

Orthodox Spirituality

There is an excellent book written by the Romanian theologian Dimitru Staniloae. It is titled *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar*. While initially this book was intended for use in Romanian theological schools it provides an excellent overview of the path to theosis according to Orthodox Tradition. It gives you deep insights into the lived Eastern Spirituality of the Orthodox Tradition. It is most useful also in understanding your personal Spiritual path.

What follows is a series of commentaries on this book that were posted in the blog *Orthodox Way of Life* (www.orthodoxwayoflife.blogspot.com) . Below is an index to the posts in this blog . All the entires to this blog on this book are included in the document. This 70 page commentary will provide a guide to the the material in this book.

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Deacon Charles Joiner

What is Meant by Orthodox Spirituality?

"Our mind goes outside itself and so unites with God; it becomes more than mind."
Saint Gregory Palamas

Spirituality is a most difficult term because it is used in many ways, often in ways that denigrate true Christian spirituality. Often, when one does not have any real faith they say, "I don't believe in any religion but I am spiritual." The term spiritual generally refers to an undefined inner spirit of man. So, those who do not have any firm religious belief have some sense of this inner spirit, but no clear path or intent to develop it. For Orthodox Christians there is a very very clear notion of this inner sense of spirit and a clear path exists to respond to it.

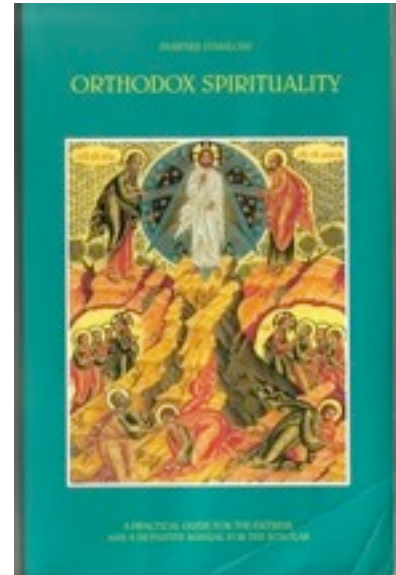
Orthodox spirituality involves a journey towards a mystical union with God through living the Gospel teachings in the context of the Church and participating in her sacraments and Holy Traditions. Dimitru Staniloae speaks to this in His book, Orthodox Spirituality.

He says Orthodox Christian spirituality

"presents the process of a Christian progress on the road to perfection in Christ, by the cleansing of the passions and the winning of the virtues, a process which takes place in a certain order. In other words, it describes the manner in which the Christian can go forward from the cleansing of one passion to the cleansing of another, and at the same time acquiring of the different virtues."

We need to ask ourselves: "Do we know this process? What are the steps along this path?" In the next few posts I will be sharing with you some of the thoughts of this great Orthodox Theologian about these and other questions on Orthodox Spirituality.

Reference: Orthodox Spirituality, p 21



The Aim

God calls us to perfection (Matt 5:48). This can't be obtained without the participation in the divine-human life of Christ.

"Therefore the goal of Orthodox Spirituality is the perfection of the believer by his union with Christ."

Dimitru Staniloae sees the following features of Orthodox Christian Spirituality:

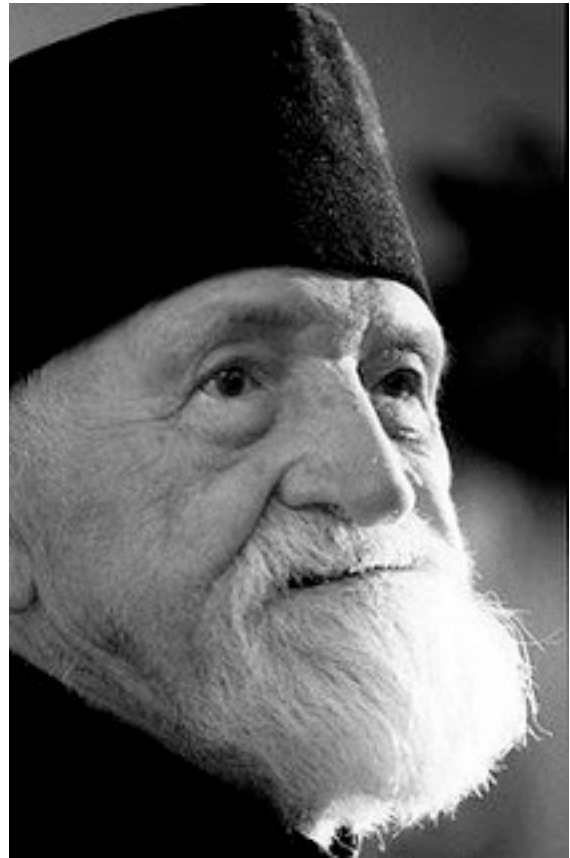
- 1. The culminating state of the spiritual life is a union of the soul with God, lived or experienced.*
- 2. This union is realized by the working of the Holy Spirit, but until it is reached man is involved in a prolonged effort of purification.*
- 3. It takes place when man reaches the "likeness of God." It is at the same time knowledge and love.*
- 4. Among other things, the effect of this union consists of a considerable intensification of spiritual energies in man, accompanied by all kinds of charismas.*

He then says ,

The goal of Christian Orthodox spirituality is none other than living in a state of deification or participation in the divine life.

This raises the question, what is this state of deification? What is the nature of this "love and knowledge"? How do we attain it and how are we perfected. Fr. Staniloae says it involves *"a prolonged effort of purification."*

Ref: *Orthodox Spirituality* p 22.



Deification - The Uncreated Light

Deification is an enhypostatic and direct illumination which has no beginning but appears in those worthy as something exceeding their comprehension. It is indeed a mystical union with God, beyond mind and reason in the age when creatures will no longer know corruption. - Saint Maximus the Confessor*

Deification is most often expressed as involving the "Uncreated Light."

Fr. Sophrony says,

This Light penetrates us with the power of God, we we become 'without beginning'—not through our origin but by the gift of Grace: life without beginning is communicated to us. And there is no limit to the outpouring of the Father's love: man becomes identical with God—the same by content, no by primordial Self-Being. God will eternally be GOD for the reasonable being." (We Shall See Him as He Is, p172.)

It is though our participation in this uncreated light that we become deified, become like Christ. We do not become a god in essence but by Grace and adoption. We are taught that we can never behold, or know the Divine Essence, but when we are filled with this Divine Light we experience His Uncreated Energies. This is a personal communion with God, face to face. Our identity is not assumed into the Divine Essence. And, it is much more than an experience of Light.

Here is how Saint Symeon the New Theologian expresses it in one of his hymns,

He Himself is discovered within me, resplendent inside my wretched heart, enlightening me from all sides with His immortal splendor, shining on all of my members with His rays. Entirely intertwined with me, He embraces me entirely. He gives Himself totally to me, the unworthy one, and I am filled with His love and beauty. I am sated with pleasure and Divine tenderness. I share in the Light. I participate also in the glory. My face shines like that of my beloved and all my members become bearers of Light.

* Fr. John Meyendorff explains the meaning of enhypostatic:

"This divine light cannot be contemplated as a hypostasis, that is, as an independent reality, since strictly speaking it has no essence. It can be contemplated only in a hypostasis, i'e', in a personal locus. Here Palamas has in mind the deified saints who by grace show forth in their whole persons the light that transforms them. But the energies are also "enhypostatic" in respect of the Person (hypostasis) of Christ. The light of tabor does not reveal the divine essence, but the second person of the Trinity.

As well as meaning "what exists in another hypostasis", enhypostatic can also mean "what really exists" that which is genuine or authentic, e.g. of our real adoption as sons by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The first sense of the word goes back to the christology of Leontius of Byzantium, the second to Mark the Monk.



The Essential Nature of Asceticism

"Only by prolonged effort, by discipline, can the state of perfection and mystical union with God be reached." Dimitru Staniloae

Saint Paul gives us a clear picture of what is required. He compares it to the training of athletes who are conditioning themselves to win an important competition. He says,

"Run is such a way that you may obtain it [the prize]...I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified. (1 Cor 24-27)" If anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.... Be diligent to present yourself approved to God.... (2 Tim 2:5, 2:15)



This spiritual work and training is called asceticism. There should not be any negative connotation given to this term. It has only a positive purpose.

Fr. Staniloae says,

The ultimate goal of asceticism is to free our nature not only from the movements of sinful appetites, but also from the ideas that appear in the mind after the cleansing from passions. This is only to gain its independence from created things, which have enslaved our nature by the passions, and make it long more for God.

Our ascetic efforts can also be seen as a gradual death with Christ. We can't be resurrected with Him if we don't first die with Him.

The ascetic activities follow a clear path involving a series of steps. Fr. Staniloae says

It is a precise discipline which takes into consideration the laws of the normal development of the spiritual life, as well as the principles of faith. Such a battle according to the law means that its road is established according to a well grounded logic...

We must seek out the nature of these spiritual laws and the steps necessary to develop our spiritual life.

Asceticism, while essential to our spiritual growth, is not a technique which of itself can produce the sought mystical union with God. It is more akin to athletic training which prepares us to receive Uncreated Light of God. Ascetic practices develop us spiritually so we can be given god like powers such as was exhibited by the Apostles. This comes only from the Grace of God once we have properly prepared.

Fr. Staniloae says,

For this self-revelation of God in a mystical union we have to make ourselves worthy by being sincere, clean, and good...

We begin with faith, but then we must work to purify our nature to become worthy to receive God's transforming Grace. This work is called asceticism. We were blessed with free will and it needs to be trained to control the natural passions of the body, and unite itself voluntarily with the will of God. We are engaged in the supreme contest that Paul called "*spiritual warfare*." Our aim is life in Christ, union with Him, to become in His likeness, so, as it is stated in the Lord's prayer, "*Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*"

What are these clear steps that make up the asceticism of Orthodox Spirituality?

Ref: Orthodox Spirituality, pp 23 - 29.

Basis for Union with God: Love not Intellect

Some Protestant theologians see the Word as the only means of divine revelation. They say it was intended for our intellect. But this is a sign of a person distinct from us rather than one in union with us. This view explains their emphasis on Bible study and their denigration of the sacraments and all that is considered mystical. It is a denial of Orthodox spirituality. This view implies the Word does not have a spiritual task. But we all sense there is more than an intellectual understanding of God. We sense that there is something beyond an intellectual understanding. We seek and yet cannot completely know. The reality is that the Word of God impacts us in a dynamic way. It was intended for the soul and not just the intellect. The Word awakens faith in us. This demonstrates that there is a direct relationship involved between us and the Word. Our Church Fathers do not limit us to only an intellectual dimension of the mind but speak of the "feeling of the mind and our relationship with God."



Fr. Dimitru tells us,

"The Fathers of the Church when they speak of the "feeling of the mind," assert a direct contact of the mind with the spiritual reality of God, not a simple knowledge of Him from a distance. Its something like the "understanding" of a person with whom you are in contact.

In seeking this spiritual union we do not imply that we will ever assume the divine substance of God. We are His creation, creatures.

Fr. Dimitru also says,

On the other hand, our creatureliness implies the sovereignty of God. It makes our transformation into a divine substance impossible, no matter how close we get to Him. Our approach to God, our uplifting to an understanding of Him, can only be realized if God Himself clothes us with the things proper to Him; but even if we are penetrated by His power, we can't shed our created nature. Our nature can't become uncreated: We become gods by grace, not by nature.

We can conclude from this that our link to Him must be established on the basis of a personal relationship. This begins with a spiritual encounter with Him. He must reveal His nature to us.

We can use the analogy of knowing our neighbor. We cannot know the inner nature our neighbor by our own initiative. For us to truly know them, they must reveal themselves to us on their own initiative. Normally this is revealed in inverse proportion to the aggressive initiatives we take to know them. The more we demand they tell us, the less likely they will reveal their inner personhood to us. We must first show our own vulnerability and humility for a relationship to develop. We must hang out with them and earn their trust. This is how it is with God. We can't know Him unless He reveals himself to us. We should not have any fears about losing our identity in this process. Just like in our developing a relationship with our neighbor as we develop a relationship with God and find union with Him, we do not lose our own identity. It is with humility and love that we allow Him to reveal Himself to us.

Fr. Dimitru says,

The spiritual Christian adopts this affirmation of supreme humility, but likewise of supreme daring: "I am man, but I live as God, by what God has given me; I am man, but I am on God's level by the grace with which He has been pleased to cloth me..." This reflects the expression of Apostle Paul: "I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

As in a relationship between two people, it is love that is central to our union with God. We must not make the mistake of only trying to know God intellectually. We must cultivate a loving relationship.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 30 - 39.

Working in Community Develops our Soul

In our quest for union with God we cannot limit ourselves to the development of all the possibilities inherent in the physical world. We must also reach out and develop that which is spiritual in each of us. It is through our cooperation with others in community activities that we learn how to help others as well as ourselves to develop our spiritual potential. As we work on our own spiritual growth, through discipline of our actions and by increasing attention to we give to every activity, we become more capable of doing good to others. We learn to be good neighbors. We learn to love and be loved. We find the way to live the life prescribed and lived by Christ Himself. We come closer to God in the process.

We are currently getting ready for our annual Greek festival. This is a very large event. There are some who say this activity is all about making money for the parish. But there are others who say it's about developing our souls. As we work together with a common purpose we learn to set aside our differences, we take actions to help each other, we put into practice to the best of our ability the virtues we have gained. As we fail and fall into conflict during this activity we can see immediately our weaknesses and where we need to grow. When we hold a spiritual aim for this kind of activity it becomes a process of spiritual growth for all of us. Our difficulties become opportunities for the expression of love and spiritual growth.



Fr. Dimitru comments,

The road to Christian perfection doesn't exclude work. It requires that it contribute to the winning of the virtues. No one should imagine that the work he does is an end in itself; it has the role of beautifying his nature, with the virtues of patience, self-control, of love for his neighbor, of faith in God, and in turn of opening his eyes to the wise principles placed by God in all things....

The ultimate purpose of work and the taking part in life of this world isn't so much the development of nature as it is the normal development of the dormant possibilities in man and in his neighbors.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality* pp 40 - 45.

Ascent is Based on Love and is Within the Church

Orthodox teachings is based on the experience of God. A God who communicates to us through His love, in Spirit and by His uncreated energies. God is neither distant nor a God who brings us into fusion with Him where our personality is lost.

The Christian God is Trinitarian, consisting of three person, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All one in essence. This is a tri-personal divine community. One in which each person is unconfused in the divinity but bound together by love. The love exhibited by the oneness of the three persons affirms that God is a God of love. The Trinitarian nature of the God shows us the nature of the earthly community we are to be part of and the nature of our union with Him. This Love is one where persons are united by love for each other yet they each retain their identity and free will. We are to seek unity without being blended together.



God wants to extend His infinite love to us. We are created in the likeness of the Son. Through His Incarnation, Life and teachings, Crucifixion, and Resurrection He showed us the way. It is by the Holy Spirit that we are raised to the divine world. It is what changes us, like It changes the wine and bread into the blood and body of Christ in the Eucharist.

Fr. Dimitru says,

By the Holy Spirit we are raised up to the divine world, or the divine world penetrates us. This changes us, with this our deification starts. This is what Orthodox Spirituality, or our spiritual life consists of.

The spiritual ascent toward union with God must be in the Church.

Fr. Dimitru says,

As Christians starting on the lowest step of our spiritual state, we have our consciousness sensitized by the Holy Spirit. We know that in this weary and prolonged undertaking we have a continuous relationship with Jesus Christ, Who is standing beside us, sustaining our steps; but we also know that He is ahead of us, as an example, calling us to Him, to a fuller communion with Him. He is like a good friend, better than you are in every way, who is also beside you as you journey toward moral perfection, a friend who is also ahead of you, always prompting you to go on.

Jesus gave us the commandments that speak to our conscience. He is hidden within us from the time of our Baptism. As we purify ourselves His presence becomes ever more clear to us.

