

Making God's Life Tangible In A Troubled World



At the heart of the Christian way of life is the awareness that authentic human life incarnates the nature of God. Disciples of Jesus recognize God's presence in his life and are called to make Christ present in the world through the way they live.

Summary

In a variety of ways the New Testament proclaims that the life of Jesus of Nazareth incarnates the nature of God in a human life through the power and presence of God's Spirit. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John provide details of this mystery and demonstrate Jesus' firm belief that in his words and actions God was present in a unique and powerful way.

The New Testament also proclaims that it is possible for you and me to participate in the same life of God that was present in Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus said, "Follow me.", he invited women and men to place their lives in the same relationship Jesus had with God. He exhorted them to be rooted and grounded in him. The cost of this discipleship is a willingness to live no longer for ourselves, but for God and what God desires for human life and the world. God's unique presence in Jesus' human life transforms what is possible for human life. Disciples of Jesus are called to make God's life tangible in their daily lives, through the power of the Holy Spirit, by participating in the nature of God. Because human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, early Christian communities called the process of making the image and likeness of God tangible in daily life "theosis" (we participate in God's nature, yet remain human). They believed this is the heart of the Christian way of life. How is this possible?

We are created in the Image of God

In the Hebrew scriptures, Genesis declares that human beings are created in the image of God. Hebrew scriptures declare, also, that no person should behold God's face. Even the name of God may not be spoken because God is beyond naming or any form of definition. God is a mystery and at the same time known to be real in the many contexts of human life. This displays a wonderful tension between the transcendence and immanence of God. Hebrew scriptures are filled with references, often poetic, in which God is beyond all thought and human experience and at the same time intimately present in the world and in human life.

If this is true, if it is congruent with human experience, it says something incredibly wonderful about humankind. If we are "the image of God" then we, too, must manifest God's presence in both our finite human existence and in a mysterious, ineffable sacredness. Genesis is saying that we bear the same transcendence and immanence of God in a dynamic tension. Perhaps the Hebrews struggled with these two aspects of God because they experienced a similar struggle within themselves, a struggle common to all human beings. We sense, within us, with an obscure sympathy, a journey in which flesh and blood and human will and being are destined to manifest God's presence. The image yearns to be born.

Theosis: Moving From Image to Likeness

The New Testament and early eastern Mediterranean Christian communities of faith recognized this truth about humankind and viewed the human journey as a movement from bearing the image of God in our nature to becoming the "likeness" of God through our manner of life. Early theologians like Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximos the Confessor, through earnest prayer and study of scripture, declared to their Greco-Roman culture that the human vocation is to mature from "image" to "likeness". We are called to *participate in and embody* the divine nature. This Christian perspective rejected a common dualistic philosophy of the day, which saw the human and divine natures as separate. The writings of Gregory of Nyssa and Maximos proclaimed that human beings are sacred and, while we are not God, we bear the "real presence" of God in time and space. We share God's nature, while remaining God's creatures. How is this possible?

The Origin of God's Grace

In the 14th century Gregory Palamas, a monk of Mt. Athos and Greek Bishop of Thessoloniki, affirmed the biblical truth that God is both transcendent and yet immanent in relation to human lives, but he articulated this wisdom in a new way. Gregory claimed that, during their prayer, he and other monks of Mt. Athos experienced God's presence in the same uncreated

light that Jesus experienced on Mt. Tabor during his transfiguration. Gregory asserted that their experience of God in the form of uncreated light was authentic, while God, at the same time, remained transcendent. His critics said, "That is not possible! What you experienced had to be part of creation." Gregory responded using fourteenth century theological and philosophical language influenced by the New Testament, the desert fathers (especially Evagrius), great patristic theologians and monks like Gregory of Nyssa and Maximos the Confessor, and the experiences of prayer and teaching of his fellow monks on Mt. Athos. In his response Gregory affirmed that God, in God's essence, is indeed beyond human experience and knowledge. Our human faculties of reasoning and experience within creation are not capable of knowing God directly because God's essence transcends creation. It is not within our "grasp." At the same time Gregory declared that human beings can participate in the "energies" of God that penetrate creation and human lives. God's energies are actions of God's transcendent essence in time and space, yet they are not part of creation; they are uncreated. They manifest God's nature and creative power without making God's transcendent essence present in time and space and, therefore, subordinate to limitations and influences of creation.

