

Orthodox Church in the world

Part III

Romania

The Theology of St Gregory Palamas and the Scholasticism of Barlaam

The Historical Context of the Life of St Gregory Palamas

1. Question: *We are celebrating 650 years since the death of our Father among the saints St Gregory Palamas. How would you characterise the historical context in which this star of Orthodoxy appeared?*

Answer: St Gregory Palamas really is a great luminary of the Orthodox Church, who showed that the Church is not a human organisation but the blessed Body of Christ and a community of deification. He himself was illuminated by Christ, Who is the true Light and the Head of the Church, and he has continued to this day to give light through his miracles and teaching.

He was born and grew up in difficult historical circumstances. The Roman (Byzantine) Empire was in decline and its territories had been reduced. Two major historical events took place in the era of St Gregory Palamas. For the first time the Ottomans, who had taken control of the whole of Asia Minor, set foot in Eastern Thrace; and for the first time scholastic theology, in the person of Barlaam, entered the domain of Orthodoxy.

Thus St Gregory had to face the anthropocentric religion of Islam – he was actually a prisoner of the Ottomans for a year and had three discussions with them – and also the secularisa-

tion of Western Christian humanism, which was evident in the discussion with Barlaam. At that period the saint developed Orthodox theology at its most profound and, with stalwart spirit and illumined nous, he confronted the two currents coming from East and West. We are faced with the same challenges today, so St Gregory's teaching is timely.

Influence of the Holy Mountain on his Life

2. Question: *Greek secular learning had a rationalistic, scholastic perspective. St Gregory Palamas follows the line of the holy Fathers. What influence did the Holy Mountain have on the spiritual formation of Gregory as a young man and his acquisition of true teaching?*

Answer: Greek philosophy is based on reasoning and imagination, but Western theology, too, is expressed in a scholastic and rationalistic way. Metaphysics makes its presence felt in both these cases. By metaphysics we mean the notion that there is a distinction between natural things, including the world, and metaphysical things, including God, and there is a vast gulf between them. Obviously, in Orthodox theology we do not refer to natural and metaphysical things, but to the distinction between uncreated and created. The uncreated grace of God, however, enters into what is created.

Scholasticism is understood as the movement which relies on reasoning and the rational faculty to understand God. Both scholasticism and metaphysics, therefore, are based on reason and imagination.

St Gregory Palamas, however, followed the life and teaching of the Prophets, Apostles and Fathers. He did not rely on the rational faculty but on the nous, which functions in the heart.

According to the teaching of the Church, the soul's rational faculty is different from its noetic faculty. The rational faculty acts in the brain and is concerned with the world around. The noetic faculty ought to act in the heart, so that the human being is in communion with God.

The saint lived this life first in Constantinople and later on the Holy Mountain. The Holy Mountain exercised great influence throughout the Empire. His whole family was inspired by the Orthodox tradition. His father was a senator, and during meetings he would pray noetic prayer. His mother and his brothers and sisters all followed the monastic life. During his studies he lived in the palace practising austere asceticism and noetic prayer. The teacher who taught him noetic prayer was Metropolitan Theoleptos of Philadelphia, a hesychast bishop. After his studies, when he went to the Holy Mountain, he met great spiritual teachers, such as Nikiphoros the Solitary, who practised and taught noetic prayer. St Gregory himself engaged in noetic prayer and had experience of the uncreated Light; he saw the All-Holy Virgin and many saints. His teaching was the outcome of all these factors.

I gave the book that I wrote about St Gregory Palamas the title Saint Gregory Palamas as a Hagiorite, in order to show the close connection between his teaching and the life of the Holy Mountain.

Effect of his Conflict with Barlaam

3. Question: *What effect did the conflict between Barlaam and St Gregory Palamas have on the Byzantine state at that time?*

Answer: Barlaam was a Uniate monk with an excellent clas-

sical education and an expert knowledge of Western scholastic theology. When he came to Constantinople and to Thessaloniki the hesychastic tradition that he encountered came as a surprise to him. Not knowing the teaching of the Fathers of the Church, he thought that it was a deviation from Christian teaching. This shows how influenced he was by the Western scholastic tradition, and how distant Western theology had become from the teaching of the early Fathers of the Church. At the same time it demonstrates that the hesychastic tradition was well known to the Orthodox people who lived with it.