Fr. Dimitru says,

We make the ascent by ascetical efforts to the mystical contemplation of Christ, through Christ, toward Christ...

Nicholas Cabasilas says

Christ penetrates us by the holy mysteries, by the washing of Baptism, by the anointing with holy Chrism, and by the partaking of Him from the Holy Table. By the medium of these holy mysteries, "Christ comes to us and dwells in us; His is united to us and grows into one with us. He stifles sin in us and infuses into us His own life and merit..." (The Life in Christ 1.11 p 60)

Fr Dimitru says,

The spiritual ascent, even if it carries someone close to God in Heaven, is an ascent within the Church, on the spiritual steps of the Church on earth, and on those of the Church in Heaven. There is no other ladder to God, except the one in the Church.... at the top of this ladder and only there, as the peak of the entire hierarchy, Christ is found.

Major Steps of the Spiritual Life

There are two basic phases in our path of spiritual growth described by Dimitru Staniloae.

The first is the **practical phase** of doing things. This first phase is intended to raise the believer's nature from the state subject to the passions and to elevate it to and by the steps of virtues, until it reaches love.... The purpose of this phase is the liberation of man from the passions.

The second is the **contemplative phase**. The contemplative phase represents reintegration, unity and simplicity, and its exclusive focus on God, the One and Infinite.

...

Only he who has cleansed the mind through dispassion can go on to knowledge or contemplation.... Only a clean soul is a shiny mirror, unspotted by passionate attachment to the things of the world, and capable of receiving divine knowledge.

We can identify a third phase of **mystical knowledge**.

The holy Fathers strictly distinguish this gnosis or contemplation, from the spiritual knowledge of the world aided by divine grace, which itself is distinguished from profane knowledge.

Saint Maximus the Confessor described these phases in this way:

Of the three steps, the first is that of beginners, who must strive to become proficient in the virtues. The virtues are seven in number. At the beginning stands faith; at the end love, immediately preceded by dispassion. Love concentrates all the virtues in it and carries man to the knowledge or contemplation. The final step is mystical knowledge, no longer concerned with the reasons of things but with God Himself... this knowledge of God is an ecstasy of love, which persists unmoved in a concentration on God. It is reached in the state of the deification of man, or of his union with God.*

Dionysius the Areopagite described the phases as Purification, Illumination and Perfection. For most of us we are most concerned about the first stage of purification. It's important to recognize our level in our spiritual development. Many writings are aimed at aspirants at the highest levels of spiritual development. Following advice intended for one at a higher level can be detrimental to your progress. It is essential to have a spiritual Father to guide you.

* Faith, fear of God, self-restraint, patience, hope, dispassion, and love.

Reference: Orthodox Spirituality pp 69 - 73.



Are Passions Natural?

What are passions? They are impulses that move us to action by overcoming our will. Because of this we say they enslave us. They are powerful because they are also desires which cannot be satisfied. They act as a force that goes against what we know to be the proper action and lead us to actions which are counter to the commandments of Christ. There is no single list of these passions, but the following is a common list used in early Christian literature: gluttony, unchastity, avarice, anger, dejection, listlessness, self-esteem and pride.



Their ultimate cause is the forgetting of God. Healing begins with faith.

Not all passions are bad. There are both natural and unnatural passions. Our natural passions are our appetite for food, enjoyment of food, fear and sadness. These are necessary for our the preservation of our nature. They are an important animal aspect of our being given to us by God. But we are more than animals as we are also spiritual. Because of this we have an aspiration for the infinite. Often these natural passions which are intended for earthly preservation are transformed into unnatural passions. They are frequently transformed into a mistaken quest for the infinite in things of this material world. The soul loses control and the passions take over. Our task is to control them so they can be limited to their proper purpose. Then they can be channeled to seek divine things.

Saint Maximus says,

The natural passions become good in those who struggle when, wisely unfastening them from the things of the flesh, use them to gain heavenly things. For example they can change appetite into the movement of a spiritual longing for divine things; pleasure into pure joy for the cooperation of the mind with divine gifts; fear into care to evade future misfortune due to sin and sadness into corrective repentance for present evil.

So the natural passions are not necessarily bad. When we are thinking of God they are kept to their necessary biological functions. Our task is not to eradicate them but to control them, keeping them within the limits necessary for the preservation of the body. They must continually be watched and controlled. This is the basis of asceticism.

Thoughts from Fr. Dimitru Staniloae:

Asceticism means, in the spirit of Eastern thought, the restraint and discipline of the biological, not a battle for its extermination. On the contrary, asceticism means the sublimation of this element of bodily affectivity, not its abolition.... Natural passions can assume a spiritual character and give an increased accent to our love for God....

Now here is the most important point. By controlling them we increase our spiritual blessings.

Fr. Dimitru says,

By putting a bridle and a limit on the pleasure of material things, a transfer of this energy of our nature takes place, in favor of the spirit; pleasure in spiritual blessings grows. ...

The challenge we face is not easy. Its difficulty is increased by our tendency to react in the wrong way. Once a pleasure leaves us we feel a loss. This can be painful. Pain or dissatisfaction always follows pleasure. This pain that follows does not lead us to take action to temper the pleasure, but does the opposite. We seek even more pleasure. The cycle continues without satisfaction.

Fr. Dimitru says,

The pain which follows pleasure, instead of making him avoid pleasure, as its source,...pushes him anew into pleasure as if to get rid of it, tangling him even more in this vicious chain.

Asceticism is aimed at breaking this dysfunctional cycle of pleasure and pain, liberating us from the unnatural extension of passions that have a proper role in our bodily preservation. This bodily domination through uncontrolled passions is our main block to union with God.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp77 - 89

Causes of Passions

The problem with passions began with our expulsion from Paradise. When Adam and Eve chose to follow their own will instead of God's, it was their senses that overtook them, their desire for pleasure, the fruit of the forbidden tree. They disobeyed God's direction and partook of this forbidden fruit. They were banished from Paradise and required to lead an earthly life. In this worldly life the senses became intensified and the mind was put in the service of the senses. The mind forgot its original purpose, which was for the contemplation of God. In the earthly life it became focused on worldly things and sought the infinite in them instead of God. Fr. Staniloae says, "*It entered a service foreign and inferior to is which couldn't satisfy its thirst for the infinite.*"

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae identifies three causes of the unnatural passions in man.

1. *The mind is weakened in its autonomous and proper work.*
2. *The work of sense perception, has become predominant and no longer in subordination to the mind.*
3. *An exclusive and irrational running after pleasure, even obtained by the praises of his neighbors, and at the same time, a frightened flight from pain.*

Our condition is one where our body and its demands have taken control over the mind. The soul has been subordinated to the body. As soon as we let the mind's attention focus exclusively on our body's needs we find we are separated from God. We act in ways counter to His desire for us. When we shift the focus towards God, we regain our connection to Him. It is this fallen condition of the mind that asceticism attacks and works to correct.

In my own case, one of my weaknesses is a fear of being ridiculed or judged by others. When this fear arises, I am no longer able to think about the needs of others and my attention shifts to an exclusive focus on my own needs. If I am able to attack this fear by remembering God, it immediately disappears and I am then able to focus on the needs of others and potentially help them. Otherwise, I remain self-centered, unable to be of much help, isolated in my own stuff.

Fr. Dimitru writes,

But this exclusive and passionate focus at a given moment on an isolated aspect of the world, makes the whole of man's nature concentrate on it in the greed to taste it; then too man's whole nature goes from moment to moment through alternative passions: from anger to dejection; from disgust of people to an avid seeking of their company, unable to keep its various impulses in equilibrium and moderation. But this tears his nature to pieces; because instead of being kept continually in the equilibrium of its functions, it is abandoned successively, a prey to the extremes which are self-contradictory by their exaggerated exclusivity. Man is no longer a unitary being, the same at every moment of his life. The forgetting of God also has as a result the forgetting of self, as a permanent unity of his own person. But this breakdown also extends to the level of inter-human relations. We want pleasure and we want innumerable objects which are going to get it for us, or we want to raise our ego to the highest level, by the passion of pride; so we get into trouble with those around us, or we awaken their envy.

Why Do We Speak of Liberating the Soul?

The soul as described by the early Church Fathers has three parts: the mind (nous) with the power of acts of knowledge; desire (epithymia) a power of all desires and appetites and thought; and the impulse for acts of courage, mindfulness or for good or evil anger, the incensive power (thymos). It is the nous that is destined to eternal life.



The mind and soul are the same. For understanding of spiritual things, we have to distinguish between the mind and the brain. The brain is physical and the mind is spiritual. We often use these terms interchangeably. The spiritual issue is that the brain in its work dealing with the senses takes over the mind and dominates it. The soul then loses its power and the result is a separation from God and the resulting passions that lead to sin.

What is most significant is that there is a center of the soul that is often called the heart. This is also often referred to as spirit, or the inner temple. This inner sanctum of our soul is at first covered or hidden (1 Cor 2:11) from our consciousness. At Baptism, Christ or the Holy Spirit dwells there as a potentiality for us. As our heart is opened and the Holy Spirit is allowed to work through our members, we gain the power of love for God and our neighbors, which allows us to obtain the virtues. When it opens the soul realizes its ties to the divine infinite and the possibility of communicating with this infinite. This opening or softening of the heart is a liberation for the soul. It regains the position of authority over the brain and all the demands of the body and resulting passions. This union of soul and spirit and the softening of the heart is the essence of the spiritual life.

Fr. Dimitru says,

The Holy Spirit descends to us and cooperates in the winning of virtues, as an opening to God and our neighbors. Our spirit catches fire in us. It wakes us up. Our heart is softened. The walls of our soul become transparent. God's love wakes up our love. God's penetration within us makes us open to God.

Most of the time our brain is working on dealing with all the inputs from our senses. This is an essential part of the life of the body. But it is this activity that leads us to difficulty when the senses become a source for pleasure. The desire dominates, the brain dominates the mind, and the soul loses dominion. We fall into a pattern of pleasure and pain, seeking a way out through pleasure that is insatiable.

Fr Dimitru gives us an example:

Sense perception understood as pure perception of the senses is in itself innocent, and can be used for the service of the mind. Only when the desire for pleasure works through it does it become feeling in the sinful sense. A minimum of pleasure can stay in it, as a natural passion. But this natural passion must be overwhelmed with the spiritual pleasure of a knowing mind. For

example, when we eat, if we concentrate completely on the taste and the pleasure which food gives us, this feeling is sinful, because desire is working through it. The mind only has the subordinate role of discovering all the possibilities of pleasure of the food. But if when we eat we bridle the feeling of pleasure, by different reflections on the purpose of food—the blessing which God has given us through it, the duty which we also have of being merciful to others with the things necessary for sustenance—we have conquered the passion of bringing feeling into the spiritual subordination of the mind.

Orthodox Spirituality is about the freeing of the soul from its domination by the body and the actions of the brain that transforms natural passions into desires for pleasure through things of this material world. This involves uncovering, or opening, the inner place, the heart, where spirit resides, the place where Christ lives within us. As we learn to do this, the Spirit flows through us helping us overcome these tendencies, enabling us to live the virtues. Once we can do this, then with God's grace we will find a life in union with Him.

Saint Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain described this as two wills that work in us.

Know that in this unseen warfare, two wills existing in us fight against one another. One belongs to the intelligent part of our soul; the other belongs to the sensory part and is therefore called the sensory will, which is the lower. The latter is more frequently called the dumb, carnal passionate will. The higher is always desiring nothing but good, the lower—nothing but evil. (Unseen Warfare, pp 100)

This sensory will must become totally subordinated to the higher will. In this way the soul is liberated from its enslavement by the passions.

Ref: Orthodox Spirituality, pp 96 -108.

How the Passions are Aroused

If we understand how the passions are aroused then we can find ways to keep them under control.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae writes,

In all Orthodox spiritual writings we find the the following sequence as the way in which the passions are aroused in every circumstance:

Satan puts a sinful thought into our mind, the so-called attack... It is the first appearance of the simple thought that we can commit this or that sinful deed. It appears in the mind as a simple possibility. It isn't yet a sin, because we haven't yet taken a position in regard to it. It seems to be outside of us; we didn't create it, and it still has only a theoretical character, a not very serious possibility, which doesn't seem to concern us much. We are preoccupied with our whole being with something else. We don't know where it came from; it seems as though someone were playing and threw it on the side of the road. But we continue to think about it. So it has all the characteristics of a thought discarded by someone else and therefore the holy Fathers attribute it to Satan...



Have you ever wondered where some of the bad thoughts you have come from?

From this attack until the sinful deed we find numerous steps.... The decisive moment is when our thought takes a position. If we have rejected the thought at the first moment, we have escaped. If, however, we start to think about it, to relish the sin in our mind the "coupling" or the mingling of our thoughts with those of wicked demons has already happened. Now we have joined ourselves with the evil thought; it has become part of us.... by it we have entered the area of sin and we can hardly stop the full development of this process once it is set in motion. The assent to the fact follows next, or the plan composed by our thoughts and the thoughts of Satan from the realization of the fact. Only now does the simple thought materialize in images.

Have you wondered why you consider some of the thoughts you do consider? One of my favorite passages is one by Saint Paul where he describes his frustration with this issue.

Apostle Paul says,

For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin. (Romans 7:15-25)

The implications of this process are clear. If one wants to progress in the spiritual life we must first have faith and firm reason why these thoughts should be rejected. Rejecting requires a firm stance, a disciplined mind, and the help of God.

Fr Dimitru says,

Therefore the duty imposed on the one who wants to go ahead in his life towards perfection is to watch continually the thoughts which appear in the field of conscience. He must eliminate the thought of any passion at its first appearance. The guarding of the mind, attention, and steadfast, alert resistance to thoughts are continuous recommendations of the spiritual masters for those who doesn't want to fall victim to the passions....It means keep the mind submerged, full of love, in the divine infinite, which enriches it with ever new and pure meanings.

This is the first task of Orthodox Spirituality.

Ref: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 109 - 114.

Free From Fear and Anxiety - Care

The reality is that we exist in a passionate state. Let's face it, our focus is on external things. We are attached to the things of the world. We crave them. We cuddle them. We horde them. We fear losing them. What we need to learn is how to free ourselves from this enslavement while we live in the world. This is our challenge—to learn how to live in the world as free beings, free from domination by passions.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae says,

The challenge is how can we live in this world as free beings, admiring it and understanding it as a transparent creation of God, without this admiration enslaving us to its purely perceptible and opaque surface, and thus hinder our development as beings oriented toward the infinite spiritual order. How can we use the world, the road toward our goal, without falling and succumbing to it?



He says that it is anxiety and worry, or care, that ties us to things of this world.

He says,

Man spends most of his life waiting for and seeking pleasure and in the fear of present and future pain. This is the fruit of the passions and unceasing manifestation of the passions in us. These periods of waiting and of fear produce care in us. But even in the moments when we do no longer have the actual consciousness that we are waiting for pleasure or expecting pain, we work for the certainty of pleasure and for the avoidance of some unspecified future pain.

It seems that we are motivated by fear. Living a life in the world involves anxiety. We do not want to lose pleasure, we want to gain more of it and we strive to avoid any pain. We have fear of lacking pleasure and having pain. This is the cause of anxiety.

There is another kind of care we must have. This is the care for our salvation, for our union with God in eternity. This care needs to be stronger than what we have just discussed.

Fr. Dimitru says,

This care is opposed to the other...It arises when we "lay aside all earthly care," because it means the care to please God, not to please the world and to take part in its pleasures and to be exempt from its pain. This care grows from the responsibility which man has for his true self, satisfying this command of responsibility, it is at the same time a continual launching out of man beyond himself, toward the source of eternal life... It too includes a fear, but it is man's fear that death ends all, and that this fear alone will succeed in delivering him from what he fears.

