

# ASCETICISM IN THE HOMILIES OF SAINT GREGORY PALAMAS

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Saint Gregory Palamas was well known as an apologist for hesychasm. The article, however, reveals the Saint as an expositor of the spiritual life and a great Father of the Church. In *The Homilies*, Saint Gregory masterfully uses biblical images to present a theology of fasting. Asceticism is given a strong eschatological and therapeutic orientation. Personal prayer and corporate prayer are held in balance. Fasting is connected with service to the poor. Saint Gregory posits that *theoria*, or the vision of God, was the experience of the Old Testaments Saints, and insists that it is a possible—if not also normative—experience for all Christians. The Father links asceticism and *apatheia* to the Cross, giving the spiritual life a strong Christological context and goal. He unites dogma and spirituality in both his person and teaching, giving us a paradigm for both theology and the spiritual life.

## *The Importance of Saint Gregory Palamas in Contemporary Orthodox Theology*

Saint Gregory Palamas—monk, theologian, apologist, and bishop—was and remains very much today a key figure in the history of Orthodox spiritual and dogmatic theology. His name and writings have become synonymous with Orthodox identity and self-understanding. Indeed, one could argue successfully that the era of the marginalisation of Palamas in Orthodox theology—a period which coincides with what Father Florovsky terms the ‘Babylonian captivity’ of Orthodox theology—reveals a lack of vitality and clarity, a time when Orthodox theology was mimicking a style and form foreign to its very ethos. Conversely, the rediscovery of Palamas, along with that of many other Fathers of great significance to the Orthodox theological tradition, represents a renewal of Orthodox theology itself, a reassertion of a particular spiritual identity, a realignment of its discourse with its very soul. This rediscovery could not but have had profound implications for Orthodox spiritual theology, since it permitted a tradition that is intrinsically empirical to finally express itself in a way consistent with its experience and life.

I do not intend here to trace in detail the development of Orthodox scholarship on Palamas. It is noteworthy, however, that most of the leading Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century were keenly interested in Palamas. Vladimir Lossky, in his

now-classic work *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*,<sup>1</sup> relies heavily on the work of Palamas and includes him among the most important Fathers. Nor was the prominence of Palamas among the Fathers lost on Father Georges Florovsky, whose article ‘St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers’<sup>2</sup> reveals his sentiments in its very title. Father John Meyendorff began his career as a patristic scholar with a major work on Palamas.<sup>3</sup> Father Dumitru Stăniloae established his reputation as a theologian in the same way.<sup>4</sup> The common thread of theological reasoning running through the works of all these authors is that Palamas is a Father of the Church in his own right, and that his teaching is consistent with that of the Fathers who came before him.

The convictions of many contemporary Orthodox theologians regarding Palamas reflect the deeper intuitions that Orthodox Christians have held since the Saint was vindicated in a series of councils held during his own lifetime. These intuitions did not set the parameters for Orthodox theological discourse during the time of Orthodox theology’s ‘Babylonian captivity’, but they were present in the Orthodox spiritual, and therefore theological, tradition in other ways. First of all, not only were the teachings of Saint Gregory Palamas accepted by councils convened in Constantinople in 1341, 1347, and 1351, they were upheld as normative expressions of Orthodox teaching. The opponents of Palamas were therefore anathematized as heretics. Secondly, Saint Gregory is commemorated on the Orthodox liturgical calendar on the second Sunday of Great Lent. This observance gives Palamas a particular prominence in the Lenten liturgical cycle. The position of his feast, however, is quite significant: it follows the Sunday on which the restoration of icons to the Church is proclaimed to the world. The proclamation is in the form of a *Synodikon*,<sup>5</sup> read by the bishop or, in his absence, the priest, in which the teaching of the Orthodox Church on icons is expounded. The fact that Saint Gregory Palamas

<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Georges Florovsky, ‘St Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers’, in ed. Richard S. Haugh, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View, The Collected Works*, vol. 1 (Vaduz, Europa: Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), 105–20. Reprinted from *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 2 (Winter 1959–60). For an important study on the role of Father Georges Florovsky in reintroducing the theology of Saint Gregory Palamas into contemporary theology, see S. Tanev, ‘*ΕΝΕΡΓΕΙΑ vs ΣΟΦΙΑ*: The Contribution of Fr Georges Florovsky to the Rediscovery of the Orthodox Teaching on the Distinction between the Divine Essence and Energies’, *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 2, no. 1 (2011): 15–71, <http://www.orthodox-theology.com/>

<sup>3</sup> John Meyendorff, *Introduction à l’étude de Grégoire Palamas* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1959).