St Gregory Palamas discerned immediately that Barlaam followed another tradition, different from the Orthodox tradition that he had met and experienced. So when he was asked by the Christians of Thessaloniki to help, he rebutted Barlaam's opinions. We see this in his treatise *In Defence of the Holy Hesychasts*.

This dialogue had a major effect on Roman (Byzantine) society and preoccupied not only theological and philosophical circles but also monks and the laity. Why was this?

When we read the history of the Church, we see that there were always two trends, even within Eastern Christianity: one trend more reliant on philosophy and the other reliant on hesychastic theology. Heretics usually studied theological issues from a philosophical perspective, whereas the holy Fathers used their personal experience to respond to the philosophical problems of their era. St Gregory the Theologian says that the Fathers worked like fishermen, like the illiterate Apostles who were fishermen but illumined by the Holy Spirit, and not like Aristotelians, using the method of Aristotle.

We encounter these two tendencies in every age. In the era of St Gregory Palamas there were humanists, who were influenced by Greek philosophy, and hesychasts – the category to which the

majority of people belonged – who were inspired by the Orthodox experience of the monks.

Christians showed particular interest in this dialogue and, of course, they completely accepted the theology of St Gregory Palamas, which is the theology of the Orthodox Church. This came about in three Councils held in 1341, 1347 and 1351. In particular, the last Council (1351) has the characteristic features of an Ecumenical Council, and it is described by many as the Ninth Ecumenical Council.

Popular Interest in Theological Issues

4. Question: *To what extent were the Emperor and the political leaders of the Byzantine Empire interested in these exalted theological issues? How interested were the uneducated faithful?*

Answer: People in St Gregory Palamas's time were concerned with theological issues because theology was the basis of the life of the community. Today our societies are based on sociological foundations, so people are divided into capitalists, liberals, socialists and so on. The state depends on anthropocentric social systems. At that time, however, the Roman (Byzantine) Empire was based on Orthodox theology, by means of which it solved the various problems that arose.

The role model for individuals and the state was the deified saint. The Church was seen as a therapeutic centre or hospital that cured the human personality, and the clergy were regarded as physicians. We see this in all the works of the Fathers of the Church, and even in the laws of the state and the imperial decrees. Certainly, mistakes were made and sins were committed even then, but people knew how to turn back to God and to

repent. God and the saints were at the centre of their life. The monastic life had influenced ordinary people.

The Emperors theologised, as the Acts of the Ecumenical Councils show. They participated in the Divine Liturgy in a prominent place. They wrote hymns: Theodore Laskaris, for example, wrote the Great Paraklisis; Leo the Wise wrote the morning troparia sung on Sunday at the end of Lauds; and his son, the Emperor Constantine, wrote the troparia of the Resurrection sung after the canon on Sunday at Matins. They vied with the monks in asceticism, fasting and prayer, and on many occasions they abdicated in order to become monks, exchanging the imperial robes for the monastic habit.

On the whole, this is how the patriarchs, bishops and laity lived. The theological schools operated within monasteries, because there they learnt the theological method, namely, purification, illumination and deification.

This whole way of life was common to the educated and uneducated, clergy and laity, monks and those in secular life, rulers and ruled, men and women.

It is certainly not my aim to embellish things, but this was the basis on which they acted. Their fundamental principle was: “Against You only have we sinned, but You alone do we worship.”

Summary of St Gregory Palamas’s Teaching

5. Question: *Can you please summarise the teaching of St Gregory Palamas as it is set out in his main works.*

Answer: It is very difficult to state in a few words the basic points of St Gregory Palamas’s teaching, which is the teaching

of the Orthodox Church as expressed by this saint.

Obviously, his fundamental teaching is the distinction between God's essence and His energy, the fact that God has essence and energy. According to this doctrine, man does not participate in God's essence but only in His energies. It is impossible for man to participate in or know God as regards His essence, but he shares in and knows God with regard to His energies. All God's names are expressions of His energies. Love, peace, righteousness and so on are energies of God. God's energy is one, but it is named according to the results that it produces. We refer to the existence-bestowing, life-giving, wisdom-imparting and deifying energy of God, as well as to His purifying, illumination and deifying energy.