Man must escape from the first care in order to become available to God. Then he is free from the passionate state; he has gained dispassion... Purification aims at the liberation from this care... By fulfilling the will of God, our authentic nature is realized.

This care comes when we "lay aside all earthly care." Our first steps in Orthodox Spirituality then involve practices that help us do this.

Reference: Orthodox Spirituality pp 115 - 118.

Purification by the Virtues

"The purification of the passions can't be attained by realizing a neutral state of the soul, but by replacing the passions with opposing virtues."

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae

These are the primary resources used by Fr. Dimitru Staniloae in his discussion on the Way of Perfection:

The Ladder of Divine Ascent by Saint John Climacus, Seventh Century. Outlines thirty steps.

Directions to Hesychasts by Callistus and Ignatius Xanthopoulos, 14th Century. Made up of 100 Chapters

The Ascetic Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian

Chapters on Love by Saint Maximus the Confessor

Here are the steps of Perfection we will be discussing:

Faith
Fear of God
Repentance
Self-Control
Guarding of the mind
Patience
Hope
Humility
Dispassion
Gifts of Holy Spirit
Contemplation
Spiritual Understanding of Scripture
Apophatic Knowledge of God
Pure prayer
Mental Rest



Faith: The Starting Point to Perfection

Is it enough to develop self-control? Why do the Church fathers put such emphasis on Faith? Why do Christians see limitations in the Buddhist and Hindu practices of meditation and ascetic practices? Why? Because without faith we cannot act on divine grace. It is grace that saves, leads to a virtuous life and promises eternal life. We can have a still mind gained from some meditation practice, but be dead to Spirit. The foundation of a Christian life is faith.

We begin our Orthodox Spiritual journey with a belief as taught in the Gospel. This is consummated through Baptism. Then this belief begins to be transformed into faith. So first is our choice to believe, then Baptism and then develops faith.

Fr Dimitru Staniloae says,

Before starting on the way to purification, it is necessary for man to strengthen his faith received at Baptism, by will.... It can't be strengthened except by beginning to think more often of Him... The thought of God is made real or maintained by a short and frequent remembrance of Him, made with piety, with the feeling that we depend on Him...

Callistus and Ignatius Xanthopoulos tell us in *Directions to Hesychasts*,

"The beginning of every action pleasing to God is a call with faith on the life-saving name of our Lord Jesus Christ, as He himself said: 'Without me you can do nothing' (John 15:5)... they should force themselves in every possible way to live, breathe, sleep, wake up, eat and drink with Him and in Him.

This is important based on the way passions are aroused. Before the arousal of a passion gains power we must intervene. This is where the remembrance of the Name of Jesus can help us avert the action of passion. It is a way to strengthen our will.

Orthodox Christians have the doctrine of uncreated energies of God. Faith is based on more than the will, but includes the uncreated energy of God that penetrates the mind as light. There is a synergy that takes place between our reason and will and the energies of God or Grace.

Fr. Dimitru says,

On the one hand in faith there is an element of the strengthening of will and reason, of their stimulation, on the other hand, the will contributes to the emphasis on the evidence from faith produced by grace. One grows on the other in a mutual way."

Faith develops and must be cultivated in the beginning.

Fr, Dimitru says,

In time faith grows to a very brilliant evidence. But it grows in the measure in which we obey the commands and gain the virtues, because through them we show that we feel God and we also open ourselves more to Him.

To nurture faith, increase our remembrance of God though our consciously bringing Him to our consciousness through out our daily activities. Repeat often, "Kiryie Eleison" or "Lord have mercy," make your cross, say the Jesus prayer or recite to yourself the Lord's Prayer. This is the first step. Force yourself to remember God at all times. Have patience and faith will grow.



Fear of God is Next Step

"With progress, faith becomes the fear of God"
Fr. Dimitru Staniloae

Ponder this point—It is important:

Faith isn't born of fear of God. Fear of God develops from faith.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae says,

Faith which hasn't reached fear or isn't accompanied from the beginning by fear hasn't gained a high enough degree of efficiency to lead to action.

What is meant by fear of God? After all, God is a loving God. Earlier we talked about our fear of the things of this world and the anxiety we have as a result of these worldly fears. Fr. Dimitru points out that this fear must be counteracted with a greater fear, the fear of God. This is a fear, not of an immediate danger, but of a future one.

Fr. Dimitru says,

The fear of God is a fear of His judgement which will seal our fate forever; it is the fear of the last judgement and of the tortures of an eternal, non-authentic, unfulfilled existence.

Orthodox Christians are encouraged at the appropriate time of their spiritual growth to meditate unceasingly on the Last Judgment to increase the Fear of God to aid us in the avoidance of sin. It is not death that we focus on, but the Judgment that follows death.

Fr. Dimitru says,

The thought of death and of the Judgment makes our thought of God, where the strengthening of faith began, more frequent, thus increasing inner meditation. Or the fear and the thought of death are nothing but the thought of God, associated with the consciousness of personal sins and with the dread of judgment.

We need to come to God at first based on love and His forgiving compassion. Then as our faith grows we will develop the proper fear of God and then we can emphasize it in our spiritual practice.

Reference: Orthodox Spirituality, pp 130 - 134



Repentance - Main Means for Our Perfection

"The fear of God, sustained by the consciousness of a sinful life, leads both to repentance for past sins, and to the avoidance, by self-control of future ones."

What is repentance? Here is how Fr. Dimitru Staniloae describes it:

It is the shovel brought out to clean man from the sins accumulated after Baptism, so that the new man can keep on fighting, by the power of Baptism, with the temptations which confront him.

Repentance is more than action. It is also thoughts. Our thoughts lead us to action, so we must also rid ourselves from sinful thoughts. It also is about having endurance of many troubles.

John Climacus says,

Repentance is reconciliation with the Lord by the practice of the virtues in opposition to sins... Repentance is the endurance of all troubles.

Saint Isaac the Syrian talks of three attributes of repentance.

1. *Highest of virtues*
2. *It never ends as long as we live*
3. *Is the means for our continual perfection*

We must accept that every virtuous act is done with some impure element. No matter how good we feel we are, there is always room for improvement. Repentance involves this element of continual dissatisfaction. It is a critical act of conscience. There is no virtue that stands above repentance.

Fr. Staniloae says,

Repentance is the road to love; it serves love. It leads from an insufficient love to more love.

He warns that this cannot be confused with discouraging dissatisfaction.

"It must not be a doubt in our greater possibilities, but a recognition of the insufficiencies of our achievements up to now... repentance is borne by a faith in something better."

Christ gave us a vision of what is possible for us. It, for sure, is a very high standard. As we progress we will see this ideal as ever more perfect. So, the gap, between how we see ourselves currently and this vision of what we are called to be, will ever increase. Repentance is a self-judgment against a standard that seems to be always beyond our realization.

Repentance is the main means we have for our continual perfection.



Repentance - The Ship that brings us to the Divine Harbor

Saint Isaac the Syrian compares our life in this world to crossing the sea in a ship.

Just as it isn't possible for someone to cross the great sea without a ship, so someone can't reach love without fear. We can cross the tempestuous sea placed between us and the spiritual paradise only with the ship of repentance, borne by the oarsmen of fear. If these oarsmen of fear don't handle the ship of repentance well, by which we cross the sea of this world toward God, we will be drowned in it. Repentance is the ship, fear is the rudder, love the divine harbor. So fear puts us in the ship of repentance and we cross the tempestuous sea and it guides us to the divine harbor, which is love where all those who labor and have been enlightened by repentance arrive. And when we have reached love, we have reached God. And our journey has ended and we have reached the island which is beyond this world.



Notice how he emphasizes that it is *only* with this "ship of repentance" that we can reach our goal. Repentance is essential to arrive at the "divine harbor." It is the fundamental way we move toward perfection and a virtuous life of love based on God's grace. It is because of our desire for God's love, and to love others that we repent.

Ref: Orthodox Spirituality, p 140

Repentance - Way to Overcome Egoism

"Repentance is the fire which gradually burns up the egotism in us."

When we adopt a repentant attitude we accept that we are always imperfect and in need of continual perfection. It is this attitude that kills our ego based pride. We recognize our limitations and our lack of perfection and have a feeling of compunction.

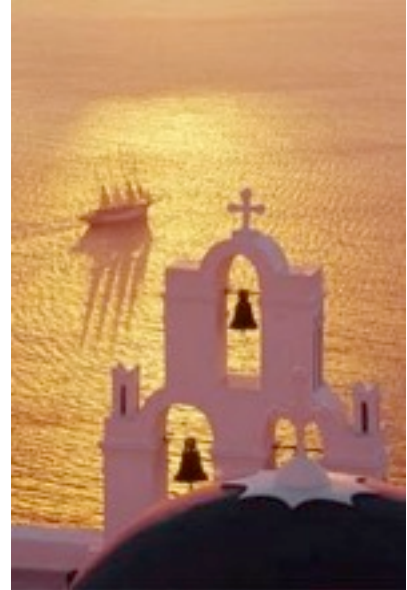
Fr. Dimitru Staniloae points out that this egoism is our largest obstacle.

So the greatest and continuous obstacle in the way of our progress to love is egoism. Until egoism completely dies, you can't have true love.... He who loves himself, who is full of self-admiration, who considers himself as the most important of all, can't love others. To love others means to forget yourself, to always go beyond yourself, to consider yourself as nothing. The love of others is consolidated in us by uninterrupted repentance and humility. ...

It is clear that no one can approach or enter this kingdom, this paradise, unless he leaves behind the ocean of numberless sirens of egotism...

The attitude of repentance carries with it an awareness of our ego-centeredness coupled with an understanding that this needs to be destroyed if we are to be united with God in love and to be able to truly love others. Egoism is the clear enemy which our continual repentance attacks. Repentance is what allows us to make gradual and continual progress against an enemy we all face.

Ref: Orthodox Spirituality, pp 141-144



Repentance as a Sacrament

In the Mystery of Repentance we must first carefully prepare ourselves. We go to the priest to rid ourselves of the garbage we have accumulated to free our souls of the burden our sinfulness places on us. The priest is our witness as we make our confession to God. We do so with utmost sincerity and with contrition. Standing in the presence of another person is humbling. This act is essential to embrace the most accentuated feeling of humility. In it we realize that our deliverance from sin also depends on the support and help we get from others. We transcend our ego and individualistic nature in this act. By admitting our weakness and failings before another person in the priest, we place ourselves in a humble position seeking help and instruction. We make ourselves open to receive objective external guidance for our sinful nature.

This act is essential for our spiritual growth and was given to us by God in His Church for our benefit.

Saint Mark the Ascetic says,

Nobody is as gracious and merciful as the Lord is, but even He does not forgive the sins of the man who does not repent;... we are being condemned not because of the multitude of our evils, but because we do not want to repent.

Confession before a priest not only results an total absolution and a cleansing of your record in God's eyes, but it humbles us, cures our pride, and instills in us shame and fear, protecting us from future sins. We also receive advice from an objective viewpoint. We are given instruction to aid us in our spiritual growth. We are taught how to struggle with our passions, how to fight them so others are no longer aware of them. But, if you do not what to be healed by this Sacrament then you will both expose yourself to ongoing abuse in your daily life and be disgraced before the entire universe at the Final Judgment.

Abbas Isaiah advises us:

The truly repentant man receives forgiveness of his sins, is conciled with God, the Church, and his own conscience, and thus regains the precious filial striving towards God as Father, and benefits for all the gifts of His fatherly love and kindness.

The sacrament is too often a forgotten sacrament, but one of the most powerful. It brings joy, freedom of the soul, and a lifting of our burdens.

Ref: Orthodox Spirituality, p 145 - 146.



Self-Control lifts us to see the infinite in things of this world.

"Self-control freely exercised by a believer isn't a restraint from the ascent to God, but the departure from evil things. The purpose is to keep him from total submersion in the world."

Between the time of creation and the present time there has been a shift in the proper use of things created. Originally food was given to us to eat, but it became something that was seen as a pleasure for the body. Our passions transform what was useful for our ascendance to God into a chain which binds us to the earthly world

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae says,

The world of things and of persons is thus meant to be a ladder to God, the support in the ascent to Him. But by the passions man takes this brilliant depth, this transparence, which reaches infinite, from the world.

Instead of freeing mankind in the world, things turned him into their slave. His passions for pleasures change their intended purpose.



Fr Dimitru advises,

The restraint which Christianity urges man to exercise is for man's spirit to claim its rights from the lower impulses which have overwhelmed him. By self-control which limits the passions, man reestablishes the limits and freedom of the spirit in himself. But in so doing, he awakens with himself the factor which sees in the world something else besides objects to satisfy these passions. By self-control man removes from the world the wave of darkness and gives it once again the attribute of making it transparent for the infinite. So disrespect for the world isn't shown in self-control, but rather the will to discover the entire majesty of the world; self-control isn't a complete turning away from the world, to see God, but a turning away from a world narrow and exaggerated by the passions, to find a transparent world which itself becomes a mirror of God and a ladder to Him.

Ref: Orthodox Spirituality, p 148 - 149

Self-Control as Fasting

The act of fasting is a conscious act to glorify God and his creation as it helps us overcome our actions based on our passions and bodily desires for pleasure. It is an act that restrains our egoism and heightens our spiritual appetite. Fasting demands will-power and the reestablishment of the domination of the soul over the body.

Fasting is seen by our Church Fathers as the primary passion to overcome. Mastering it you can then master the others.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae says,

Self-control from gluttony is what makes restraint from the others possible...

Fasting is the antidote against this pathological extension of our appetites and or our egoism. It is the humble return of the ego to itself, but by its transparency it sees God and is filled with a life consistent with God. This is the growth of spirit in man, from divine spirit....Because man's egoism wants to grow without God, without loving relationships with his fellow creatures, it grows only in appearance and for a little while.

Through self-control eating can become an act for reflecting and thinking about God. As we contemplate on our food we can seek the *Logoi* that is behind its creation. We can see the beauty in God's creation realize how it was provided for our benefit to come closer to God.

This is why the Church in her wisdom from its earliest days prescribed fasting on Wednesday and Fridays as well as other extended periods for fasting such as the 40 day fast of Great Lent. While it is helpful to follow the program of fasting outlined by the church, one cannot see it as a "law" but as a aid to help us grow spiritually. It is a means to help us overcome our enslavement by our bodily passions, so we can be freed for higher spiritual growth.

Your personal rule for spiritual growth should include regular fasting.



Ref: Orthodox Spirituality, pp 150 - 153

Self-Control to Overcome our Passions

Fasting deals specifically with the passion of gluttony. We must however deal with all our passions and overcome them one by one. Fasting is the starting point to controlling the others. It is a fight that we must steadily engage in. By doing so we will gradually reduce them.

Saint Maximus outlines four steps for this progress:

- 1. The stopping of their appearance in sinful deeds—the obtaining of sinless in deed is the first dispassion*
- 2. Freedom from passionate thoughts caused by appetites in our consciousness; victory over them bring us to a second dispassion, without such thoughts they can't become deeds.*
- 3. The control over our natural appetite so that it doesn't move toward the passions—this is the third dispassion*
- 4. The complete removal from the mind of perceptible images—this leads to a fourth dispassion. No longer having them in the mind, they can no longer enter the subconsciousness to move an appetite to a passion.*

He goes on to advise us that there is one further step.

We must reach a state where we can receive images of things without creating any passion within us. This happens when through them their divine logoi become transparent. Only after this does the mind unite with God in a state higher than prayer.



Ref: Orthodox Spirituality, pp 153

Guarding the Mind - Watchfulness - Getting at the Root

Engaging in spiritual disciplines such as fasting, we develop the will to exercise self-control over our passions. But the real cure is to eradicate the root—to get rid of the passionate thoughts.