<sup>4</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigore Palama: Cu patru tratate*, seria Teologica 10 (Sibiu: Editura Scripta, 1938).

<sup>5</sup> A *Synodikon* is a statement issued by a synod. In this particular case, the synod (843) reaffirmed the teaching of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787) regarding the theology and use of icons in the Church. The *Synodikon* also contains a summary of the teaching of the preceding six Ecumenical Councils. By placing the commemoration of Saint Gregory Palamas on the Sunday after the Sunday of Orthodoxy, the Church acknowledges Palamas as a great Father and invests his teaching, at least implicitly, with ecumenical authority.

is commemorated on the following Sunday suggests that his teachings represent, in a sense, a continuation of the proclamation of the Orthodox Faith read on the previous one. The point here is that the liturgical practice of the Orthodox Church reveals Palamas as an accredited Father and authoritative defender of the Orthodox tradition, and not simply as a great ascetic.

Palamas is best known in the West as an apologist for hesychasm. That he played such a role is certainly undeniable; what the conciliar and liturgical traditions indicate, however, is that what he defended in hesychasm was part of the essence of the tradition. Palamas is thus not a defender of a movement within the Orthodox Church, but an apologist par excellence of its empirical theology. This is why no study of Orthodox spiritual theology would be complete without him.

### *The Homilies*

Palamas delivered many of *The Homilies* in his cathedral in Thessaloniki in his capacity as Archbishop of the city. He is eminently practical in his approach to spiritual questions and very sensitive to the pastoral needs of his community. At the same time, he does not shy away from the most central themes in Orthodox theology and is a master in presenting profound doctrinal truths in uncomplicated language. Palamas was Archbishop of Thessaloniki from 1347 until his death in 1359, and the majority of *The Homilies* were written during that period. The number of Homilies that have survived stands at sixty-three. Only recently has a complete collection of *The Homilies* appeared as a critical edition in the Greek original, edited by the scholar and Palamas specialist, Panagiotes K. Chrestou.<sup>6</sup> Until very recently, only a portion of his homilies were available to the English-speaking world, but this has changed with the appearance of an edition of *The Homilies* translated by Christopher Veniamin, which includes all sixty-three of *The Homilies*.<sup>7</sup>

Many of the homilies I have chosen for this study were preached by Palamas in the pre-Lenten and Lenten periods. My objective in examining them is to present the basic teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas on asceticism. For this particular theme, not surprisingly, the Lenten and pre-Lenten homilies proved to be the richest source of material.

### *The Origins of Fasting*

The theme of fasting allows Palamas to begin his teaching on asceticism on a very practical note. He discusses the origins and history of fasting in Sacred Scripture,

<sup>6</sup> Όμιλίες 1–63, in Γρηγορίου του Παλαμά: άπαντα τά έργα, Έλληνες Πατέρες τής Έκκλησίας, ed. Π. Κ. Χρήστου, τόμοι 9–11 (Θεσσαλονίκη: Πατερικά Έκδόσεις Έρηγόριος ό Παλαμάς, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Saint Gregory Palamas, *The Homilies*, trans. Christopher Veniamin (Waymart, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2009).

obstacles to fasting, the therapeutic effects of fasting, its place in the spiritual life, and its intrinsic relationship to the care of the poor.

Palamas' discussion of fasting brings us right to its very origins: 'It was because we did not fast in paradise that we were thrown out into this life of sufferings'.<sup>8</sup> Here Saint Gregory identifies fasting with God's command to Adam and Eve to refrain from eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Fasting therefore precedes the Fall. It is according to nature in the truest theological sense: it belongs appropriately to humanity in its state free of corruption. In this way, Saint Gregory establishes the normative character of fasting. Furthermore, it provides a fresh understanding of the Fall: sin has its origins, in part, in the refusal of Adam and Eve to fast. Naturally, this paves the way for the Saint to show how fasting might be part of the redemption of humanity. It also allows him to diagnose self-indulgence as unoriginal and therefore unnatural.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Link to the Transfiguration*