Gregory declared that we can participate in God's nature through God's energies. This

experience provides the context in which a human being gradually receives the grace of the Holy Spirit (the uncreated energies of God) to manifest the “likeness” of God. Gregory’s personal experience of divine light in prayer led him to declare that the divine light which transfigured Jesus on Mt. Tabor is accessible to human beings through God’s uncreated energies. This reveals that authentic human life is God-filled life. It is the meaning of theosis.

Gregory’s conclusions are congruent with Jesus’ prayer for his disciples and all persons who are led to place their lives in him. *“I ask not only on behalf of these [disciples], but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”* (John 17:20-23) In Jesus’ Jewish heritage “glory” refers to the presence of God. The presence of God revealed in Jesus’ life (including his experience of divine light on Mt. Tabor) is what he desires for all persons. Jesus is very clear about this! Just before Jesus died the disciple Thomas asked Jesus, *“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”* Jesus replied, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through*

me." Later, in response to Thomas' desire to see God Jesus replies, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:1-14) The glory of God's presence in Jesus is tangible and becomes the path to authentic human life. The God-filled life of Jesus is the Way to God-filled human life, through the energies of the Holy Spirit. It is a gift, not something we achieve. In Gregory's words,

"Through grace, God in his entirety penetrates the saints in their entirety, and the saints in their entirety penetrate God entirely, exchanging the whole of him for themselves, and acquiring him alone as the reward of their ascent toward him, for he embraces them as the soul embraces the body, enabling them to be in him as his own members."

What does this mean for you and me? It is not esoteric theology for the few. Gregory's experiences and teaching help us understand the meaning and fundamental importance of how God's grace can permeate every person's spiritual formation and living. The primary environments of our formation into the likeness of God are our local faith community and our personal life of prayer. The energies of God interact with our hearts and minds as we pray, study and meditate on the Bible, participate in the sacraments of the Church, especially the Eucharist, and become involved in the lives of other people.

*"God walks in the soul,
and the soul emigrates to God."*

Origen of Alexandria

The Church is a Community of God's Presence

At the heart of this Christian proclamation is the awareness that authentic human life incarnates the nature of God. This is exemplified in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The central and unique declaration of Christians is that God was present in Jesus' human life in a relationship of complete union. It proclaims that it is both God's desire and nature to be present in creation and in human nature. Gregory Palamas rejected that portion of Hellenistic philosophy which described human life as only a shadow of what is real or eternal. He, along with other theologians before him, insisted that human life incarnates the divine nature and spoke of the process of "theosis" or deification as the purpose and destiny of human beings. He proclaimed that the Church, as the embodiment of God's presence in the risen Christ, is a community whose primary purpose is to nurture individual Christians in the process of participating in the divine nature and thus become fully human. The Church is a community where the risen Christ is a *present reality*. It has been gathered together by the presence of God in each individual and each person's union with God is the source of the Church's unity. Christ is not only *present* in the church; he is *embodied* in the lives of

its members.¹ The Christian tradition proclaims that each community of Christians, called together by the presence of the risen Christ in each of its members, embodies the same union with God present in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The vocation of each local congregation is to become an environment where the unending process of theosis takes place. Although every person's movement toward manifesting God's likeness is unique and personal, the process of this sanctification takes place within community because authentic human life is lived in communion with other persons. The fundamental purpose of each faith community, therefore, is to become an environment of grace that forms each member as she or he grows in manifesting the likeness of God in his or her life. This is why scripture, liturgy, and the sacraments are essential parts of each Christian community.