Fr Dimitru Staniloae tells us that passionate thoughts are put into our consciousness by Satan. He attacks where we are weak by amplifying patterns that have been etched in our brain by previous behaviors. We also have good thoughts that come from the spirit. But they too can be transformed into passionate thoughts. Our passionate thoughts come from connections with our biological being and its desires. The challenge is to connect the good thoughts which come from God to oppose the ones that arouse our passions.



Our aim is dispassion. Dispassion is the dominance of the good thoughts which are calm and peaceful. It is where we overcome our automatic responses to our desires or passions.

Mark the Ascetic says,

We must bring any good thought that arises within us—just as soon as it appears—to Christ as a sacrifice.

In this way it is protected and not likely to be polluted with thoughts which amplify our passions. Think of this as a shepherd tending his flock of sheep.

Evagarius says,

The thoughts of this world, the Lord has given to a man like sheep, to a good shepherd... . So the anchorite must keep this flock day and night so that no lamb be seized by wild beasts, or by thieves... . Thus if the thought about our brother is spun around in us and enveloped in hate, we should know that a beast has gotten hold of it.

So, let your simple thoughts be directed to Christ, bringing them to Him as a sacrifice. In this way we create a shield to protect us.

Fr. Dimitru says,

The guarding of the thoughts is a shield which the mind itself produces. Of course the mind can't be stopped from working continually. Therefore we must supervise it continually. The purpose of this watchfulness is twofold: When the thought is received we should see that either it develops into a devout one and creates an association with pious ones, or that with the appearance of other thoughts as the beginning of still more, we should see from the first moment that they are directed to the safe channel. This is a narrow way, a way sustained by a continual effort which at the beginning is very hard, but in time also becomes easier.

This is an advanced step and requires preparation and a life dedicated to Christ with continual repentance. More on this to come.

Ref: Orthodox Spirituality, p 158 - 162

Guarding the mind- Knocking on the Door of the Heart

To guard the mind requires that we know Christ's presence in our heart. Once we know this presence, we can bring our innocent thoughts to Christ. But first, our heart needs to be opened. Until it is open, Fr. Dimitru Staniloae says,

we must knock at its door, with thoughts sacrificed to Christ, with the hope that we will gain the awareness of His presence and by this our heart will be opened.

He also says that we don't have a full feeling of His presence at first. We will experience gradual progress in this. We must be persistent and have patience.

The whole notion about guarding the mind is dependent on us being able to bring our thoughts to the door of the heart. Therefore it is also called watching of the heart.

Fr Dimitru says,

Standing watch at the door of the heart, the mind does nothing but keep itself from going astray, because the heart is after all nothing but the depths of the mind.

Think about how often our minds go astray.

How often by our immersion in our ego needs

we ignore this place of the heart. The mind never stops and our actions seemingly spin out of the control of our highest values. We need to be ever vigilant.

Mark the Ascetic says,

The mind must keep vigil over the heart and guard it with all watchfulness, trying to penetrate into its innermost and undisturbed chamber, where there are no winds of evil thoughts... to be vigilant over the heart and go ever deeper into it and to approach God alone, without becoming disgusted with the toils of attention and persistence.

We have to train the mind to be the supervisor and to watch the thoughts as they enter. At the same time to be aware of the presence of Christ within us, in the heart. Then our thoughts can be presented to Christ as a discipline.

Fr Dimitru says this is how it works,

First a simple thought appears in the consciousness. Immediately somewhere on the periphery an evil thought shows itself, with the tendency of monopolizing the simple thought.

But often this watchful defense fails. We allow our thought to become associated with to a desire.



Fr. Staniloae says,

The mind forgets itself for a little and lets itself be touched by the gentle breeze which is coming from the aroused appetite; it finds that it was robbed of its simple first-born thought and was bitten by the passions.

Even when we let our guard down allowing a thought that arouses our passions, our approach is to still refer this thought to God in our heart. We must now call on Him with all our power—"Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy."

We may also experience the first thought as a direct attack and not an innocent thought. We need to develop that capacity to recognize it as a direct attack at the very beginning.

Fr. Dimitru says,

It must however, be unmasked at the start, so that we will scarcely be able to escape.

He then tells us that this calls for a special spiritual sensitivity which is gained only through steady practice and much effort to cleanse ourselves from the passions.

The challenge is developing continual prayer so we will continually have God on our mind. We need to be able to at any time stop and say, *Lord have mercy*, or to recite the Lord's Prayer, *Our Father...*

Fr. Dimitru concludes this topic as follows.

Guarding thought... consists of a continual reciting of the name of God in the mind, in the seeking of the heart, or in concentrating within it. But nothing but a concentrated uninterrupted prayer...

This is the meaning of Saint Paul's teaching on unceasing prayer.

pray without ceasing...test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. (1Thess 5:17, 21,22) Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer... (Romans 12: 9,12)

This seems to be an advanced spiritual practice demanding lots of self-control, a life of repentance, and significant progress in mastering the passions.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 163 - 167

Longsuffering - Why Troubles and Suffering?

I know this will not be a popular topic. But Saint Maximus the Confessor teaches us that we are brought to perfection and in union with God in a way that is both positive and negative. We are uplifted by the beauty of good and all that God does for us. But there is also judgment. This includes punishments which God allows us to experience so we will be motivated away from sin and evil things.

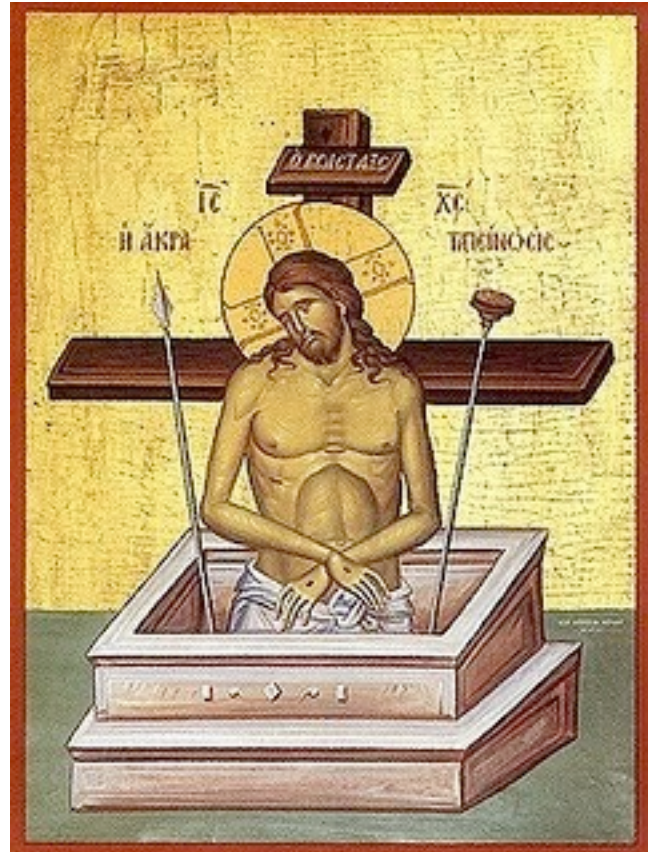
Saint Maximus writes,
He who loves good and beautiful willingly moves toward the grace of deification; he is guided by providence (the protective care of God), by the logoi (the divine guiding principle) of wisdom. But he who isn't in love with this is attracted against his will and this causes him to be rightfully judged by various kinds of punishment. The first, that is the love of God, is deified by providence; the second, that is, the lover of flesh and the world, is stopped by judgment from arriving at condemnation.

Often, as we progress spiritually, developing self-control and watchfulness, we become proud of our achievements. We begin to see ourselves a superior to others. We then become slaves to greater passions that lead to pride and vainglory. There is a need for us to be corrected in this. Therefore, God allows for disappointments and troubles so that we can be healed from these higher passions. The virtue that aids us is patience. With patience we learn to overcome the passions of anger.

Fr Dimitru Staniloae says,

Self-control and the supervision of thoughts... are aimed at the passions of appetite (gluttony, unchastity, love and wealth); patience in the face of dissatisfactions which people cause us and the bearing of various troubles which are meant especially to weaken the passions of anger (dejection and irritation), although they contribute too to a full withering of the movements of appetite. So this virtue has its place after the virtue of self-control.

Often, when we face troubles and disappointments we feel as if we have been forsaken by God. When things were peaceful we felt God's presence, but when trouble comes we may feel as if we have been rejected. But we must remember that in times of trouble our faith is tested. It is one of the ways we are taught. We are to thank God for the opportunity to learn to become more humble and seek His comfort.



Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 168-169

Role of Temptations -

We grow spiritually both from our temptations for pleasure and the trials we face from pain. We are either drawn to something based on our appetite for it or reject it by our refusal to accept it. The spiritual tests we receive are either attractive or repulsive. These tests are not merely for our self-knowing, but they are aimed to correct ourselves; to help our soul regain control over the biological demands of our body. It is the way we master our passions.

Let's consider temptations. We may have a simple temptation for a second helping of ice cream which only brings to us later the feeling of being stuffed and then problems with being overweight. But our desire for more pleasure tempts us to take more of what we know not to be in our best interests. By rejecting a temptation we strengthen our will, increasing our



capacity to do God's will. This resistance demonstrates and fortifies our self-control. But resisting temptations may be easier to master than our capacity to reject dejection, anger and disgust. While pleasure is something we can anticipate, pain is something we must wait to address. It's easier to not be controlled by temptation for pleasure than to avoid pain because we never seek pain. It often appears due to our life experience and not necessarily something we can avoid, although much pain is the aftermath of pleasure. Dealing with our temptations is our first priority.

Fr. Dimitru says,

The primordial and direct cause of man's decadence isn't an avoidance of pain but a seeking of pleasure. The avoidance of pain comes later, because it is caused by pleasure. So first we must do battle with pleasure, principally and directly. Pleasure is often sought by our previous initiative, while pain is almost always avoided, by a reaction which is produced when it arises; likewise if we wish to escape the preliminary initiative which looks for pleasure, we must also do it with a previous, contrary initiative, and if we want to escape the reaction contrary to pain which is produced the moment of the appearance of pain, we must wait for that moment to stop the reaction.... I run for pleasure as a reaction to something I am waiting for. But I must wait for the moment of pain to stop the repulsive reaction to it.

We can see this in the life of Jesus. First He was tested by pleasure in the wilderness and then faced the trial of suffering in His Passion and Crucifixion.

We seek pleasure for its own sake, but also because of our fear of pain.

Fr. Dimitru says,

The restraint from pleasure and the patient endurance of suffering, far from being something negative-passive and of a weak nature, instead strengthens it and this means a spiritualization, a putting the spirit in control... . By refraining from pleasure we have taken a big step toward the spiritual force of dispassion.... . Dispassion isn't a passivity, but a concentration of the spirit in the realm of the good and of the spiritual world.

The true joy we seek does not come from pleasure. When we are no longer automatically moved by an attraction to pleasure nor fear pain, we find a peace and stability in our life. We can see the divine providence of God at work. We understand how God uses our life's situation in the world as both grace and judgment. We appreciate how we grow through our self-control to avoid pleasure and exercise patience in our times of difficulty.

In suffering we are attracted to God and tested so we will be stronger to resist future sins. Our difficulties may not be due to our own sinfulness but due to that of others. In this fallen world stuff happens and we need to be prepared to respond to all kinds of difficulty with love and patience. Our ability to endure with patience is a sign of our recognition of God's power and wisdom. We thank God for all he sends to us along our path of life. It is through our avoidance of temptations and endurance of pain that we grow our faith in Him and find true joy.

As we say in the Lord's Pray, "*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*"

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 170-176

Hope - Power of Advanced Faith

When Man sees how much he has to endure, he begins to see that it is impossible for him not to have comfort from God, if not in this world, at least, in the next.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae

What is hope? Fr Dimitru tell us that it is faith in an advanced stage. It is a certitude in future realities and the participation that one will have in them.

Fr Dimitru says,
Hope is faith in an advanced stage. a power, which gives transparency to time, which penetrates through time, as faith penetrates space and visible nature.

It is through hope that we are able to sense a better future which is only reached with some difficulty. It is the opposite to our worries and fears, which Fr. Dimitru calls cares, which only point to an uncertain and unpleasant future. It with the absence of the worries or cares that we find religious hope. The less we have fears about the future and the more we have faith in God and our future with Him in His kingdom, the greater is the power of Hope in the soul.

Mark the ascetic tells us,
The heart where Christ dwells from Baptism can't be opened but by "Christ Himself and by intelligent hope."

It is only when hope becomes predominate in our souls that our heart is opened so we can guard the mind and intercept thoughts attached to our passions, so we can live a virtuous life. Hope unleashes the power of Christ within us.

Fr. Dimitru says,
Hope is vision within the heart, with the deepest part of our spirit, thus it is an intimate mystical conviction, a state of the transparency of our nature to the things beyond this world. ... In hope we experience a certainty, which doesn't depend only on our will, which doesn't have the strength we give it. Is the development of hope that makes all the problems that burden others seem meaningless. Once we know for certain that our future is with Christ in His kingdom, all the difficulties we face in this world no longer have any power over us. Our worldly cares are diminished. With hope we are able to patiently endure the troubles of this worldly life.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp177 - 179



Patience with Hope Leads to Meekness and Humility

As we practice patience and are able to endure our troubles with Hope, we will find that we begin to develop humility and meekness*.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae says,
Meekness is a firm disposition of the mind and is unaffected either by honors or insults. It means to be unaffected by the disappointments which your neighbor has caused you and to pray sincerely for him. It is the rock that arises above the sea of anger.

Meekness is not a weakness as many tend to think. It is a positive force aimed at the healing of hate. It is the meek person who is able to put himself into the shoes of others and to clearly see their point of view and understand their situation. With meekness one is able to take into consideration many dimensions of a situation. One who is meek has actions that are congruous with his thoughts. Fr. Dimitru says, "*By meekness the soul approaches simplicity.*"

Humility is the opposite of pride.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae defines humility as follows:

Humility is the supreme consciousness and living both of the divine infinity and our own littleness. It is at the same time the consciousness that the divine infinity pierces everything and everybody around us... As long as there is a trace of pride in us, we lack the thrill of contact with God; we lack the profound consciousness of a deeper relationship with God, and neither do we make others feel it.... Only the humble lives in the immeasurable depths, full of mystery, in God.... The humble person, far from becoming poor, embraces the infinite more than anybody else and offers it to others.

To know God we must become humble and meek. This is an essential lesson. As Fr. Dimitru says, "**only the humble lives... in God.**" Becoming humble is a total surrender of the ego-self. It is as if one becomes nothing. One becomes pure and a reflector of divine light. This is for sure an advanced state of spiritual development.

Fr. Dimitru writes,

If he only accepts this role of being nothing but a reflector and a receiver of divine light, he has a tremendous destiny: that of living with the infinite. If he is ashamed of this role and is filled with his own smoke, he can no longer see anything even in himself.

So reflect on this image of being "*filled with your own smoke.*" This "smoke" is what needs to be cleared away for us to be able to see God and to join with Him in what we call theosis. To see the divine light first the room must be cleared of *all* the "smoke."

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Matthew 5:5

* The Greek word for meekness--*prautes*--has nothing in it of this negative and weak implication. It is in fact quite a strong word meaning "openness to God and man." As such, it implies a determined effort toward a conciliatory attitude. Applied to human relationships it involves tolerance and flexibility. In the relationship to God it implies a readiness to accept His Word and His will.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 180 - 184



Dispassion the Aim of All Asceticism

We have now reached the end of the discourse on Purification. Our personal efforts discussed in this phase of Orthodox Spirituality lead us to what is termed *dispassion*.

Saint Maximus the Confessor says,
"Dispassion is a peaceful condition of the soul."

Saint Isaac the Syrian says,
"Dispassion doesn't mean to no longer feel the passions, but to no longer accept them."

Diadochos of Photiki says,
"Dispassion doesn't mean to be no longer be attacked by demons..., but being attacked by them, to remain unconquered."