In tracing the history of fasting in Scripture, Palamas begins with the broken fast in the Garden of Eden.<sup>10</sup> He then points to Christ, who began his ministry with fasting. His good and perfect fast was a reversal of Adam and Eve's refusal to fast.<sup>11</sup> Moses, Palamas indicates, received the Law after fasting. Moses is to be understood as the liberator of Abraham's race, while Christ is the liberator of the human race.<sup>12</sup> Elias encounters the Lord after fasting. The ascension of Elias into heaven prefigures Christ's own ascension.<sup>13</sup> Moses and Elias, in addition to prefiguring Christ in the Old Testament, are great ascetic figures, as Palamas himself points out.<sup>14</sup> What is also remarkable (and, no doubt, not entirely accidental) is that, with these two Old Testament types placed beside Christ, Palamas has sketched out verbally the icon of the Transfiguration. That Palamas relied heavily on the Transfiguration as a theological source in his apology for hesychasm is more than evident in the *Triads*. The same reliance on the Transfiguration as a source for spiritual theology can be seen in *The Homilies*. Saint Gregory dedicated two homilies exclusively to the Transfiguration,<sup>15</sup> in which the Orthodox doctrines of the uncreated energies of God and the essence/energies distinction are presented and defended. Frequent allusions to the Transfiguration, whether explicit, as in *Homily 12*, or implicit, as in *Homily 6* on fasting, can be found throughout *The Homilies*. By placing a topic such as fasting

<sup>8</sup> *Homily 9*, 63.

<sup>9</sup> *Homily 6*, 47.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 45–46.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>12</sup> *Homily 6*, 46.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Homily 12*, 87.

<sup>15</sup> *Homilies 34* and *35*.

against the backdrop of the Transfiguration, Palamas is locating the practice of asceticism in the context of glorification.

### *Obstacles to Fasting*

Fasting, according to Palamas, as well as asceticism in general, can be undermined by pride: 'When pride is linked with fasting, however genuine, it annuls and destroys the virtues, and how much more so if the fasting is a sham'.<sup>16</sup> The Saint distinguishes fasting through human effort alone from grace-filled fasting that has its origin in God. Pride, he notes, always has the devil as its source.<sup>17</sup> The simple *act* of fasting is not salvific in and of itself. Abstinence can be a purely human virtue. True fasting imparts something of God's gracious character to the ascetic.

Bodily fasting must be practised concurrently with inner or spiritual fasting. Saint Gregory calls hatred and unforgiveness another 'drunkenness', in other words, a form of internal self-indulgence.<sup>18</sup> This spiritual violation of the fast renders any bodily disciplines useless. The image of drunkenness is a fitting one and very contemporary, since it connotes addiction and suggests the necessity of a therapeutic treatment for a gradual recovery. In the same way that an alcoholic has an almost uncontrollable urge to return to his or her self-destructive behaviour, so also a person who indulges the passion of unforgiveness will be drawn to hatred, finding in it a kind of relief from the stress of living without it. This is a primary way used by the devil to sabotage fasting:

This is the drunkenness of hatred which more than anything else causes God to turn away, and the devil attempts to bring it about in those who pray and fast. He prompts them to remember wrongs, directs their thoughts toward harbouring malice, and sharpens their tongues for slander. . . . In this time of fasting and prayer, brethren, let us with all our hearts forgive anything real or imaginary we have against anyone.<sup>19</sup>

Palamas mentions two other ways that the devil uses to undermine the efforts of Christians in fasting and prayer: self-conceit<sup>20</sup> and vainglory.<sup>21</sup> All three temptations represent an attempt to undermine fasting and prayer, and with them, the ascetic life in general. Saint Gregory points out that the evil angels have their own pseudo-fast characterized by anger, pride, and rebellion against God.<sup>22</sup> The orientation of fasting

<sup>16</sup> *Homily 2*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Homily 7*, 49–50.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>20</sup> *Cf.* n. 14.

<sup>21</sup> *Homily 7*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

and its accompanying inner disposition are of critical importance; fasting must be practised in forgiveness, humility, and submission to God's will. Embracing the body and the soul equally, fasting must be a psychosomatic event.

*Fasting as a Therapy for Body and Soul*

Precisely because true fasting embraces body and soul, it has the potential to be therapeutic for the entire person: 'Each of the other virtues cleanses and adorns either the soul or the body, or rather, just one part of the soul or body. . . . But fasting and self-control lull the stirrings of the body and quench the raging of anger and desire.'<sup>23</sup> In a parallel passage from another homily, Palamas states that spiritual and bodily fasting, combined with prayer, extinguishes fleshly desire and tames anger.<sup>24</sup> He goes on to say: 'We will become partakers of prophetic food with hope, faith and inner vision of the good things to come, and we will be able to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy'.<sup>25</sup> Fasting as a psychosomatic event not only heals body and soul but initiates the ascetic into an experience of the Kingdom of God. The references to the 'prophetic food' and the 'inner vision of the good things to come' give fasting an eschatological orientation. This combination of the therapeutic with the eschatological is typical of hesychasm and is a hallmark of Orthodox asceticism. Not only does it allow asceticism to have a uniquely Christian character, it places it outside of the practice of simple self-deprivation or bodily discipline and puts it into an entirely new context. This is important, because asceticism was known to the pagan Greeks and practised by some of them. What the Platonic ascetics or the Stoics would not have been able to do, however, is to allow asceticism to be therapeutic for both the body and the soul, and to connect asceticism with a foretaste of the eschatological.

