

Orthodox Psychotherapy

from 'The Soul (Psyche)'

The ancient philosophers believed that the soul is in a specific place in the body, that the body is the prison of the soul and that the salvation of the soul is its release from the body. The Fathers teach that the soul is everywhere in the body. St Gregory Palamas says that the angels and the soul, as incorporeal beings, “are not in a particular place, yet neither are they everywhere”. The soul, as it sustains the body together with which it was created “is everywhere in the body, although not in the sense of being located in a place or encompassed; but it itself sustains, encompasses and gives life to the body, by virtue of the fact that it is in God’s image.”

The same saint – seeing that there are some people (the Hellenisers) who locate the soul in the brain as in an acropolis and that others place it at the very centre of the heart “and in that element therein which is the spirit of the soul” as the most genuine vehicle (Judaisers) – says that we know precisely that the rational faculty is in the heart, not as in a container, for it is incorporeal, nor outside the heart, since it is conjoined. The heart of man is the controlling organ, the throne of grace, according to St Gregory Palamas. The nous and all the thoughts of the soul are to be found there. The saint affirms that we received this teaching from Christ Himself, Who is man’s Creator. He reminds us of Christ’s sayings: “Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth” (Matt. 15:11), and: “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts” (Matt. 15:19). The saint adds further that St Macarius of Egypt said: “The heart directs the entire organism, and when grace gains posses-

sion of the pastures of the heart, it reigns over all the thoughts and all the members, for it is there, in the heart, that the nous and all the thoughts of the soul have their seat.” Therefore the basic aim of therapy, he says, is to bring the nous, “which has been dissipated abroad by the senses,” back from outside and return it to the heart, which is “the place of the rational faculty” and “the first rational organ of the body”

Therefore, according to the teaching of the Fathers, the soul uses the heart as its organ and directs the body. The soul is united with the body. Nemesius of Emesa teaches that “The soul is incorporeal, and not circumscribed to a particular portion of space, but spreading entire throughout: like a sun that spreads wherever its light reaches as well as throughout the body of the sun, and there is no part illuminated by it in which it is not wholly present.” Furthermore, “the soul is united to the body and yet remains distinct from it.”

The soul activates and directs the body and all the members of the body. It is a teaching of the Orthodox Church that God directs the world without created intermediaries, by His uncreated energy. Thus, just as God activates the whole of nature, in the same way “the soul too activates and moves each member of the body in accordance with the energy intrinsic to that member”. Therefore just as it is God’s task to administer the world, so also it is “the soul’s task to guide the body”.

St Gregory Palamas, who dwelt much upon the theme of the relationship between soul and body, says that what takes place with God takes place with the soul. The soul has within it in simple form “all the providential powers of the body”. And even if some members of the body are injured, if the eyes are removed and the ears deafened, the soul is no less possessed of the providential powers of the body. The soul is not the providential

powers but it has providential powers. In spite of the presence in it of the providential powers, it is “single and simple and not composite”, not “compound or pieced together”.

It is very characteristic that in this passage St Gregory Palamas links what takes place through the soul in relation to the body, with God’s relation to the whole of creation. God directs the world with His providential powers. God had the providential powers even before the world was created. Yet God, Who not only possesses many powers but is all-powerful, is not deprived of His unicity and simplicity because of the powers that are in Him³⁸. This shows that the soul is “in the image of God”. What takes place in God takes place analogously in the soul of man.

St Gregory of Nyssa says that the soul is immaterial and bodiless “working and moving in a way corresponding to its peculiar nature, and evincing these peculiar emotions through the organs of the body”. The same saint teaches that the soul is not held by the body but holds the body. It is not within the body as in a vessel or bag, but rather the body is within the soul. The soul is throughout the body, “and there is no part illuminated by it in which it is not wholly present”.

It follows that the soul is in the whole body, there is no sector of a man’s body in which the soul is not present; that the heart is the first rational seat of the soul, that the centre of the soul is there, not as in a vessel but as in an organ which guides the whole body; and that the soul, while distinct from the body, is nevertheless most intimately linked with it.