Saint John Climacus says dispassion is,
"the heaven in the heart of the mind, which considers the cunning of the demons as just toys."

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae summarizes,
So dispassion would be that state of the soul in which it defeats every temptation.

This state is attained after much ascetic work and is a most positive strength capable of defeating every passion. It can also be seen as the possession of all the virtues.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 185 - 187



With Dispassion Love Blossoms

With dispassion comes the quiet of the soul. It can be viewed as a state of spiritual rest because our mind has been freed from the domination of the passions. Consequently, the soul is able to take charge. Our mind becomes free to direct our will to do works of virtue and is able to direct its attention to higher meanings inherent on the natural world.



Saint Mark the Hermit says,

When by the grace of God the mind does the works of virtue and comes near to knowledge, it feels little from the evil and non-

understanding of the soul. Its knowledge catches him up to the heights and frees him from all the things of the world; and by the

purity in them (saints) and the fineness and the lightness and sharpness of their minds, and again by their asceticism, their mind is cleansed and becomes transparent, by the withering of their flesh in the school of quietness and by staying a long time in it. This because the contemplation in them easily and speedily grasps everything and to their amazement leads them.

Dispassion is a prerequisite for contemplation of God which leads to Illumination.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae says,

For this, a distinct revelation of God is necessary. But this revelation can't take place as long as man's spiritual eyes are troubled and his time is preoccupied by the attraction of the passions. The absence of passions, however gives him the capacity to see and to remember things in the simple meaning, without associating them with a passionate interest.

In this spiritual state one is still not able to continually contemplate God. Neither is it a state without interest in things of this world. Instead, love blossoms.

Maximus the Confessor defines two aspects of this state.

First is the state of the soul which permits it to receive and conceive things in their "simple" meaning, in other words not interwoven with passion. Secondly, it is a state which doesn't exclude but implies love.

Fr. Dimitru comments,

The absence of passion when either seeing or thinking of things is the absence of egoism. The dispassionate person no longer sees and thinks of things through the prism of passion which wants to be satisfied with them; in reference to himself, things no longer seem to be gravitating around him, but they appear as having their own purpose independent of his egotism. Other people appear to him as human beings who are purposes in themselves, who need help from him.... The dispassionate person knows that he influences his neighbors more by his quietness, as a sign of his deep cleansing from passions. He works for salvation of others, with the unwavering confidence in the plan which God has for every soul... . Dispassion leads us into the inner most part of the mind, to the heart, where God is found and the winds of passion aren't whistling and blowing, but where the peaceful and conquering breezes of love are stirring.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 187 -191

The Elements of Purification in Orthodox Spirituality

In the previous posts on Fr. Dimitru Staniloae's work titled *Orthodox Spirituality* we have reviewed part one which he titled "Purification."

In this section he discusses the [passions](#) and shows how we can progressively overcome them to attain a final state of dispassion which prepares us for the next section he titles "Illumination."

The path he outlined is as follows:

1. Faith, the Basic State for Purification.
[Faith: The Starting Point to Perfection](#)
2. The Fear of God and the Thought of Judgment
[Fear of God is Next Step](#)
3. Repentance
[Repentance - Main Means for Our Perfection](#)
[Repentance - The Ship that brings us to the Divine Harbor](#)
[Repentance - Way to Overcome Egoism](#)
[Repentance as a Sacrament](#)
4. Self-Control
[Self-Control lifts us to see the infinite in things of this world.](#)
[Self-Control as Fasting](#)
[Self-Control to Overcome our Passions](#)
5. The Guarding of the Mind or of Thoughts
[Guarding the Mind - Watchfulness - Getting at the Root](#)
[Guarding the mind- Knocking on the Door of the Heart](#)
6. Longsuffering, the Patient Endurance of Troubles
[Longsuffering - Why Troubles and Suffering?](#)
[Role of Temptations](#)
7. Hope
[Hope - Power of Advanced Faith](#)
8. Meekness and Humility
[Patience with Hope Leads to Meekness and Humility](#)
9. Dispassion or Freedom from Passion
[With Dispassion Love Blossoms](#)

Summary:

We find ourselves in a state of many cares of this world. Our mind is taken up with worries and fears. We find it difficult to concentrate on God, to consistently do His will, and to practice the virtues in our daily life. We need some kind of radical transformation.

The path to the needed transformation begins with faith in the Good News that is found in the Gospels. We believe and are Baptized where the Holy Spirit is planted in our hearts and we develop Faith. This faith is strengthened and followed by the realization of our sinfulness and the final judgment we will eventually face. We realize we can live a life that takes us to an eternal life with God in His kingdom, or, by ignoring His direction for us, live an eternal life separated from Him. With this fear of God, we then seek to purify our way of life through an attitude of repentance. We feel contrition for our weaknesses and seek God's help to overcome them. We participate in the Sacraments of the Church for our healing and spiritual growth. We realize our need to have more self-control so that we will not continually repeat our past patterns of living. We engage in ascetic practices like fasting to aid the development of greater control over the passions which seem to drive us and separate us from God. As we gain self-control we seek to get at the source of the distractions which lead us to temptations we are unable to resist. This involves an inner guarding of the mind and referring our thoughts to Christ who is with us in our hearts. We find that there are all kinds of difficulties in this world that we cannot necessarily avoid. We learn to endure them with patience and the guidance and comfort of God. As we endure with patience, in us grows our hope for the next world, God's kingdom where there are no troubles. We find we begin to develop meekness and humility—a loss of our ego-centeredness. And finally, we enter into a state of dispassion where the passions no longer have any control over us. Our mind becomes quiet and free to pursue the contemplation of God. The soul is now in command to direct our will and we begin to live the life of virtue and love.

We are now ready to enter into the next phase of Orthodox Spirituality known as Illumination.

Entering the Next Phase of Spiritual Development - Illumination

We are now entering a new phase in the major steps in the Orthodox spiritual life. The first step was called **Purification**. This is the stage where we work to liberate our soul from the passions. It is one where we develop meekness and humility, setting aside our ego-centered desires and learn to practice the virtues which are based on love. This carries us to the next phase called **Illumination** or often Contemplation. It is where the true meaning of things, the logoi, are illuminated for us. We work to see God's purpose in all things. With this the world becomes a teacher for us about God—the divine Logos. Finally there is **Perfection** which is the direct contemplation of God or mystical knowledge.

In the phase of Illumination we will cover the following topics:

1. The Gifts of the Holy Spirit
2. Contemplation of God in Creation
3. Spiritual Understanding of Scripture
4. Negative and Apophatic Knowledge of God in general
5. Steps of Apophatism
6. Negative and Positive Theology: a Dynamic Relationship
7. Pure Prayer
8. Methods for Facilitation of Pure Prayer
9. To Jesus by what is Deep Within Us
10. Mental Rest: the First Step of Stillness

The First phase is a necessary preparation for the Second. And the Second for the Third. There is a progression in our spiritual growth. Beware of trying to skip beyond the level which is appropriate. It is wise to follow the guidance of a spiritual Father.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 69 -73



Illumination - Gifts of the Holy Spirit

At our Baptism and Chrismation we receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But as long as we are dominated by the passions, these gifts are not fully active. They are hidden or covered. Once we remove the passions then these gifts work in our consciousness.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae says,
Only after the termination of the work of purification, driven especially by the powers of Baptism and of repentance, does the work of the gifts of the Holy Spirit appear first and foremost.

It is during the stage of Purification where we strive to overcome the work of the passions where we begin to feel increasingly the power of the Holy Spirit. He then works later to bring to our consciousness full illumination of the truths.



There are said to be seven gifts of the Holy Spirit:

- Fear of God to help overcome sinfulness.
- Spirit of strength to live by the virtues.
- Spirit of counsel to give us the skill of discernment.
- Spirit of understanding to realize how blessings have been revealed to us to gain virtues.
- Spirit of knowledge to know the deeper motivation of each command and virtue.
- Spirit of comprehension to know the meaning of things by identification with them.
- Spirit of wisdom which is the simple contemplation of truth of all things.

St. Maximus the Confessor describes wisdom as follows:

By this we know as far as is humanly possible, in an unknown way, the simple logoi of things found in God; we take out the truth from everything, as from a gushing spring of the heart, and we also share it in different ways with others.

It is the gifts of the Holy Spirit that guide us in the knowledge of God. Again Fr. Dimitru cautions,
Only after the mind is cleansed not only from the passions but also from simple images and representations of things, will the direct knowledge of God be produced...

The work of the Holy Spirit is like a light shining into a dark room. As the light increases, the contents of the room become known. Through illumination the Spirit will illumine our consciousness so that we are filled with divine light. With this light all things become transparent and their meaning and relationship with God become very clear. We are enabled to penetrate beneath the surface of things.

Fr. Dimitru says

Only in the measure in which someone becomes transparent to himself, are things made transparent to him, because this power which works in him later reaches the exterior... for the eyes of our soul to see the light of intelligible and divine realities, that is the depths of things, they must first be filled with the light which radiates from these depths. In him who sees must be found something of what is seen. Through the contemplation of things of the created world and the words of Scripture, we are led to a deeper illumined knowledge.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 195 - 202

Contemplation of God in Creation

Before we can expect to directly contemplate God we must first contemplate Him in nature. It is by the beauty, order and mystery of the created world that we are guided to our union with Him.

There is a reason behind every created thing. This truth is called the logoi of the thing or event. The Church Fathers use this term to emphasize that there is an objective truth behind all things. The logoi are their sense, purpose, cause, finality and special relationship with everything else. This truth is not a relative truth or subjective one.

It is true that when most of us view an object or event we will have a different view of it. What seems relative in the truth of things is only due to our self-interest or our opinions being imposed on things and events. When we develop dispassion and humility through the steps of Purification, these self-opinions disappear so that the truth of things, the logoi, is revealed in a pure objective sense. These logoi are the obedience that the thing has to its Creator. They come from God as divine directives. They represent God's ideas. The reality of all creation is that they are the same no matter which person is viewing them once we strip away the clutter of ego-centeredness from the observer.



Through the logoi of things we can gain an understanding of the divine Logos which is God, supreme reason, once we have overcome the passions.

Saint Maximus the Confessor says,

The mind which cultivates in the spirit natural contemplation... receives the proof of the creative Logos of all things from the beautiful order of visible things"

This truth or logoi is hidden in things. As we contemplate them we will discover rays of the divine Logos. As we discover these truths hidden in things, we gradually ascend to the knowledge of God and our personal relationship with Him.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae says,

On the road to our approach to God stands the world—we must pass through the understanding of it... The world imposed on everyone as a stone for sharpening his spiritual faculties.... If we look at its beauty in order to praise its Creator, we are saved; if we think that its fruit is pure and simply something to eat, we are lost. Salvation is not obtained in isolation, but in a cosmic frame.

Through our contemplation of the things of the world we are stripping away from all things our biases, images and limited views we have imposed on them, which comes from our way of life being subjected to the passions.

In addition to nature we have the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who is the incarnation of the Divine Logos. Therefore, by studying Scripture, the life of Jesus and his teachings, we can also gain spiritual insights.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 203 - 207

Illumination: How to Discern the Truth (logoi) in Things

After a prolonged period of purification with much spiritual exercise to subdue the passions, we can focus our mind on the contemplation of God's creation to discern the truth that lies in them, the logoi.

This truth is not grasped by our reason alone.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae writes, *It is reason which is exercised by the choice of rational things required by divine commands and by gradual rationalization of man gained by virtue.*



This is a reason purified from the influence of all our passions and self-centeredness and informed by a selfless virtuous life. This provides the basis for an act of "intuitive knowledge" in which reason is implicated through exercise over prolonged periods of time. We must be aware that we can make personal judgments about things, their logoi, their purpose. In our normal state these judgments vary from time to time but this does not change the truth about them. It only reflects our imperfect judgment about them. Once we realize, based on humility, that all that happens takes place by God's will, we can begin to have revealed to us the "true line" of His development of creation.

This truth of things is not something obtained with intellectual dialogue. This is not necessary to extract their truth. We must prepare ourselves so it is revealed to us.

There exists an objective logos—pure reason.

Fr. Dimitru says,

It imposes itself by its fully convincing and evident rationality and at the same time by its supra-rationality as a reflex of a harmonious and immutable order of the existence of a thing of fact with the framework of the whole of reality.

We can arrive at these truths only after proper preparation and the development of a high moral character. Only then is the truth revealed to us uncluttered by our personal opinions.

Next we will address why prolonged preparation is necessary.

Illumination: Why is Prolonged Preparation Necessary?

Without much preparation our judgment about things continually changes. We do not always have the same capacity to grasp the truth. Our self-interests based on actions of the passions clouds our reasoning. It is the passions that introduce irrationality into our reasoning. Only they are irrational. We make our reason fit our life situation, rationalizing all of our misguided actions. We have a self-made world view, a mental model, through which we interpret the world and its events. We tend to see created things only in terms of our own needs, as objects for material satisfaction. We justify irrational behavior as rational and find in things and events logoi that do not belong. This is so because of the existence of passions in us that modify our vision of the world in a way that deviates from the truth.



First, the deeper spiritual logoi are covered up. We only see the material utilitarian aspects of things. For example an apple is not seen as having a purpose of realizing that the creative energies of beauty and sweetness come from God. We instead see an apple as an object to satisfy our appetite or for some nutritional value. These material attributes blind us to the greater spiritual meanings.

Second, we try to justify all our actions based on personal motives. The objective logoi are replaced by subjective logoi. This subjective logoi are not the true ones but ones given to us through our passions. It is only the objective ones that aid our spiritual growth, but without preparation they are hidden from us. When we are under the control of our passions the truth is replaced by a personal truth, a subjective truth. We see all things relative to our personal self-interested observation. When we embrace this subjective view as truth, we fall into an error called Relativism. We mistakenly embrace as truth that there is no absolute truth, that there are no logoi, because everyone sees the world differently. Thus, the truth is not recognized. It remains hidden.

This subjectivity needs to be overcome to know divine truths. It cannot be done through any theoretical study. It comes only with the development of dispassion based on humility and meekness, through a long process of purification. This involves a struggle demanding much effort and faith. The state of dispassion allows us to avoid the action of the passions to distort our judgment about things and events. With a quiet liberated mind we can begin to observe divine truths.

Fr Dimitru Staniloae says,

Only reason which is modeled after a virtuous life, in other words after a life which has sacrificed, after prolonged exercise, egotism and the self-importance of personal opinion, can come to truth... Only the subjectivity which means the living of the surpassing of personal subjectivity can approach the truth. Surpassing personal subjectivity is the basis for contemplation of the truths of God's creation. This is why in our modern world such great emphasis is placed on the scientific approach. It removes personal subjectivity. But this approach is also limited, because it is applied only to the study of material attributes. But a scientific approach models the objectivity needed to also view the spiritual attributes of things. Dispassion is the equivalent "scientific method" for knowing divine truths.

This implies the development of a whole way of life, not just some rational understanding. Once purified of the passions, reason is transformed and is assisted by the powers of the soul and the whole person becomes in love with the truth. Through this love of truth we enter into a relationship with the divine Logos. We leave behind our opinions and only seek the truth given to us by God. In this way mind and heart become unified.

As Fr. Dimitru puts it,

"The truth can't be known and confessed except with "one mind and one heart."

Next we will look at the steps for our healing and transformation of our reason.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 206 - 213

Illumination: Steps Needed to Discern Truth

"Preparation is necessary because our reason, in every condition of our life, doesn't remain invariable with the same capacity to objectively capture the truth."

The following are the steps outlined by Fr. Dimitru Staniloae to return to the way of truth.