Palamas refers to other therapeutic effects of fasting. He states that fasting weakens the passions and makes them disappear.<sup>26</sup> Fasting causes the body to be obedient to the soul and lightens the mind in its ascent to God.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, fasting is a tool to defeat the devil.<sup>28</sup> Fasting is therefore not commended to Christians for its own sake, but for its greater therapeutic effects upon the soul.<sup>29</sup> In other words, it is a vehicle, not an end in itself.

<sup>23</sup> *Homily 9*, 61.

<sup>24</sup> *Homily 7*, 52–53.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>26</sup> *Homily 10*, 66.

<sup>27</sup> *Homily 9*, 62.

<sup>28</sup> *Homily 13*, 95.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 95–96.



*Fasting and Love of the Poor*

Those more skeptical of asceticism might accuse Palamas or other spiritual figures in the Christian tradition of propagating an introverted, individualistic piety that is oriented towards self-perfection and nothing else. Others may be wondering where the horizontal dimension is in the Orthodox practice of asceticism as expounded by Palamas. The latter will not be disappointed by the Saint: Palamas links fasting directly to love for and service to the poor. In an appeal to his flock worthy of one of the Old Testament prophets, the Archbishop says:

When you are fasting and limiting your food, do not store up the surplus for the following day. The Lord made us rich through becoming poor, and you, by your voluntary hunger, should nourish those who are starving against their will. Then your fasting will be like a dove bearing an olive sprig which brings your soul the good tidings of deliverance from the flood.<sup>30</sup>

Palamas summarises his teaching in the following way:

We must either be poor as He was, and so live with Him, or share what we have with those who are poor for His sake, and so be saved through them. . . . If you join almsgiving to fasting you will blot out every sin, venerate the saving Passion with boldness, join in the rejoicing at Christ's Resurrection and gain eternal redemption.<sup>31</sup>

*Three Important Pairs*

Palamas makes use of pairs of spiritual realities to help his listeners understand the interrelatedness of certain things in the spiritual life. These pairs are not antinomies or dialectics; they are simply important aspects of the spiritual life held in relationship. We need to understand the pairs as 'married', in the sense of never being separated. One spiritual pair presented by the Saint is fasting and self-control. Fasting is understood by the Archbishop more in the sense of abstaining from food; self-control is seen as a deliberate reduction in the intake of food, sometimes called moderation.

*Fasting and Self-Control*

Palamas refers to fasting and self-control as being yoked. Speaking of the Lenten practice of the Orthodox Church in his time, he observes that fasting is appropriate

<sup>30</sup> *Homily 13*, 97.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

to weekdays, whereas self-control is appropriate to Saturdays and Sundays.<sup>32</sup> This particular practice reflects the liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church, in which Monday to Friday during Great Lent are non-liturgical days, in other words days on which the Eucharist is not celebrated, and Saturday and Sunday are liturgical days. Orthodox Christians fasted on non-liturgical days by abstaining from food all day, eating their first and only meal after Vespers in the evening.<sup>33</sup> This remains the norm in most Orthodox monasteries throughout the world and in Orthodox parishes in certain places. Saturday and Sunday were days in Lent on which the Eucharist was celebrated. Fasting is still considered inappropriate on these days, since the fast is always broken after the Eucharistic celebration. Moderation, however, is exercised on those days, and the Lenten diet of no meat or dairy products is still observed.

The 'yoking' of fasting and self-control is therefore very much related to the liturgical life of the Church and, more particularly, to the rhythm of Lenten Eucharistic celebration. It helps Christians to avoid over-individualising fasting by connecting it, and asceticism in general, with ecclesial life. This, of course, should come as no surprise, since Saint Gregory is teaching his flock about Great Lent, which is first and foremost a corporate fast with a personal dimension. Every Christian must, on a personal level, answer the invitation of the Church to fast, but in so doing he or she also agrees to do so as part of a people. The linking of self-control to fasting also causes the latter to be more nuanced by adding the notion of control to simple denial. This makes fasting always more than starving.

