows the underlying foundation of intense longing for God and divine illumination. He is well acquainted with praxis and theoria, and the fact that theoria must necessarily be preceded by praxis. The *Ladder* begins with renunciation, and ends with love that is

continuously developing and ascending. His brief exhortation is characteristic: *“Ascend, brothers, ascend eagerly, and be resolved in your hearts to ascend.”*

This is the context in which St John Climacus views Orthodox theology. The beginning of love is the growth of fear, and total purity is the foundation of theology. He who has completely united his senses with God is mystically led to an understanding of His words and becomes a theologian. Someone who does not know God by personal experience *“merely speculates”*. Those who wish to learn the will of the Lord *“must first mortify their own will.”*

St John Climacus’s *Ladder* leading to heaven teaches hesychasm in all its aspects. At the same time it shows all the hidden paths, as well as the errors that may arise to draw people away from this sacred journey. It is a treasure-house of our tradition, and we should be very grateful to the holy mountain of Sinai, which has nurtured such patristic figures and has been hallowed by them.