The Sacraments as Experience of God's Formative Energy

Gregory Palamas described the sacraments as liturgical actions and signs through which divine energy or grace nurtures each member of the local faith community. Those who are baptized into Christ share in the fullness of the divine and

¹ This organic dimension of the presence of Christ in the Church is distinct from yet may empower and guide the institutional dimension that organizes its temporal life.

human life present in him. They enter into a process of collaborating with God in which the grace of baptism comes to fruition in the life of the believer. Baptism is a sacrament of vision and is the root of all unity because it joins the baptized in a birth that transcends all physical boundaries and categories.

The Eucharist is the primary sacrament of the presence of God. In the context of a sacred meal, those who have been gathered experience a fullness of union with God and each other. This is a real presence and a sacred mystery. In an ordinary event, with the simple gifts of bread and wine, participants enter into the most fundamental experience of life. The incarnation of God becomes manifest in bodily form in those present. In this way the Eucharist embodies the central vocation of the Church: to ennoble human beings as sacred, to guide and form them in becoming the likeness of God, and empower them to incarnate God's presence in the world through compassionate engagement in the lives of other people.

God's Faithful Presence in Scripture and the Faith Community

This early proclamation about the nature and vocation of human life is taken both from the Bible and the experiences of God's presence in the prayer of the early Church.

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of

him who called us through his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature."

(2 Peter 1:3-4)

How can we know that the Bible is reflecting this truth accurately? In other words, can we trust that God "speaks" through the Bible or the Christian community as it lives and interprets the Bible? In the 4th century, Origen of Alexandria spoke eloquently about God's real presence in the Bible in a way that is also congruent with the message of the Bible concerning the nature of human beings. Origen was convinced that an image participates in the reality it reflects. The presence of the reality in the image is authentic. Therefore, the image manifests the reality; it makes the reality present. It is not necessary for the complete essence of the reality to be fully present for its presence to be real. This is the foundation for Christian understanding and experience of the sacraments. As liturgical actions, they bring to birth the reality they symbolize. Origen encountered the words of the Bible as images of the Logos, the creative energy of God present in the world, the Word of God. He experienced God's presence in the words of Scripture. He trusted that this presence was authentic whether or not what the words specifically described was literal or figurative. Origen also believed that the Word of

God had many forms and that the presence of the Logos in those forms could guide and instruct the life of the believer.

As we encounter the risen Christ in the Bible and the sacramental life of the Church, especially the Eucharist, we become what Christ is and are drawn into his divine life. Our Christian ancestors placed great emphasis on contemplative prayer, study and meditation on the Bible, and participation in the Eucharist as primary channels of grace that, with our cooperation, lure us into divine life.

The Unity between God and Creation

If Origen's understanding and experience of God's presence in the Bible and the life of the Church is valid, then it expresses a profound insight about the divine image in humankind found in Genesis. It declares that humans incarnate God's real presence in time and space by participation in the divine nature of God. If this is true for humankind, then all creation manifests God's presence. This means that the Hebrew scriptures are accurate in expressing both God's transcendence and immanence. Although God declares through the prophet Isaiah, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways..." (Isaiah 55:8), there is a natural relationship and communication between God and humanity. This evaporates the conventional distinction between what has been called the

natural and the supernatural. This ancient distinction infers the existence of two separate realms. Yet it seems clear that the Bible and the earliest Christian communities reject such a distinction and, in doing so, part company with a major foundation of Hellenistic philosophy and any other dualistic outlook on the world and human relationships.

What can this mean for us? It means that although God is, indeed, ineffable, God's presence in creation is real. All creation is sacred because it participates in the divine nature. There is an indelible bond between God and creation. Nothing is profane. Everything is of immense worth. The desert father Isaac the Syrian (seventh century) said, *"What is a compassionate heart? It is a kindling of the heart over every creature-over mankind, the birds, animals, demons, and the whole creation. And when he remembers them or contemplates them, the tears well up from his eyes out of the great pity which grips his heart. And his heart feels itself moved and possessed, and cannot bear to see or hear any creature suffer hurt, or the slightest pain."*

If the bond between God and creation is real, then that same bond must exist between every part of creation, including human beings. This fundamental truth repudiates the false distinctions and barriers we humans have created and is also the basis for responsible, moral and compassionate living. This truth is the heart of Judeo-Christian living. "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all

your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and with all your strength; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Is this what Jesus desired when he prayed: "Abba, may they all be one as we are one."?