Self-control refers not only to the regulation of food intake, but also to a certain frugality in eating. Palamas specifically encourages simplicity in eating as an expression of moderation.<sup>34</sup> Through such frugality, Gideon and his men in Old Testament times found spiritual and physical strength, defeating the Midianites.<sup>35</sup> This image is used by Palamas as a type of the spiritual battle in which every ascetic is engaged. Fasting and self-control, however, must not be applied to the body alone, but must also be imposed on all of the senses.<sup>36</sup> Since it is to a great extent through the senses that we are led to sin, fasting and self-control must be brought to bear on them, re-orienting them to sanctification. As with the body, they are to be transformed, not suppressed.

Saint Gregory appeals to his entire community to fast, reminding them that there is a totally reasonable way to fast that is possible for virtually everyone. Here too moderation is an important factor:

<sup>32</sup> *Homily 10*, 66.

<sup>33</sup> The terms 'liturgical days' and 'non-liturgical days' were used by Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann. See <http://www.schmemmann.org/byhim/lent.html> For a full discussion of the theology of liturgical and non-liturgical days, see Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 45–49.

<sup>34</sup> *Homily 9*, 61–62. Here, the frugality is represented by the cake of barley bread seen in a dream (Judg 7:13).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 62–63.



The forty day [sic] period of the fast is not your whole life, and every day your fasting ends when the sun sets. Going without food to this extent is surely easy and reasonable for nearly everyone. But when we eat let it also be with moderation, so that fasting and eating within due limits, we may not lag far behind those who do not eat at all.<sup>37</sup>

It is noteworthy that Palamas suggests that limits be applied both to eating and fasting. He seems to recognize that the spiritual disciplines of 'those who do not eat at all' should not be adopted by the average member of his community. A reasonable and balanced fast is perfectly appropriate to them: eating with moderation will allow them to progress in the spiritual life at a pace only marginally inferior to that of the great ascetics. Those who practise a more severe form of fasting have reached that level through years of experience. Palamas does not prescribe for the parish what is suitable for the skete. Showing both wisdom and sensitivity, he guides his flock down the middle path of moderation, leading them to the objectives of the spiritual life, which are common to those in parishes and those in monasteries. The ability to recognize these objectives and prescribe the best way to reach them in differing circumstances is the mark of a competent spiritual guide. Palamas shows himself to be such, and the evidence for this can be found in his nuanced approach to spiritual questions.

A parallel passage on moderation in fasting may be found in *Homily 13*:

Speaking from experience, our fathers whom God inspired do not approve of fasting for days on end. They consider it more acceptable to eat once a day without satisfying your appetite. This is what they refer to as moderate and reasonable fasting, as the Scripture says well: not to be led astray by a full stomach and the pleasure of eating, but to leave your food while still feeling hungry.<sup>38</sup>

Eating without having one's fill is a practical demonstration of moderate fasting; it shows how and why fasting and self-control are 'yoked'. In this context, we can see why Palamas, speaking on behalf of a time-honoured Christian tradition of asceticism, applies self-control equally to eating and fasting.

### *Fasting and Prayer*

The second important pair we find in *The Homilies* is that of prayer and fasting. Referring to the appearance of Moses and Elias with the Lord on the Mount of the Transfiguration, Saint Gregory says: 'These two men practised prayer and fasting

<sup>37</sup> *Homily 9*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> *Homily 13*, 96.

more than anyone else, and their appearance while the Lord was praying shows the harmony and concord between fasting and prayer. In their talking with the Lord, it was as if fasting were talking to prayer'.<sup>39</sup> The communication between prayer and fasting in this illustration serves to further highlight the interrelatedness of the two. Of course, since fasting in Scripture is almost always presented in the same context as prayer, Palamas is not saying anything new. What is unique to Palamas is the virtual personification of fasting and prayer so as to present the two in a dialogical relationship. This characterisation serves to demonstrate, however, that fasting and prayer in the spiritual life do not have some kind of independent existence. Rather, they need to be practised by *persons*. Moses and Elias, as we saw earlier, are key figures in the history of asceticism as presented in Scripture. They are, as we have also seen, great ascetics in their own right who function as types of Christ in the Old Testament. Saint Gregory points out that the event of the Transfiguration is directly connected to the practice of prayer and has immediate relevance to all Christians. It was while Christ was praying that Moses and Elias appeared.<sup>40</sup> Here again, Saint Gregory finds the Transfiguration a rich and useful source for theology.