1. The first is faith. We need to be obedient to God's commandments.
2. Second, is a long term effort to direct our lives and to explain things in the world in light of our faith.
This involves the steps of purification outlined earlier. We need to gain control over the passions, gain a life of virtue, and give up seeing things as objects for egoistic satisfaction.
3. Third, we need the experiences of life gained by the first two steps.
This develops valid value judgments and legitimizes an explanation of things and their logoi having their source in God. We learn that a life directed only on fleshly things is a distortion of the full reality. We realize a life of faith and observe the truth of life. We understand that discernment is based on more than what we can learn from our own rationalization or judgment. We begin to realize the logoi in things are also logoi in God. Our discrimination of logoi becomes ever clearer.
4. Fourth, with this increased sharpness of mind our discernment is accelerated. We can see what is evil or good in a thing or event at our first glance. With a long habit of such discernment we realize logoi do not consist of fleshly utility but in a revelation of a spiritual sense—a divine intention. This is all gained gradually as a gift of the Holy Spirit.
5. Finally, we develop the capacity to grasp the rational relationships of things and events with the logoi of other things and events.

Fr. Dimitru concludes this chapter,

For man to know the Logos from nature and Scripture, something necessary for him if he wants to reach perfection, he must understand both of them "in spirit" going beyond their material covering.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 214 - 223



Illumination: Spiritual Understanding of Scripture

Man has the absolute need for these two things, if he wants to keep the right way to God without error: the spiritual understanding of Scripture and the spiritual contemplation of God in nature."

Saint Maximus the Confessor

Saint Maximus also tells us that for a spiritual understanding of Scripture it is essential to go beyond the literal understanding. He writes,

He who doesn't enter into the divine beauty and glory found in the letter of the law falls under the power of the passions and becomes the slave of the world.

This means we must first be worthy of the Spirit and able to enter into a spiritual relationship with the words to gain deeper spiritual understanding of Scripture.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloe says, *The spiritual understanding... requires preparation as well as the knowledge of the logoi or the living words and present workings of God by things. Those who are full*

of passions, to the extent that they are glued to the visible surface of things, are also glued to the letter of the Scripture and its history... the wall which blocks the road to God, rather than being transparent for them or a guide to Him.

This implies that the most useful study of Scripture comes after we have conquered our passions. Before this we are apt to make self-serving and highly subjective interpretations of Scripture. This is why it is not advised for Orthodox Christians to engage in their own study or interpretation of Scripture, but instead to rely on the interpretations given to us by the Church Fathers and study in the context of the Church with the assistance of her clergy.

Scripture is divine word and the proper understanding of it involves a limitless depth and a universal validity for every age and every person. To gain this universal understanding requires the ability to hear the words as if they are spoken by God, to us personally and at the present time.

Fr. Dimitru says,

It means that when I read the letter I hear God himself speaking to me and to us today, or about me and us, and about our duties... means to see the constant relationship between God and us, and to live it in the way it affects me at the present moment....

This is not a subjective interpretation but one that is universal and the same for all persons. Spirit must penetrate the words of the Scripture, allowing them to be understood from our inner being. This inner



understanding is from Spirit and not the intellect that becomes available to us once we are purified of the passions which blind us to the selfless truth of things.

The Scripture gains meaning from a virtuous life and a life in the Church. The readings of the Church Fathers help us give clear meaning to the words.

Fr. Dimitru says,

Scripture... has depths which lead to the divine infinite and make the Person of the divine Word felt. This wisdom makes way of an infinite progress in the deeper study of the Scripture and in the increasing accentuated feeling of Christ... The progress in the deeper study of Scripture is in proportion to our progress in the life according to the Spirit, in proportion to our purification from the egotism of the passions.

This is why when we read Scripture time and time again it takes on new and deeper meanings. As we progress spiritually, progressively revealing the influence the passions have on us, repenting and correcting our ways, gaining in self-control, we see new depths in Scripture. The Scripture has not changed, but our perception of it changes and deepens. Once we have reached the state of dispassion where the passions no longer have any control over us we enter into the spiritual nature of Scripture and it becomes in a real way the voice of God.

Fr. Dimitru says,

In this way all things in Scripture not only become contemporary, but in some way a biography of our relationship with God. In this sense the events of salvation of the life of Jesus become present events which happen in the depths of my life... He is resurrected in me when I reach the state of dispassion. He is transfigured for me when I become worthy of seeing the divine light. He penetrates into me in a hidden way at baptism. He is the effective force which guides and empowers my whole ascent along which He becomes increasingly more transparent in me by my gradual deification, making me like Him by the dialogical communication with Him...

For the spiritual man, in the depths of Scripture... the Spirit sustains his efforts of purification and illuminates for him everything around that they might become transparent symbols of divinity. All things give him the consciousness that "In God we live and move, and have our being," (Acts 17:28) as Saint Paul told us in Athens.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 224 - 229

Illumination: Going Beyond Knowledge - Apophatic Knowledge

As we begin to approach an understanding of God we find that we cannot understand Him. He is beyond our mental grasp. This leads us to a critical step in our spiritual journey. We need to go beyond all mental concepts to know God. This step is referred to as one requiring apophatic knowledge. It is a mystical way of knowing that transcends the logical mind.

We began our journey with a positive approach to knowing God only to find that this does not lead us to knowing Him.



Fr. Dimitru says,

So at the beginning the affirmative way is less dependent on the consciousness of the ineffable character of God; later it is more so. After a long ascent, it becomes almost totally dependent on the consciousness of the inability to comprehend and express God in concepts.

Instead of identifying positive attributes of God we begin to try and use negative ones. This is a way of expressing our feeling of the incomprehensibility of God that develops as we ascend in our spiritual growth. It refers to an experience that cannot be described in positive terms, an experience that is referred to by the Church Fathers as vision of God or the divine light. It is not a rejection of the idea of knowing God. But one that is part of a transition to the realization that there is a higher kind of knowledge that permeates our being when we come into contact with God.

V. Lossky captures this idea in his well known book *Mystical Theology* where he explains the teaching of Dionysius the Areopagite (Acts 17:34).

Fr. Dimitru summarizes it as follows:

Dionysius distinguishes two possible theological ways. One—that of cataphatic or positive theology—proceeds by affirmations; the other —apophatic or negative theology—by negations. The first leads us to some knowledge of God, but in an imperfect way. The perfect way, the only way which is fitting in regard to God, who is of His very nature unknowable, is the second—which leads us finally to total ignorance. All knowledge has as its object that which is. Now God is beyond all that exists. In order to approach Him, it is necessary to deny all that is inferior to Him, that is to say, all that which is. ... It is by unknowing that one may know Him who is above every possible object of knowledge. Proceeding by negations one ascends from the inferior degrees of being to the highest, by progressively setting aside all that can be known, in order to draw near to the Unknown in the darkness of absolute ignorance.

This is a major transition because we have to give up all we have conceived, all that was useful in our earlier spiritual development, so we can continue on our path to union with God.

Saint Dionysius writes,

One must abandon all that is impure and all that is pure. One must then scale the most sublime heights of sanctity leaving behind all the divine luminaries, all the heavenly sounds and words. It is only thus that one may penetrate to the darkness wherein He who is beyond all created things makes His dwelling.

This approach, called apophatic, is an attitude of mind which does not allow the formation of concepts about God. It is based on a mystical experience and not gained through a method of abstract thought. It requires proper preparation and a purification.

Lossky summarizes as follows:

Unknowability does not mean agnosticism or refusal to know God. Nevertheless, this knowledge will only be attained in the way which leads not to knowledge but to union—to deification. Thus theology will never be abstract, working through concepts, but contemplative: raising mind to those realities which pass all understanding...

The knowledge of the divine nature is above knowledge.

Saint Gregory Palamas says,

It shouldn't be called knowledge, because it is much higher than all knowledge and the viewpoint from knowledge.

It is the lived embodiment of the unknowability of God.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 230 - 236

Illumination: Facing the Abyss

After a long and arduous struggle to tame the passions, we receive the gift of contemplation to seek the truth in all of God's creation. Along this path we continually have feelings of God's presence, but we now come to a place where we realize that we can't know God. We recognize that there is a limit to our mental ability to grasp truth. We yearn for union with Him and to be united with His divine light. But, our attempts to understand Him elude us. We begin to think in terms of what God is not, developing what is called an apophatic sense. We begin to sense that there is an alternative path to a fuller knowledge of Him, one that goes beyond the mental concepts we have trusted in so far. This alternative is what the theologians have described as apophaticism.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae says,

After the knowledge, by the intermediacy of nature, of the divine logoi and energies, the knowledge of the divine revealed energies follows. Of course, the knowledge of these energies is accompanied especially in the second case, by apophaticism. Furthermore, the knowledge of the energies enveloped in nature is accompanied by the consciousness of the unknowability of the divinely revealed energies; and the knowledge of them goes together with the consciousness of the absolute incomprehensibility of the divine nature. This apophaticism is present at the same time as knowledge, or alternatively, on both steps, but is more accentuated on the second.



As I have personally contemplated the truth of God as found in His creation, I sense this gap between what I can know and what there is to know. I am left with a divine "feeling" that I don't really understand. I feel as if I can't fully know the truth about that which I observe. Occasionally I come to a place where I momentarily let go of my mental concepts and this feeling intensifies, but, almost instantly, I snap back like I am afraid of losing reality. It feels like a temporary loss of consciousness. It appears as a void, a silence, a great abyss, one I am not quite ready to master. It seems like everything will be negated. I react and withdraw to a more comfortable place. I realize I am not yet prepared for this next step.

Fr. Dimitru describes this condition where we begin to feel the unexplainable divine energies as the first step of apophaticism. The next step he describes as follows:

The moment we leave behind every consideration of concepts taken from nature and every preoccupation even to negate them when we therefore also raise ourselves beyond negation, as an intellectual operation, and beyond some apophatic feeling of them, we enter a state of silence produced by prayer.

This is a critical transition in our spiritual growth. We may experience a void, silence, darkness, a state of intense prayer or a total quietness of our mind. To progress we have to make a total surrender to God

and enter into this unknown area. We must face the abyss. It is a total surrender of our ego-centeredness, of the control that our mind uses based on worldly concepts.

Fr Dimitru says,

The mind reaches the abyss which separates its knowledge from God, but it is still here on the human side. But carried off by God, it goes over there, to the vision of the divine light.

There is a large chasm we need to cross and our faith must be total to cross it. On the other side is the divine light and the union with God we seek.

Fr Dimitru says,

Certainly the vision of the divine light is also accompanied by an apophaticism, which we could call the third step. But it is no longer an apophaticism in the sense of a void, as previous steps. First it consists of the consciousness of the one who sees it; that it can't be contained in concepts and expressed in words. Secondly, that beyond it is the divine being, which remains totally inaccessible. But it has a positive content of knowledge higher than knowledge of apophatic knowledge, a feeling of higher experience and of natural feeling.... the vision of the light means that it has carried the mind across the abyss which separates us and God.

Fr. Staniloae has more to say on this. Next.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 237 - 244

illumination: Positive Theology is a Companion to Apophatic Theology

Every reality, concept or symbolic image mirrors God as well as awakens in us the proof or unexplainable feeling that God is totally different... they confront us with an infinite abyss of divine reality which we can't grasp with our minds.... But our mind, faced with this abyss still doesn't give up looking at things... and finds they don't give it the means to describe the abyss... Finally the mind realizes that not one is is suitable. Fr. Dimitru Staniloae

Apophaticism is a stage where reason become aware of its limits. It does not mean that we must abandon all the concepts we have learned as being useless, but we accept their limits in knowing God and negate them in this context.

Fr Dimitru says,

Therefore negative theology doesn't eliminate the enriching of our spirit with concepts ever higher and more enhanced. It also measures divinity with them and always finds it incomprehensible...

We need to first develop these concepts, because to negate we need something to negate. So as our positive knowledge increases so does our ability to approach the unknowable God.

Fr. Dimitru says,

It is true that positive theology is a theology of the finite, but far from excluding the infinite, it makes the ascent to Him possible. Only if it is used without negative theology does it have but a limited character... We must have first tried, and continually be trying to approach the divinity with the rems of positive theology in order to know that they don't fit and consequently negate them... So because of the fact that by His hidden nature God is unknowable but by His works which come into the world and are mirrored in their created effect, He is knowable, stands for the necessity of expressing God antinomically, in other words in positive terms, immediately replaced by the negative. thus on one hand we must say that God is life, according to His life-creating power which He has manifested by working in the world, on the other hand we must say that He isn't life, because the hidden nature from which the life-giving power comes and acts in the world, isn't identified with this, but is greater than it. Affirmative theology expresses the grain which can be taken from the "nature " of truth—negative theology, the consciousness or evidence that these grains aren't everything, that by them the knowledge of the truth isn't finished. It expresses the consciousness or evidence of the inexhaustible mystery, which as such is the inexhaustible source of the truths which will be known in the future. Positive theology strikes the balance of the truths already known. Negative theology gives the assurance for the knowledge of the future.



Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 245 - 254

Illumination: Pure Prayer

The virtue of prayer brings about the mystery of our union with God, because prayer is the tie of rational creatures with the Creator. - Saint Gregory Palamas

Pure Prayer is the bridge we seek to union with God and to be participants in His divine light. It is prayer that enables us to cross the great abyss when realize God is beyond all mental concepts and involves a higher knowledge. It is a step that is beyond apophaticism or negative theology.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae writes,

Pure prayer is an ecstasy of interior quietness, a total cessation of thought in the face of divine mystery, before the divine light descends to the mind thus stopped by astonishment.

This pure prayer is only given to us once we have mastered our passions.

Fr. Dimitru says,

Pure prayer is made only after the mind has been raised from the contemplation of visible nature and from the world of concepts, when the mind doesn't have any image or form or concept.

It is called pure because it does not have an object and does not involve any words. This is also called by the Church Fathers as the Prayer of the mind, or noetic prayer, where the mind is free and we are face to face with God.

Fr. Dimitru gives us a couple of conditions for reaching this level of prayer:

1. The mind must withdraw from things outside and focus on what is within, to its heart. It is in this place called the heart, the center of our soul where we find God.
2. One should use only a few words addressed to Jesus to assure a remembrance of Him and to focus the mind on its goal. He says, "even the most pure prayer must keep the thought of the presence of Jesus." He advises us that the common prayer of this nature is the Jesus Prayer :Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner."

With the mind focused on the heart we will find that the mind no longer looks for external things. With its focus on the name of Jesus it is guarded by any sinful thoughts. But there is a struggle involved against evil forces.

Fr. Dimitru says,

It must struggle much with the thoughts around it, to make its way toward it (the heart) and to open it... The mind with difficulty regains the habit of looking toward God... Then it lives His presence directly, or feels itself in His presence.

This state of prayer involves the opening of the heart. We feel the pleasure of constantly remembering His name and being within with His love.

St. Diadochos writes,

Grace itself then thinks together with the soul and cries or together with it: "Lord Jesus Christ." [Because immediately]... we need His help to unite and gladden all our thoughts with His ineffable Sweetness, that we might be moved with all our heart to the remembrance and love of our God and Father.

Next: Method for the facilitation of pure prayer.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 255 - 261

Illumination: Developing Pure Prayer

Fr. Dimitru next shows us the different ways to lift our minds to pure prayer. He outlines the teachings of the following Saints.

Saint John Chrysostom:

He teaches the return of the mind to the heart and the repetition of a short prayer addressed to Jesus.

St. Simeon the New Theologian: *The Method of Holy Prayer and Attention*

He outlines four levels of prayer:

1. Prayer accompanied with imagination.
2. Prayer which concentrates on the words of the prayer not accepting images or other sensations.
3. Guarding the heart and praying from the depths of the heart, calling on Jesus Christ, without distraction from passions, and with obedience to a spiritual father.
4. The final level is when the mind remains motionless in contemplation of God.



Nicephorus the Monk:

He recommends that we seek the heart from the very beginning and to coordinate our saying of the prayer with the breath, persistently reciting the prayer addressed to Jesus.

Gregory of Sinai:

Saint Gregory provides detailed instructions for the body and mind. He advises that the Jesus Prayer should be recited with both mind and mouth.