The Incarnation of God in Creation

The awareness that the distinction between "natural" and "supernatural" does not exist may help us understand the central aspect of Christian faith: *incarnation*. In this context, it is perfectly *natural* for God to be manifest in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth. And as Jesus declared, it is perfectly natural for God to be manifest in every human being. Perhaps it is only in our minds that such declarations seem impossible and contrary to "natural law". St. Paul was convinced that in the human life of Jesus "...all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." (Colossians 1:19) And as we have seen, St. Peter proclaimed that we who are in bodily form, therefore, are called also to "...participate in the divine nature." (2 Peter 1:4) This mystery of mutual presence and co-inherence does not negate the dynamic reality of God's transcendence and immanence nor does it eliminate the unique human individuality of each human being. The sacrament of God's presence in Jesus declares that this same relationship is the natural destiny of fully human life. Paul said with great conviction: "It is no longer

I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:20)

Jesus, the Christ, our Way from Image to Likeness

As we have seen in the teaching of Gregory Palamas and the Second Letter of Peter in the New Testament, it is the life of God in Jesus Christ that draws us to incarnate the image of God, already in us, in our manner of life. The total and absolute congruity of divine transcendence and immanence in Jesus' life, death and resurrection make that same union with God possible for us. Jesus told his disciples, "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all humankind to myself." (John 12:32) Yet, we have the freedom to reject this fullness of life. Sin and its consequences are the result of our rejection of authentic humanity and our attempts to create ourselves in our own image, rather than incarnate God's image. When we reject our divine image we also reject being authentically human. We turn away from our natural state of being. Without God there can be no truly human life. The fundamental consequence of sin is alienation from God, other human beings, and creation. We become less than human. Specific consequences of sin such as greed, injustice, immorality, conflict and war and selfish abuse of creation corrupt humanity through self-love. Sin is a result of the deprivation of the divine life in us and leads to a personal rejection of grace, the uncreated energies of God. Guilt, in this

context, is an inner reminder of who we really are. Even in the midst of sin, the image of God remains, and that blessed weight can reawaken us. The power of seeking and receiving God's forgiveness is a step across a threshold toward transformation. Repentance is the first step in returning to our original and natural state of being. The fundamental aspect of redemption lies, then, in the restoration of full humanity in each person. This is the saving power of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Salvation is the reintegration of each human being to one's true self in Christ. It is a never-ending process.

Abiding in God: A Summary of the Ancient Tradition of Theosis

The early eastern Christian communities of faith proclaimed that the vocation of each human being is to collaborate with the image of God in us and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, manifest God's likeness in our daily lives. They placed great emphasis on inner attention and watchfulness. These disciplines of prayer produce single-minded openness to God's Spirit and unite every person with what is most fundamental in life. By non-attachment to what is peripheral and futile each heart makes space for what God's desires. The desert fathers and mothers called this purity of heart. Purity of heart is not a state of moral perfection, it is a desire to be authentically human and makes moral living possible through the

manifestation of divine love. These early communities of faith invited each person to make this journey from image to likeness. They used the words "theosis" or "deification" to describe God's desires for us and how we are lured by divine love to manifest God's nature in the way we live. Both words are symbols pointing toward God's incarnation in us as we participate in and are formed by the uncreated energy of God. Theosis mirrors in us the triune life of God. It is an entering into union with God, who permeates every aspect of our humanity. It is a dynamic movement of God's transcendence and immanence within us through which we are transformed and God becomes present. In this movement, an incarnation of love, the Spirit of God lures and binds us in *mutual* love. God remains, in essence, totally ineffable, yet the Spirit, through the movement of grace, imparts God's nature and energy to us. Our human nature is not lost or over-powered. Nor are we being changed from someone who is "bad" to someone "good." We are being completed as sacred persons by the presence of the Christ, the Logos. Jesus proclaimed, "I have come that they may have life, and have it in abundance." (John 10:10) Later, Paul responded, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:20) This grace-filled relationship in each person is the source of the life of the Church and embodies the triune dimensions of God's being.