At least three factors emerging from the Transfiguration are useful to Palamas in describing the ascetic life. *Firstly*, the Transfiguration took place on a mountain and was therefore preceded by an ascent. The apostles were taken up the mountain to meet the Lord in glory in the same way that Moses went to meet the Lord on Mount Sinai. So also, in the ascetic life, an ascent is needed before one gains a clear vision of the Lord in his glory. *Secondly*, the ascetic ascent leads to a vision of God. The precise nature of that vision of God was one of the main subjects of the exchange between Saint Gregory Palamas and his challenger, Barlaam the Calabrian. Palamas is not interested, however, in Barlaam in this particular instance. Here the vision of God is simply the normal objective of the spiritual life. In other words, asceticism leads to glorification. *Thirdly*, fasting and prayer are linked to authority over demons. Upon his descent from the glorious Mount of the Transfiguration, Christ encounters the father whose boy is afflicted by demons. Palamas spends the better part of *Homily 12* interpreting this passage from the Gospel of Mark.<sup>41</sup> Significantly, however, Palamas ends his discussion of the passage with the following observation: 'Driving away demons, however, is not required of us, and even if we were able to drive them away, it would be no advantage to us if we lived carelessly....It is much more profitable to us to strive to banish the passions of fornication, anger, hatred and pride than to cast out demons'.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Homily 12*, 87.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Homily 12*, 89–91.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

The authority to cast out demons is a charism given to some in the Church, but the authority over the passions, obtained through prayer and fasting, is necessary for every Christian.

### *Private Prayer and Liturgical Prayer*

The third important pair of spiritual realities that we encounter in *The Homilies* is that of *private prayer* and *liturgical prayer*. In *Homily 7*, Saint Gregory presents both sides of the marriage between private prayer and liturgical prayer. On the one hand, Saint Gregory insists on regular attendance at liturgical worship in addition to personal prayer and fasting.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Palamas says: 'If someone only wants to pray when he attends God's Church, and has no concern at all for prayer at home, in the streets or in the fields, then even when he is present in church, he is not really praying'.<sup>44</sup> For Palamas, the life of prayer requires balance. One may not eschew liturgical gatherings for the sake of asceticism, neither is it tenable to suggest that corporate liturgical prayer renders personal prayer superfluous. Each expression of prayer, according to Palamas, facilitates and leads to the other.<sup>45</sup> Palamas removes any possibility of a false dichotomy between the two expressions of prayer, holding the two together in a kind of symbiotic relationship.

### *Asceticism, Creation, and Salvation*

Saint Gregory Palamas' understanding of asceticism is grounded in a biblical and patristic view of creation and salvation. Following in the great scriptural tradition, the Fathers of the Church consistently refer back to creation, the Fall, and the Incarnation in order to take their cues for other areas of theology. Palamas is no exception among the Fathers. In *Homily 6*, the Archbishop grounds his theology of asceticism in cosmology and soteriology. Palamas observes:

We should bear in mind the fact that just as the earth cannot yield worthwhile fruit without labour, so the soul cannot acquire anything which pleases God or leads to salvation without spiritual struggles. But while it is possible to find earth which is unsuitable for cultivation, every human soul is naturally suited to virtue.<sup>46</sup>

We find here a very simple but important theological premise: ascetic labour is a consequence of our condition. We live in a world where labour is a condition

<sup>43</sup> *Homily 7*, 51.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Homily 6*, 42.

of our existence. Why would it be different, Palamas argues, in the spiritual life? Asceticism, then, is unavoidable. It cannot be ignored any more than our human condition can be denied. The cosmological and soteriological justification for asceticism puts an end to the argument advanced by certain partisans of *sola gratia* who link the practice of asceticism with a 'works-oriented' soteriology. It likewise provides an excellent apology for those who find in the patristic theology of asceticism hints of Pelagianism. Many of these debates that were raging at the time of the Protestant Reformation (and even earlier) were somewhat circular and closed because of a failure to reposition the discussion within the categories of cosmology, anthropology, and eschatology. Palamas' anthropology, like that of the Orthodox tradition in general, is unfailingly optimistic. There is no human person incapable of virtue. True asceticism is a possibility for anyone.