"It is necessary only to speak quietly and without agitation, so that somehow the mind doesn't trouble the feeling and attention of the mind and hinder them. This until the mind, getting used to this work will make progress and receive the power of the spirit to be able to pray fully and persistently. Then it is no longer necessary to speak with the mouth, but neither is it possible; then it is enough to carry on the work with the mind."

He also instructs us to divide the Jesus prayer in half, repeating each half by itself for a time. (Lord Jesus Christ Son of God -- Have mercy on me a sinner)

Callistus and Irgantius:

They add the idea of thinking of death, the judgment, the reward of good works and the punishment of evil.

Nicodemus the Aghiorite:

He emphasizes the need to give the mind something to do with the meditation of the Jesus Prayer. He also gives details on the use of the breath in prayer.

Fr. Dimitru concludes his discussion suggesting we focus on the simpler method of John Chrysostom, which is the recitation of the Jesus Prayer without the complications of body movements, positions or control of breathing.

He then reviews the lessons from the *Way of the Pilgrim*, a story of a Russian pilgrim who sought to find how to pray unceasingly and learned to recite the Jesus Prayer more and more each day until it became a constant prayer. It is a gripping and powerful story.

Fr. Dimitru Stailoae says,

The Jesus prayer becomes gradually a mental prayer, also the content of the mental prayer is also Jesus...

It becomes mental prayer when there is no longer the need for either words, or methods, and the mind is occupied with it unceasingly, along with the heart.

The practice of the Jesus prayer is important for our spiritual growth towards theosis. Some say it is essential.

For those looking for information about how to practice the Jesus prayer, I suggest you go to the website [www.OrthodoxPrayer.org/Jesus Prayer.html](http://www.OrthodoxPrayer.org/JesusPrayer.html) Here you will find useful information and links to many articles. Also there are many posts on this blog regarding the Jesus Prayer. [This link](#) will lead you to some of them.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 262 -282

Illumination: Entering Within

The process that leads us to pure prayer is difficult to explain. We are relegated to ideas such as negative theology, prayer in the heart and pure prayer. Fr. Dimitru Staniloae does an excellent job of explaining this important step in our spiritual journey, which involves facing the abyss, darkness, a vast chasm and so forth. It is a process that involves going beyond reason, rising to the use of a higher mind that does not rely on concepts. It is a step beyond negative theology.



Fr. Dimitru writes,

In negative theology we make an abstraction of the world only by reason and not totally even then,

because when we negate one of God's attributes we think about what we negate.

So, negative theology is like a first step into this unknown space. At this stage we begin to realize the unknowability of God through reason. While we do so we realize the reality of His inner presence.

He continues,

In mental prayer we turn away from all things and submerge ourselves in ourselves; we make an existential abstraction, total and lasting, by all that we are.

It is through mental prayer that we will make this final journey to be filled with the joy of the divine light and a higher knowledge of the divine through a union with God. There is a step beyond apophatic or negative theology which occurs through prayer. As we enter into mental prayer we enter into the depths of our inner being. We discover our true self and open the doors of our heart to knowledge of God.

He continues,

In the prayer made in the heart we not only negate the world and think of it at the same time, but pure and simple we totally forget the world with our whole being. We are left only with ourselves and not with our superselves with our traits and properties which can be seen or thought about in definite concepts. Rather we remain with our "I" from the depths, unconstrained by the thought of things, which can't be seen or defined by any concept whatsoever. We find ourselves only with the simple consciousness of the presence of the self, of its indefinable realities.

As we enter the heart in prayer, which is the center of our being or our spirit, we leave the realm of concepts, reason and our normal mental processes. We now face the the pure self in its simplest form, free of mental concepts. What makes up our ego-self disappears. We are stripped of all the images we have created to make up our self-image. We are free and pure to face our Creator.

Saint Gregory Palamas says,

In prayer the mind gradually abandons all relations with created things: first with all things evil and bad, then with neutral things capable of conformity to either good or ill, according to the intentions of the person using them.

All the Holy Fathers tell us, according to Fr. Dimitru, that the absolutely essential condition to approach the mind of the infinite God is to leave behind all perceptible and intelligible things. This we are able to do, after preparation where we conquer our passions, in mental prayer.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp. 283-284

Illumination: Mind Beyond Reason

The notion that prayer of the heart takes us beyond all concepts and is essential to approach God raises some important questions. This is often described as an emptying of the mind or a stillness of the mind. But doesn't our mind always need to have something to do? Our Church Fathers affirm that it is truly possible to totally empty the mind of all its thoughts and concepts. Then, how is it that we can have our mind not involved with thoughts and concepts but still occupied? Even when we are engaged in negative theology we are still filling our mind with concepts, albeit they be negative ones about attributes of God. We are still activating reason based on known concepts. The answer is prayer. Prayer fills the mind with God.



Fr. Dimitru Staniloae says,

Prayer alone succeeds in making this work complete by removing from the mind all definite content whatsoever. It occupies the mind with the infinite, with God; in other words, it fills it in a positive and experiential way with the apophatic.

To further understand this we need to distinguish between mind (nous) and reason (logos) in the writings of our Fathers.

Reason is the faculty that conceives things by assigning them to concepts or what are also called logoi. It is these concepts that are the objects of our reason. The mind is more than reason. It is the faculty that thinks contents without restraining them to concepts. Reason is used by the mind which is a much higher a power. So, to go beyond reason is to appeal to the highest part of our mind which operates without concepts.

Fr. Dimitru compares this to the Divine mind. He writes,

Reason comes from the mind just as the divine Logos is continually born from the Father, who is the first Mind (nous). Therefore in the divine mind is the principle of all things, so too the mind in man is the principle of all things, so of reason too. It is therefore the basis of the human subject, which is beyond delimited contents.

So as we go within to the place of the inner self, we go beyond what is possible to grasp with reason. Our "self" is beyond reason and all concepts. It is not limited by the images and conditions that make up our ego-self. What ever concepts we use to describe our "self" there is always more. To know our true being we must go beyond all concepts using the higher powers of our mind.

Fr. Dimitru says,

Things and concepts are a curtain which shut off our view, not only of God, but also of the basis of our subject.... The mind should be able to see its own self as in a mirror... Yet images and concepts cover the mirror with a wall which must be pierced...

The main point is that to know our true self and to join in union with God we need to go beyond our reason, beyond all concepts, to the highest part of our mind which does not rely on concepts; that part which controls even reason. Reason and concepts are limiting, incapable of grasping the infinite. Knowing this truth about our own being leads to knowledge about God that is beyond reason. This is the aim of all our ascetic preparation, to get beyond all that keeps us focused on the things of this world which we understand through reason and concepts about them. This starts by controlling our passions, and then engaging in pure prayer where we come to recognize our true being which is beyond all reason. Then we can grasp the truth about God.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 284 -286

Illumination: Knock and the Inner Door Will Be Opened

It is only through much effort that we become capable to lift ourselves above the realm of reason and concepts. Transcending reason is essential to know God, because God does not resemble things or concepts.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae writes,
Our thinking subject (our mind) is the highest sovereign which we encounter in the world; it raises itself over all the order of objects and avoids being grasped in any way. So it is the only entity which is like God. Therefore to raise ourselves in some way to an understanding of God, we must somehow understand the thinking subject in the created world.

Here is a passage from Evagrius that many Fathers quote,
When the mind, unclothing itself of the old man, puts on that of grace, it sees in the time of prayer its state like that of a sapphire or of the heavenly color. This state Scripture calls the place of God, seen by the elders of Israel on Mt. Sinai.

Fr. Dimitru tells us about the view of Saint Gregory of Nyssa

According to him, the cleansed heart sees God, not as a person apart, but he sees Him mirrored in himself. The heart or "the man within which the heart calls Lord" reflects God by its nature. But sin, covering it, has also covered the One mirrored in it. As soon as we cleanse it and it sees itself, it also sees God as some see the sun in a mirror, without turning to Him in order to see Him in His hypostasis.

It is when the mind, purified, enters into this inner part of our being called the heart that it meets Christ. It is here in this inner most chamber of our being that we experience an unlimitedness that cannot be captured by concepts and used by reason.

Fr. Dimitru says that in face of this new experience we are dumbfounded.

First, this dizziness or astonishment in the face of an abyss means a paralysis of the powers of the mind, to the extent that it can no longer move forward. The abyss in front of it is a great darkness. Secondly, it realizes that this abyss isn't entirely a region of our being, neither a void in the sense of an absence or a reality whatsoever. It isn't darkness strictly speaking. Rather it represents in continuity or by contact with the unlimitedness of our subject, the infinite depths. For us, it also represents the unlighted depths of divinity.

When we are able to enter into this abyss, where our mind seems to lose its boundaries, we, instead of feeling a void, begin to recognize the divinity in it. It is the condition of total apophaticism where we have abandoned not just the contents of our mind but also all of its content. This is the point where the Fathers tell us that we receive as a gift from God the vision of the divine light.



Fr. Dimitru tells us,

Arriving at our pure intimacy, we experience the infinite but personal presence of God hidden under the veil of the most complete darkness, just as many times we feel that somebody is near us, because we feel it, but we can't see anybody.

This is the condition of pure prayer. With mental prayer we try to find, by using the name of Jesus, the place in our heart, or that center within us that is beyond reason. Our prayer seeks to find Jesus in this most inner place. Gradually, it becomes to know with certainty that it has met Jesus. (Don't be mistaken, this is not an image like we see on an icon, not an object of any kind, but is indescribable.) It is then, only through our inner prayer, that we experience God as subject and do not limit Him by any mental concepts. We become aware of our own nothingness and our dependence on God for our existence.

Fr. Dimitru says,

He penetrates into the content of our subject; He fills it and overwhelms us so much so that we forget ourselves.

It up to us to continually knock at the door our the heart. We must continually try and open it. We have to make the knocking heard. This is the place were Christ dwells within each of us. He will open the door because we have purified ourselves and call out His name and show our need for Him.

Reference: Orthodox Spirituality, pp 286 -293

Illumination: Mental Rest or Stillness of the Mind

We have been discussing the highest elements of Orthodox Spirituality that are of necessity preceded by much work to tame the passions. The stage we have arrived at is one where the mind is still and at rest. This is a stage one attains prior to receiving the gift of the divine light, but involves a strong feeling of God's presence.

Fr. Dimitru outlines the characteristics of this standstill of mental activity:

1. This cessation is produced because the mind has reached the peak of all objects received by thought and has given up all

understanding, no matter how well defined; it has realized that no definite thought whatsoever can see God... It realizes that its activity no longer has any purpose, but on the contrary, that it is harmful because it brings it down once again to finite things.

2. We can draw two conclusions: First, the experience of God by the motionless of the mind is superior to the consciousness gained by the affirmation or negative activity. Secondly, this shows that this inactivity isn't a simple inertia or insensibility, but an experience of the divine reality which it doesn't try to define further.

3. The mind has left all things behind, even its own function which it had directed toward these things. It finds itself now before the Master, at the end of the earth, looking intensely and astonished at the ocean of life which is contained in Him.

4. It has given up all things and stands motionless, praying that a vessel will be sent to bring it into the open sea, which will open the door for it. This reveals a state of great love before the divine infinity.

5. In the measure that the warmth of prayer has grown, so has the love, that it might reach its fullness in pure prayer, the highest step of prayer. This love also remains after the ceasing of pure but unlimited prayer; love will constitute together with the coming of the Spirit to help, the bridge of crossing from the coast of created land, to the vastness of the divine ocean.

6. The experiencing of the feeling of the boundless divine mystery, the state of boundless prayer and the warm firm love for God are other characteristics which distinguish this apophaticism from negative theology, in which the intellect is more active.

Finally, he again cautions us:

This experience isn't reached without a freedom from all cares, from those intended to produce pleasure, or from all that can cause pain or need. Now once that the feeling of this divine ocean is reached, it controls man with such charm, that he remains quiet in tasting it, unaffected by anything from the outside.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 294 - 299



[Summary of the the Stage of Illumination](#)

The first phase of Orthodox Spirituality as outlined by Fr. Dimitru Staniloae was [Purification](#). He sees this as the necessary prelude to the second phase called Illumination. The first phase involves ascetical practices to cleanse us of our passions, liberating the mind for contemplation on the Divine.

Part Two: Illumination

[Entering the Next Phase of Spiritual Development](#)

[Gifts of the Holy Spirit](#)

[Contemplation of God in Creation](#)

[How to Discern the Truth \(logo\) in Things](#)

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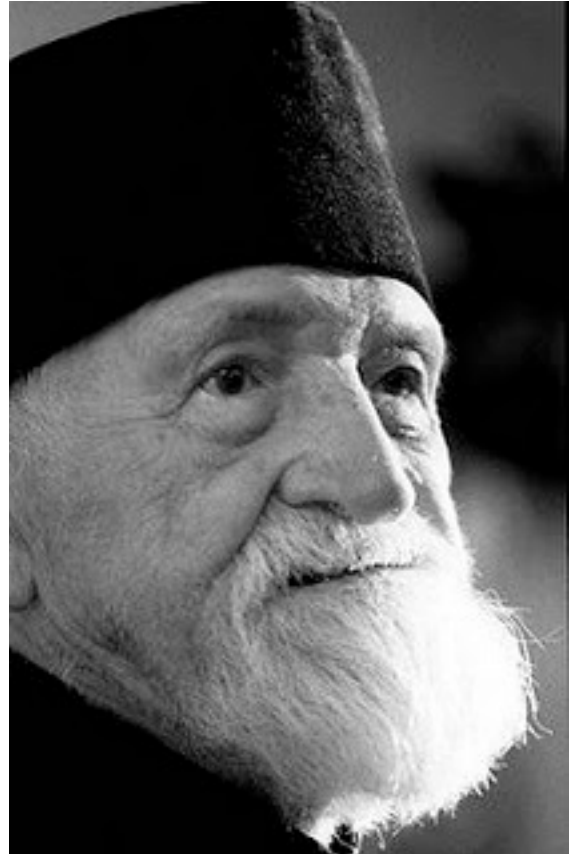
[Developing Pure Prayer](#)

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[Mental Rest or Stillness of the Mind](#)



In the phase of Illumination we learn to gain a new kind of knowledge that goes beyond mental concepts. We first begin to see the divine intent in all things, discovering their truth and purpose, the logoi. In this we see the handiwork of God in all things. As we pursue this level of contemplation we begin to realize the limits of our knowledge and mentally classify our knowledge of God as not this or not that, but something beyond that is not subject to our normal powers of reason. We discover and enter the higher reaches of the mind that is above reason. Seeing that our conceptual knowledge is limited and inadequate we lose our ego-centered self and face an abyss of unknown. This involves a letting go of all our concepts and discovering the pure self deep within our being, in the heart. The way we bridge this abyss and enter into this mystical state and knowledge is through pure prayer. With our focus on Jesus, we enter into the chamber of the inner heart and rest in the stillness that we find there. We are bathed in knowledge that is higher and not subject to classification by concepts. We lack words to describe this kind of knowledge. We are now prepared to receive the gift of the Divine light and our union with God.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality* by Dimitru Staniloae

Perfection - The Steps of Love - The Path to Union

Fr Dimitru Stanloae begins his discussion about the final stage of Orthodox Spirituality, *Perfection by Union with God or by Deification*, with a discussion on Love and Dispassion. To understand union with God it is first necessary to understand love. It is with love that we attain union with God.

What is love? What are its characteristics? Love involves an eradication of ego, the development of selflessness. Our self-centered actions come from the passions. These we first have to overcome. Love is about giving totally of oneself to another. We can't be preoccupied with our own needs and love others. Love only fully develops after we have freed ourselves of the control of passions and reached dispassion.

Love is central to our finding union with God.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae says,
We can't turn exclusively to God, as long as we are preoccupied in an egoistic way with ourselves.