This life of grace makes salvation a daily event, as we become more fully human. This means that salvation is a *present reality* and its potential already lies within each of us. Sanctification is moving, daily, ever toward God, rather than a static goal or achievement. Jesus said: "The realm of God is already within you." (Luke 17:20-21) And "It is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32) The path toward theosis is articulated in Paul's awareness that we are called to collaborate with God, in awe and humility, as we work out our own salvation. God has given us both the desire and talent that make this possible. (Philippians 2:12-13) These human efforts cooperate with and are fulfilled by the uncreated energy of God in us. This is grace and we are formed by grace from "image" to "likeness" in the life of the Church and in our life of prayer. The one who leads us and becomes our life is Jesus, the Christ. It is both a mysterious and unending process.

"When the soul has become simple, unified, really like God, it finds fulfillment...it clings to the One who alone is really lovable and desirable. It is unified with him by the living activity of love. It is transformed into that which it apprehends, continually making new discoveries."

Gregory of Nyssa

Making Christ Tangible in Our Daily Lives

How does a person become united with the One who Gregory of Nyssa described as “the living activity of love”? For Christians, the path is Christ Jesus who is “the way, the truth and the life.” (John 14:1-7) He embodies both the fullness of divine life and truly human life. Jesus, through his complete openness to the movement of the Spirit, reveals the transcendent essence of the Holy One, whom he called Abba. In his *experience* of this unconditional divine love we glimpse the nature of true humanity. Contrary to the Hellenistic philosophy of his day, Gregory Palamas insisted that this divine nature in us is not a secret gnosis or knowledge intended to release us from the limitations of finite existence. This is not knowledge about God, but *experience of God* in the context of human life. *It is here on earth, within our bodily existence, that we experience and are made whole by divine love.*

As we experience the same love Jesus experienced, it becomes possible for us to see with the same eyes of love. “Abide in me as I abide in you.” (John 15:1-11) Theosis is not self-serving. It is not about “me and God.” Our experience of the divine life in and around us, in prayer, is the womb of compassion. In Christ we are drawn to become what we already are. Like God, we become life for the world.

“The most shining demonstration of the act of grace within us is in our sympathetic awareness of our

neighbor. By grace we long to make those who are in need at home with us, as we wish to make God at home with us. Nothing contributes so much to our growth in righteousness, to our drawing close to God, to our deification, as compassion showed to those in need."

Fr. Dumitru Staniloae, a Romanian contemplative theologian.

The Centrality of Prayer

Our 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." (John 1:14)

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 both 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.



Icon of Gregory Palamas

“For all the virtue we can obtain, and such imitation of God as lies in our power, does no more than fit us for union with the Deity, but it is through grace that this ineffable union is actually accomplished.”

Spiritual Growth

Theosis takes place through *spiritual growth* within a Christian community, coupled with personal prayer and passionate engagement with society. Spiritual growth is the process of being conformed to the image of God and gradually manifesting the likeness of God in our daily living. Although we collaborate with God in this process, it is always a gift of the Spirit.

We stand in the present permeated with the past. Yet we are linked simultaneously with eternity. The prayer, wisdom, and experience of a great cloud of witnesses within our Christian tradition surround us. Prayer is the link and the energy that holds us in the sustenance of our tradition as we discern and give wings to what lies ahead. The Holy Spirit makes all this possible. Therefore, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 2:5)

“Remain in Jesus.”

Abba Paul the Great

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