In *Homily 3*, Palamas refers to creation in very positive terms. His assessment of creation demonstrates that he is part of the patristic tradition, in which a clear break has been made with Platonic philosophy. While some superficially associate everything mystical in the Christian spiritual tradition with Platonism, and even one Orthodox scholar explicitly calls Palamas a Platonist,<sup>47</sup> there seems to be little in the Archbishop's cosmology and anthropology that would indicate that he is indebted to Plato or Neoplatonism. Referring to all of the aspects of the cosmos, Palamas says: 'None of these signs are necessary to the spiritual Creation, which is above the senses, or to the animals, which live by their senses alone. They were made for us, who by our senses enjoy the other benefits of the visible world as well as its beauty, while in our minds we can apprehend the signs we see'.<sup>48</sup> The human person, being both a physical and a spiritual being, is able both to enjoy the beauty and majesty of creation and to look beyond it to come to a deeper understanding of its Creator. Creation here has a positive role to play, since through it the human person can contemplate deeper realities. Creation, therefore, has a dual role: on the one hand, it sustains us physically while, on the other, it is a mirror of the spiritual world. Palamas states:

To sustain our bodies our Creator brought this whole world out of nothing before he created us. But to improve our ways and lead us towards virtue there is nothing our benevolent Lord did not do. He made all the visible world like a mirror of heavenly things, so that by contemplating it spiritually we might attain to them as by a marvellous ladder. He put in each of us a natural law, our own conscience. . . . When by means of nature and Creation, he had opened the school of virtues, he appointed guardian angels over us . . . In the end, . . . he gave himself to us for our sake.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Sergius Bolshakoff, *Russian Mystics* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 23.

<sup>48</sup> *Homily 3*, 16.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

The contemplation of the visible world as ‘a mirror of heavenly things’ is a clear reference to *physikē*, the second stage in the spiritual life according to Saint Maximus the Confessor and many of the other Fathers. This stage follows *praktikē*, the stage of repentance and purification. The third and final stage is called *theologia*, or very often in *The Homilies*, *theoria*. The final stage, a favourite subject of the Saints, is the vision of God. *Physikē* is meant to further virtue, although it requires the prior stage in order to function well. How is one to contemplate the visible creation through the mind and the heart if they are both desperately in need of purification? The first and the third stages will be discussed at greater length later. In this particular homily, *physikē* features more prominently because of its direct connection to the visible creation.

In *Homily 3*, asceticism is called ‘the school of virtues’.<sup>50</sup> The school has been opened to us by creation, and God has provided everything for the school to be complete. Three things were necessary: a creation that is fundamentally good, a human person that could relate to creation physically and spiritually, and a God who was willing to take on creation in the Incarnation. This is why Saint Gregory completes his discussion of creation and *physikē* with the words ‘he gave himself for us’. Creation finds its fulfillment in the Incarnation. The latter reality, however, is not unrelated to the former one. Indeed, the Incarnation is itself a second genesis, a renewal of creation. Just as, in the spiritual life, *physikē* points to a deeper reality, so also, in creation, the first genesis points to the coming of Christ, which is the greater reality.

### *Images from Scripture* 1) *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*

In *The Homilies*, Saint Gregory Palamas presents a number of images of asceticism drawn from Scripture. More precisely, Palamas chooses specific passages of Scripture to which he applies an ascetic interpretation. The ascetic reading of these biblical pericopes provides us with invaluable teaching on asceticism, both because it reveals asceticism’s content and because it also demonstrates its very ethos. In *Homily 4*, Palamas refers to the parable of the ten virgins from Saint Matthew’s Gospel. Virginity in this parable is likened to asceticism. This is true, not only in the sense that many ascetics are monastics and therefore celibate, but also in a more existential sense, since a virgin is one who struggles constantly to retain his or her purity. The lamps held by the virgins are interpreted as the minds, which are to be purified and enlightened. The hands that hold the lamps—or, in other words, provide the basis for the enlightenment of the mind—reflect *praktikē*, the first stage in the spiritual life. The oil in the lamps points to love.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *Homily 3*, 17.

<sup>51</sup> *Homily 4*, 29.

The ascetic reading of this parable as presented by Palamas provides some basic teaching on the character of Christian asceticism. The virgins in the parable are awaiting the arrival of the Bridegroom. The parable has an eschatological orientation, and this same orientation has been transferred to the ascetic life. One struggles to attain virginity or purity, not for its own sake but because it is the appropriate state in which the Bridegroom is to be welcomed. The arrival of the Bridegroom therefore provides all of the meaning to the struggle for purity. In this way, we see that, in asceticism, the present is informed and shaped by the future. The lamps as objects have no meaning until they are lit; analogously, the mind does not reach its full potential until it is enlightened. Illumination is the second stage in the spiritual life, according to the Dionysian rendering: *purification, illumination, vision of God*. These three stages are equivalent to the Evagrian schema preferred by Saint Maximus and employed frequently by Palamas himself: *praktikē, fisikē, theologia*. Since neither schema was recognized as the normative description of the progression of the spiritual life in the theological work of the Fathers, a Father such as Saint Gregory would likely be at home drawing his terminology from either model.