Every essence has energy. This is true of God and the whole creation. The difference is that, when the essence is created, the energy too is created, and when the essence is uncreated, the energy too is uncreated. God's energy is uncreated and not created.

St Gregory Palamas often analysed this whole theology through the event of Christ's Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. The Light which shone from Christ's face was not a third hidden nature in Christ, but the very glory of His deity, which shone forth through His human nature; and His body itself became a source of uncreated energy. The three Disciples on Mount Tabor beheld God's energy as Light and entered into the Light.

This teaching, which had been expressed in the past by many Fathers and which St Gregory Palamas developed further, is highly significant because it reveals the difference between Orthodox and Western theology. Barlaam, as an exponent of Western scholasticism, taught that God's uncreated essence is identical with His uncreated energy (*actus purus*), and that God communicates with created beings through created energies.

This is heresy, and it gave rise to the filioque and many other more recent teachings of the Latins.

St Gregory Palamas also expounded other subjects, including three basic points, as is clear from his treatise *In Defence of the Holy Hesychasts*. The first is that knowledge of God is not acquired through human wisdom but by keeping God's commandments. The second is that the nous returns to the heart through noetic prayer. The third is that theoria of the uncreated Light is participation in the Kingdom of God and is superior to every kind of human wisdom, so those who behold God are higher than the philosophers. In these three points we see the stages of the spiritual life: purification of the heart, illumination of the nous and deification.

Knowledge of God

6. Question: *What is the explanation for the fact that Barlaam did not agree with St Gregory's arguments with regard to the knowledge of God?*

Answer: Barlaam, as I have mentioned already, was an exponent of Western scholastic theology, as it was shaped from the ninth century onwards by Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas and other scholastic theologians who took up the views of St Augustine. Scholastic theologians regarded the philosophers as superior to the Prophets, because the philosophers based themselves on reason which, according to them, is the noblest element of human existence, whereas, in their opinion, the visions seen by the Prophets were imaginary. According to them, philosophy is higher than divine vision.

In addition, Barlaam had Platonic views about the body and

despised it. Also, his opinions on the Holy Spirit and God in general directed his thinking towards a sort of Christian agnosticism. Whereas St Gregory Palamas was a God-seeing theologian, Barlaam was a speculative philosopher.

When, in the Eastern region, Barlaam came across the tradition of hesychastic theology, according to which the nous enters the heart and prays noetically and is then illumined and beholds the uncreated Light, and the human body participates in deification, and particularly when he heard about the method taught by Nikiphoros the Solitary to return the nous to the heart and acquire communion with God, he regarded this as constituting heresy.

The major significance of St Gregory Palamas lies in the fact that, abundantly illuminated by God and guided by the experience he had gained, he demonstrated that hesychastic theology is the true method for acquiring knowledge of God, and that Orthodox hesychia is the basic pre-condition for Orthodox theology.

Patristic Teaching as the Basis of St Gregory Palamas's Teaching

7. Question: *On which holy Fathers was St Gregory's teaching based?*

Answer: St Gregory Palamas had the particular blessing of living from his earliest childhood within the framework of the Orthodox tradition. He knew great hesychastic Fathers, he went to the Holy Mountain, and he reached the heights of the spiritual life, theoria of the uncreated Light. Thus he became an empirical theologian. When one reads the biography of St Gregory Palamas written by St Philotheos Kokkinos, one understands

that he himself beheld God and spoke from his experience of divine vision, so he was a real theologian.

When it was necessary for him to defend this way of life and to confront Barlaam's views, he used passages from the holy Fathers, including the Cappadocian Fathers (St Basil the Great, St Gregory the Theologian and St Gregory of Nyssa), St John Chrysostom, St Macarius of Egypt, St Dionysius the Areopagite, St Maximus the Confessor, St Mark the Ascetic, St Symeon the New Theologian, St Nicetas Stethatos and others.

It should be noted that Barlaam made use of even more patristic texts but, because he did not possess personal spiritual experience, he misinterpreted them. Although St Gregory cited fewer passages from Holy Scripture and from the writings of the Fathers than did Barlaam, he interpreted them authoritatively, because he was himself a Father of the Church. He contributed a new theological message that met the challenges of his era, without departing from the tradition.

