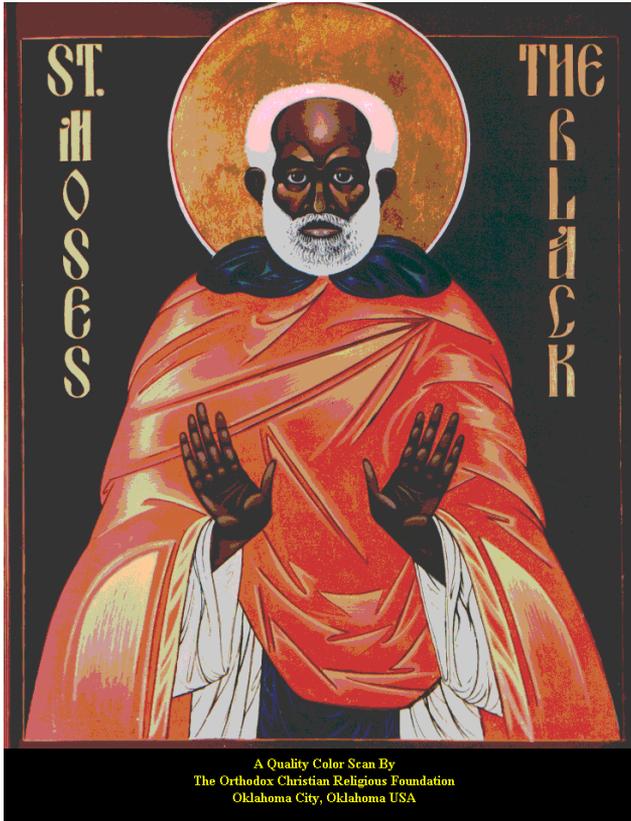


The Centrality of Prayer



“If a man’s deeds are not in harmony with his prayer, he labors in vain.”

Moses the Black

In Christ we are drawn to become what we already are. Like God, we become life for the world.

This *new* life for the world begins in prayer. Prayer, in its variety of forms, is a simple abiding in God. It is a mutual seeing. In prayer we learn to see as God sees and the energies of God become our energies. As we experience God's love we begin to collaborate with God in the ongoing creation of the world. God's energies, as they become incarnate in us as compassion, respond to the suffering, pain and inequalities present in modern life. Compassion is not a commodity to be shared or legislated by the strong for the weak. It is the intimacy and life-giving energy that flows from the elimination of unnecessary boundaries and barriers human beings erect for survival, control and protection. Compassion is the grace to go beyond ourselves and find ourselves present in others. We learn this from God. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Our vision to see Christ present in others is inspired by our openness to Christ's presence in ourselves. By listening to the Word within us we can recognize that same voice in the world around us. Prayer and life become a seamless garment woven with the

thread of daily life. Rather than separating ourselves from the world, prayer engages us fully with the world. Through our contemplation and action the incarnation of God's presence continues in the world. Like the great icons of the eastern Christian churches, our ordinary lives and actions can become windows that draw others into an experience of God's presence and redeeming power.

Orthodox icons are examples of this principle in physical form. Lovingly crafted from wood, egg tempera, paints derived from minerals, traditional design patterns depicting scenes from the Bible and the lives of the saints, and the discipline of the iconographer's life of prayer and skill become an object which leads us beyond itself into the heart of God. In the same way, our daily work, relationships, passions and joys, sins and contrition, search for knowledge, creative expression and embracing the challenges and opportunities of life become a living icon of God's presence in the world.

This very positive theology of God's presence in human life and the natural world means that creation is both a gift and a responsibility. We experience God's love in such ordinary things as natural beauty, food,

living creatures, care of the earth, technology, work, friendships, humor, recreation and art. These natural things bring meaning and fulfillment to human life. At the same time, our misuse of creation confronts us with the consequences of failed humanity and the need to collaborate with God in creation. Things close at hand remind us of the faithful presence of God in the midst of life and discern the will of God. The earth is where we experience authentic life in God, through both success and failure.

At the same time, our union with God is an *eternal relationship* because God is eternal. This is why the resurrection of Jesus lies at the center of Christian belief and living. The union with God that Jesus experienced transcended human mortality. This central mystery of Christian life declares that when God is present in human life, human death becomes a threshold linking our finite life to the transcendent and eternal life of God. Even in death, human life continues to be transformed. This pattern of life, death and transformation is embedded in all creation. It is the Paschal Mystery in which we are drawn into the reality of eternal life each day of our lives. Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, two early Christian mystics and theologians, realized that we live simultaneously in two contexts: who we are now and who we shall

be in our completion in God. We, and all creation, exist in this present finite cosmos and at the same time in an eternal fullness, which will *ultimately be realized* in God. Jesus taught that it is in giving ourselves to God's image in us that we find this vision of life. By dying to self-made worlds and limited vision, we find ourselves transformed and made whole through the vision of God.

The prayer needed for living in a postmodern world must be as authentic and realistic as the world, itself. It should not lead us away from the world, but engage us more fully in the lives and issues present in society. Just as the world is perceived as both material and spiritual, so the single life of prayer is experienced as *action* and *contemplation*. Dynamic prayer collaborates with God in the on-going creation of the world through a union of desires. It is the *mystery* of God's life in us working through us in the midst of goodness and evil. Prayer is alive when it becomes an expression of the tension between "the way things are" and "the way things could become." The distance between these two realities is the venue for life. The substance of prayer is to be *fully alive*. A person of prayer is a person who is "in God" and in the world at the same time.

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