Saint Diadochos writes,
He who loves himself, cannot love God. But he who doesn't love himself because of he overwhelming richness of the love of God, loves God, for such a person never seeks his own glory, but that of God. Because he who loves himself seeks his own glory, but he who loves God, loves the glory of Him who made him. since it is proper to the sensitive soul to always seek first the glory of God in all the commandments which he is carrying out, and secondly, to enjoy himself in his humility.

Saint John the Evangelist says,
"He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" (1 John 4:20)

Fr. Dimitru outlines three steps in love:

- a) *The tendency of natural sympathy from the state of nature fallen from grace. [This we all have as a seed within ourselves from our birth.]*
- b) *Christian love, which uses this tendency and grows by divine grace and by self-efforts; this grows and becomes firm. It brings nature to a kind of fulfillment. [This we develop as we follow the Orthodox Way of Life.]*
- c) *Finally, there is love as ecstasy or as a gift exclusively from above. This comes after a long preparation through the second and last for moments, that from the second it might gain new force and continue its growth. [This comes with pure prayer.]*
Full love means a man's complete victory over himself.

Divine love is a total victory of egotism. It is gained through prayer after preparation through the activities of purification to rid ourselves of the passions. It is what we begin to experience as we are able



to transcend reason and all concepts. We discover God's love within our hearts and this helps us develop our capacity for love of God and for our neighbor.

Saint Diadochos says,

When someone begins to richly feel the love of God, then he begins to love his neighbor too, with spiritual feeling.

Saint Diadochos adds an important adjective to our love of other, "with spiritual feeling." When we love another with "spiritual feeling" there is no separation between us. All our thoughts are about the other person. And the one loved has all their thoughts directed toward us. We are joined in selfless union. There is no separation. This is how we attain theosis. It is based on our love of God and His love for us. As we give up ourselves for Him, we find ourselves embraced in His divine love. We find the union we seek.

Fr Dimitru says of divine love,

Divine love is a drink, because it floods with its enthusiasm the worldly judgment of the mind and the feeling of the body. It moves the one who participates in it to another plane of reality. He sees another world, whose logic darkens the logic of everyday life; he receives the sense of other states, which overwhelm the feeling of bodily pains and pleasures.

It is through this divine love that the Apostles received on that day of Pentecost. With the descent of the Holy Spirit filling them with divine love based on their total love of Jesus Christ, they were able to spread the Word throughout the world while suffering rejection, imprisonment and torture. All the troubles they endured never weakened their effort because of the union they had with God. It was through divine love that they were able to bear all. This is the focus of the final stage of Orthodox Spirituality: Perfection.

More on love...

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 303 - 309

Perfection: Joined in Love

Love involves a union. Between lovers there is a mutual penetration of energies. This penetration is not imposed by force. It is mutual and received with joy. The one loved is absorbed by the one who loves yet remains independent. Love is experienced as a unity of free individuals.

Fr Dimitru Staniloae writes,
In love I don't only live myself or by myself, but also my neighbor or by my neighbor, without his ceasing to be a subject independent from me. This means, nevertheless that I don't have him as an object of mine, as a part of my individuality, but in a free relationship.... he becomes more intimate to me than anything which I possess; I see him penetrating more deeply in me than anything, and I penetrate him more than anything which he has.

There is a substitution of egos that takes place between two lovers. One ego takes the place of the other. There is no absorption of the other but a going out of oneself. The other becomes one's center of life.



This is the nature of our union with God. It is what is meant when Saint Paul says, "I live, and yet not I but Christ lives in me." When we love God we no longer possess our own life but now possess His life.

Christian love is the opposite of pride. We no longer think only of ourselves and are only satisfied when the other is also satisfied. Love is based on humility.

Fr. Dimitru writes,
So love is realized when two subjects meet each other in a full, mutual experience, in their qualities as subjects, that is without the reciprocal reduction of each other to the state of objects, but revealing themselves to each other to the maximum, as subjects; nevertheless with all this they give themselves to each other with complete freedom. Love penetrates two subjects reciprocally in their intimacy... By love you penetrate into the intimacy of your neighbor... without annihilating or belittling him... The more I love him the more he reveals himself to me.

This is the nature of our desired relationship with God, our union with Him. A mutual penetration of our love while not being assumed into him but free to act. We live in Him and He lives in us. Though this coupling in love we are able to voluntarily link our will with His. Our energies co-penetrate. His energy flows through us.

Next: Love demands asceticism and prayer.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 310 - 316

Perfection: Prayer Develops Love and Union with God

It is by prayer that we grow in love.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae writes, *When we go forward by the Jesus Prayer, to mental prayer in the heart, we are sustained by love for Him. It grows continually, and fashions us, in a spiritual imaging of His spiritual image, according to His image. Then we feel Him evermore united with our ego, in as "we" from which I can no longer leave without the danger of being lost. And not only do I receive in me the ego, the "I" of Christ, which makes me according to His image, but also His "I" receives mine in Himself—He*

accepts even my body in Himself, so that He includes me in His pure senses, in His pure actions. Thus all of us who believe become one "body" with Him and with each other, a fact which will become perfected in the future life.



This union is reached by pure prayer addressed to Jesus. But until we are able to engage in this level of prayer we must strive to love our neighbors. We work on this, recognizing that true love of neighbor, love that never fails, cannot be reached without prayer and asceticism.

Love is an encounter with the infinite. If we experience this ecstatic joy between two people it is usually only for a moment. When we join in our love of God with prayer this state of joy can be prolonged.

Fr. Dimitru writes,

We can spend a longer time in the intoxication of the love of God, as the height of pure prayer.... Prayer leads up to the "cessation" of the mind from every activity directed toward the limited. But the intoxication of the love of God descends all at once from above. ...as overflowing joy, which expresses the total absorption of your person in the other and of the other's in you, there is also a peaceful love, directed by rational consideration, which grows little by little. This is a preparatory condition for the other.

So our efforts to love one another is also an important preparation for our union with God. As we learn humility, and learn to give ourselves selflessly for the good of others, we come closer and closer to God. As we eliminate our passions and perfect our prayer to the state where it descends into the depths of the heart in pure prayer, we experience the unlimited love of God, our total surrender out of our love for Him and His love for us. It is through prayer that love is perfected in us.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 318 - 322

Perfection: Divine Love Brings Union of All

How by our union with God or others is the union of the entire human nature and its union with God realized?

Fr Dimitru Staniloae writes, *St. Maximus the Confessor says that first of all love unifies the individual man. It replaces anger, falseness, gluttony, and all the things in which man has taken part by bodily love himself. When these things no longer exist, no trace of wickedness can persist; in their place various kinds of virtues are introduced, which integrate the power of love.*



However, by this unification of the individual man, the unification of individuals between themselves is also realized.

While we are here on earth we only can experience love in short ecstatic moments, in relationship with another person or with God. Even when we are in an ecstatic relationship with God we forget all people. So how do we experience a union with all people?

Fr. Dimitru says,

It follows that only in peaceful everyday love, manifested in fact and in thought, in Christian love in a broad sense, can we experience more or less love for all men. My interests, my passions, contradictory opinions, as voluntary manifestations, no longer break the unity of nature between me and my neighbor. Every moment I judge things from the point of view of my neighbor with whom I am connected; I replace my ego with his and give up mine. By doing this right along with various neighbors with whom I come in contact, the sentiment of my union, actual or virtual with anyone, is strengthened. On my part there is no longer a rift between me and them; I no longer see any such thing. If they do, I don't. This steady behavior strengthens the sentiment of my unity with them and with God... The energy of my love for another, also nurtured by the effort of my will, but especially by these moments of ecstatic contemplation, is easily directed later toward other people. And everywhere I gain a steady disposition of love for anyone, a joy for all, a conviction that in each one I can discover the mystery of enchanting depths. I feel united virtually with everyone and with every concrete opportunity... Love for others grows from the habit of love for God and especially from living it as ecstasy on the culminating step of prayer...

...

We have the feeling that in the love of God as ecstasy, God has opened His heart to us and received us in it, just as we have opened our heart so that He can enter it. On the other hand, the coming back to God, to His heart, means to enter His home. God's "home", however, wants to include all people, because in His heart there is room for everybody, and when I enter it I must feel that by being there I am united with everyone there. Coming back to God, we truly come back home where we belong to the supreme parental home, together with all the heavenly Father's children...

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 323 - 326

Perfection: The Mind and the Divine Light

What is the Divine Light?

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae says,
It is, from one point of view, simply the happy radiation of divine love, experienced in a more intensive form in moments of ecstatic focus on God.

The experience which characterizes this state could be expressed by three terms: love, a knowledge by experience, higher than conceptual; and the light which is the expression of joy.



To attain this state is a journey. The mind finds itself through prayer. When the passions have been overcome and the mind is still, there is a descent of divine love which is often experienced as uncreated light. There is an ascent through purification and illumination and then the divine descent for our purification.

Saint Gregory Palamas describes it as follows:

The one who desires union with God... frees his soul as much as possible from every impure tie, and dedicates his mind to unceasing prayer to God, and by this becomes wholly himself; he finds a new and secret ascent to the heavens, an unapproachable ascent to the silence of the initiate, as someone might say. With an unspeakable pleasure, he submerges his mind in this deep night full of pure, full, and sweet quietness, of a true tranquility and silence and he is lifted up above all creatures. In this way, he completely goes out of himself and becomes wholly of God; he sees a divine light inaccessible to the senses as such, but precious and holy to pure souls and minds; without this vision the mind couldn't see by being united with things above it, only by its mental sense, just as the body's eye can't see without perceptible light.

In the divine light the mind is enabled to see God directly and to find itself in union with Him. This is not a light which is beyond itself or higher,

Gregory Palamas again,

But seeing itself, it sees more than itself: it does not simply contemplate some other object, or simply its own image, but rather the glory impressed on its own image by the grace of God. This radiance reinforces the mind's power to transcend itself, and to accomplish that union with those better things which is beyond understanding. By this union, the mind sees God in the Spirit in a manner transcending human powers.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 327 - 336

Perfection: The Divine Light is Spiritual

The light that is seen at the peak of pure prayer is not a physical light but a spiritual one. It radiates from the presence of Jesus Christ and enlightens our souls with His truth.

This light is like the experience of Moses on Mount Sinai or the Apostles at the Transfiguration of Christ.

Saint Gregory Palamas writes describing the experience of Moses,

Because he was able to see, after he had surpassed himself and arrived in the darkness, he didn't see either by the senses or by the mind; so that light is self-visible and fills minds become blind in the sense of surpassing.... But

when the mind is raised above all mental activity and is found without eyes in the sense of being surpassed, it is filled with a brilliance higher than all beauty; it is found in God by grace and has that self-visible light mystically and sees by the union above mind.



Saint Gregory Palamas says,

Those who see it are able to penetrate by the power of Spirit in them beyond the pane of physical realities. They find themselves raised to an order of the Spirit. Their eyes are open and they seek a target somewhere outside. But this means only that the light from the order of spiritual realities has overwhelmed the surrounding realities; their senses have become full of the power of the Spirit. We might use a colorless comparison: For those who love each other, all nature is filled with the light which seems to radiate from the other.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 337 - 340

Perfection: Divine Light - Knowledge Beyond Knowledge



The Divine Light is of a spiritual nature, fills the mind, and reveals the mystical realities of God.

The Light which is seen in pure prayer is beyond all that can be known through our senses and reason. In effect it surpasses knowledge. It is a higher knowledge (supra-knowledge) based on a relationship with God.

Saint Gregory Palamas says,

Because union surpasses the power of the mind it is higher than all mental functions and it isn't knowledge, and because it is a relationship of the mind and God, it is something incomparably higher than the power which ties the mind with things created, that is than knowledge. Such union with God is thus beyond all knowledge.... This union is a unique reality. For whatever name one gives to it—union, vision, a sense perception, knowledge, intellection, illumination—would not properly speaking apply to it, or else would properly apply to it alone.

The divine light is often referred to as a vision (not based on the imagination which include apparitions and so forth) reached by a leap through the descent of Spirit.

Fr Dimitru Staniloae says,

The vision of the divine light is a vision and a knowledge [caused by] a divine energy, and received by man by means of a divine energy. It is a vision and a knowledge according to the divine way. Man sees and knows qualitatively as God, or "spiritually and divinely"...

Saint Gregory Palamas gives us an analogy.

The light of knowledge may be compared to a lamp that shines in an obscure place, whereas the light of mystical contemplation is compared to the morning star which shines in full daylight.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 341-343

Perfection: The Divine Light

The one who has purified himself of the passions and has reached a burning love for God on the steps of the virtues can attain the vision of the divine light...

The attainment to the divine light indicates that one's nature has been spiritualized, perfected, so that it is a clear receptacle of the warmth and a light of the love of God. There are no traces of ego-centeredness left. The Holy Spirit shines from within, enlightening one's presence.

Father Dimitru tells us that St. Simeon the New Theologian... and Gregory Palamas have described these three elements;

a) *The light is a manifestation of love*

b) *This love is the work of the Holy Spirit*

c) *He that raises himself to this state of light or of culminating love forgets bodily sensation, produced by the world through the body, and even himself.*

He says,

The intensity of this love, the blinding level of light with which it overflows, makes the body of the one who experiences it totally transparent for others...

The bodily sense are overwhelmed. Fr. Dimitru writes,

The body and the world are not done away with but they become the medium by which the interior light is made known. A paradoxical thing happens. First, the exterior things are overwhelmed; secondly, a great love is poured out through them, to everybody. Light radiates from everything.

Saint Gregory Palamas says,

This is union: that all these things be one, that the person who sees no longer be able to distinguish between himself and that through which he is seeing, but he only knows this much: That it is light and he sees a light, distinct from all creatures.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 358 - 361



Perfection: Deification

Can we really be deified? What does this mean? This is a central doctrine in the Orthodox faith and is called Theosis.

Fr. Dimitru Staniloae defines deification as "God's *perfect and full penetration of man.*" It is something that never stops but continues to the infinite. It is an experience that only mankind is capable. It is the result of a growth of our receptive powers to receive and use the divine energies. It is through deification that we reach towards our potential to become like God, made in His image as we learn from the book of Genesis.

Fr. Dimitru says,

Man becomes more and more like God without identifying with Him. Man will continue to become like God forever, in an ever fuller union with Him, but never will he reach full identification with Him; he will be able to reflect God more and more, but he will not become what God is.



The Holy Fathers emphasize that deification is by grace and not by man's own effort or nature. When deified man's nature remains the same. He does not become a source of divine energy, like God. He receives God's energies through grace. Man only reflects God's energies. He never assumes the role of the source.

We never receive the totality of God's energies. Through our efforts in preparation we make an ascent and as we grow spiritually God's energies descend on us granting us increased powers.

Fr. Dimitru concludes his book with the following thoughts:

The divine energies are nothing but the rays of the divine essence, shining from the three divine Persons. And from the time that the Word of God took flesh, these rays have been shining through His human face.

It can also be said that the things of the world are images of the logoi of the divine Logos, which are at the same time energies. By creation God put a part of His infinite possibility of thought and of energy into existence, in the form specifically at the level of the understanding of human creatures. He did this to permit a dialog with God and towards union with Him.

The incarnation of the Word confirmed the value of man and of these images of reason and of energy measured by him. But it also gave man the possibility to see in the face of the man of the Logos, concentrated anew, all the logoi and divine energies. Thus final deification will consist of a contemplation and a living of all the divine values and energies conceived in and radiated from the face of Christ according to the supreme measure of man. But by this, in the face of each man, by the logoi and the energies gathered in him, the logoi and the energies of the Logos will be reflected luminously. Eternal bliss will be the contemplation of the face of Christ.

So all will be in God and we will see all things in Him, or God will be in all things and we will see Him in all things; and the unitary presence of God in all things will be real to the extent that all creatures gathered in Him remain real and unmingled in God

This is the eternal perspective of deification.

Reference: *Orthodox Spirituality*, pp 362 - 374