This shows that it is not enough simply to refer to passages from the Fathers. We must understand their 'spirit' and we must be living organisms. Saints are recognised only by saints, just as only a good scientific doctor can recognise, when reading a book, that its writer is a good doctor.

Consequences of the Church's Victory through St Gregory Palamas

8. Question: *What were the consequences of the Archbishop of Thessaloniki's victory against the scholastic perspective concealed beneath the rationalistic influence?*

Answer: It was not St Gregory Palamas's victory but the vic-

tory of the Orthodox Church and the truth that it possesses, through its chosen son, St Gregory Palamas.

The entire discussion contributed to the fact that the reason-based, rationalistic view of scholastic theology did not prevail, and the hesychastic life remained the basis of the Orthodox Church. Defining Orthodox hesychia, St Gregory Palamas says that hesychia is when the nous and the world stand still; it is initiation into heavenly secrets and the laying aside of thoughts so that the inner life may develop. This way of life is the praxis on which theoria is based. When someone reaches the vision of God, this is proof of a healthy soul. Thus Orthodox hesychia, which is also called the neptic tradition, is the true therapeutic method of the Church.

Orthodox hesychia is also the basis of Orthodox dogma. By means of hesychia the Prophets, Apostles and Fathers arrived at the vision of the uncreated Light and subsequently formulated dogma in order to safeguard this life.

The teaching of St Gregory Palamas played a major role in preserving Orthodox theology during the period of Turkish domination. It influenced the entire 'philokalic' renaissance in the Balkans and Russia, as well as finding expression through the iconography of Palaeologan art and the Macedonian and Cretan Schools, as can be seen in the wall paintings in all the churches in the Balkans and Russia.

The Message of St Gregory Palamas for our Era

9. Question: *What is the message of St Gregory Palamas for Christians today?*

Answer: Today the world around us expresses Barlaam's

teaching in many respects. Barlaamism is conveyed through education, contemporary arts and the mass media, as they are based on reason, imagination and the senses. Man's nous today is dispersed among created things instead of turning towards God. Instead of praying to the Creator he is attracted by created things, and instead of loving the Maker he loves what has been made. This is the situation since the Fall.

As Orthodox Christians it is necessary for us to know the teaching of St Gregory Palamas and, above all, to learn to live in a hesychastic way, with prayer and asceticism, as our Orthodox tradition lays down. We should not regard the world as evil, but we should avoid the worldly way of thinking. The body is not profane, but the carnal mentality creates problems.

St Gregory Palamas is very relevant today. Through his teaching we can deal with various contemporary situations and current problems, such as humanism, which lays too much stress on man's natural gifts; self-love, which expresses itself as irrational love for the body; psychologism, which isolates human beings and closes them in on themselves; making a god of material goods, which leads to intense social problems; Eastern mysticism, which negates the concept of person in God and human beings; Western moralism, which takes a very superficial view of humankind, and so many other things.

St Gregory Palamas's teaching responds to all these current problems, because it stresses that human beings, as they were created by God and re-created through Christ's incarnation, have true communion with God and one another, so everything in life is transformed. In Christ people are transfigured, sanctified and deified within the Church, which is a communion of deification. The powers of their soul are turned towards God, and the so-called passions are not uprooted but transformed, so

that the human body too is glorified, made radiant and deified. Such human beings do not just live morally but spiritually. They cannot live lavishly when their fellow human beings are suffering. In St Gregory's teaching, therefore, we see Orthodox theology, ecclesiology, ascetic teaching and sociology, which provide answers to existential, spiritual, social and ecological problems.

St Philotheos Kokkinos writes that St Gregory Palamas had studied the philosophy of Aristotle and learnt it very thoroughly. When he went to the Holy Mountain, however, he prayed continuously using the phrase "Lighten my darkness." In spite of his gifts and his knowledge of philosophy, he felt that his nous was far from the Light of God and was therefore in darkness. This is not just a philosophical or moral issue, but a spiritual one. This continual prayer of his led to the illumination of his nous, through which he beheld the glory of God and was sanctified. His last words before departing this life, which he repeated many times, were: "The heavenly things to the heavenly", that is to say, those who live with heavenly things go to the heavenly realm.

May this cry, "Lighten my darkness", become our prayer as well. May we live as God wishes, so that we may be led to our real homeland, "the city to come", whose builder and maker is God.