The lamps are held or, more appropriately, carried. In the same way that lamps must be held or carried, the spiritual stage of illumination must be ‘carried’ by ongoing *praktikē*, the first stage of the spiritual life. *Praktikē* must remain forever active so that the next two stages can be adequately supported. Finally, the oil that allows the lamps to give their light is love itself. Without love, asceticism loses its purpose in the same way as, without oil, a lamp remains an object that cannot perform its function.

In the same homily, Saint Gregory continues his discussion of the relationship between asceticism and love. Every building must have supporting walls and a roof. The supporting walls are the virtues, and the roof, according to the Saint, is love.<sup>52</sup> The virtues require love as their cover and completion. Love, however, requires a supporting structure, and that structure is provided by the virtues. This reading of the parable teaches that love and asceticism must be constantly in relationship. True love, in its deepest sense, does not come without sacrifice and ascetic labour. On the other hand, a loveless asceticism is not asceticism in the biblical, and therefore Christian, understanding.

## 2) *The Anointing of the Head and the Face*

In *Homily 7*, Palamas refers to the passage from Saint Matthew’s Gospel in which the Lord says, ‘When you fast, be not as the hypocrites . . .’, and asks that, when we do fast, we anoint our heads and wash our faces, conducting our fast in secret.<sup>53</sup> The passage itself is highly relevant to the practice of asceticism, since it instructs us

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Matt 6:16–18.



*how* to fast. Saint Gregory's teaching on vainglory as an obstacle to fasting we have already seen at the beginning of this chapter. Particularly interesting here is the ascetic reading of the passage:

We can refer to the *mind* metaphorically as the *head of the soul*, since it is the soul's guiding force and to the imaginative aspect as its face, as this contains the permanent centre of the senses' activity. So it is good to anoint our heads with oil when we fast, namely, to render our minds merciful, and to wash our faces, our imaginations, clean from shameful impure thoughts, anger and everything evil.<sup>54</sup>

Saint Gregory is referring to an inner anointing and a spiritual purification. Anointing the mind with mercy means that forgiveness and tenderness provide a spiritual direction for the soul. Simultaneously, our imaginations, our memories need to be purified from anything that could become a source of temptation. Saint Gregory is not advocating the removal of every impulse or image from the imagination, a kind of washing of the imagination, but rather the purification or restoration of the imaginative aspect in order to enable it to produce something good.

### 3) *The Paralytic*

Another image from the Gospels selected by Saint Gregory for an ascetic reading is the passage about *the paralytic*, who was let down through the roof of a house into the presence of the Lord.<sup>55</sup> The paralysis in this case is understood by Palamas to be an addiction to sensual pleasures.<sup>56</sup> The paralytic needed to be carried to the Lord by four friends, each taking up one corner of his pallet. These four are understood by Palamas as self-condemnation, confession, renunciation of evil ways, and prayer. The roof of the house is the reasoning part of the soul. Its connection to the passions, represented in the parable by the tile, earth, and other materials on the roof, needs to be loosed.<sup>57</sup>

Asceticism in patristic writings generally, and very particularly in Palamas, has a strong therapeutic orientation. Passages of healing are of special interest to the Saint, precisely because their therapeutic content makes them especially suitable to the theology of asceticism. In this particular passage, Saint Gregory is paying very close attention to diagnosis and process. Addiction to passions is a spiritual paralysis. Spiritual growth is not possible because the addiction saps the dynamism from the soul. Once diagnosed, every illness needs to be treated, and the treatment implies

<sup>54</sup> *Homily 7*, 52.

<sup>55</sup> Mark 2:1–12.

<sup>56</sup> *Homily 10*, 71.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

a progression. The process or progression in this case begins with repentance and ends with prayer. Purification without repentance is not possible. The connection between the reasoning aspect of the soul and the passions cannot be loosed without repentance and confession. Nevertheless, the different stages of the ascetic recovery process are not themselves the source of the healing. They help or, rather, bring the paralytic, in whom we may all find ourselves, into the presence of Christ, in whom is the source of healing. When the healing occurs, a proper psychosomatic order is restored in which the body is in submission to the mind. The carrying of the bed by the paralytic after his healing points precisely to this therapeutic reordering.<sup>58</sup> The bed that previously carried him is now carried *by* him. He is controlled by his addiction no more.

One of the basic assumptions that Saint Gregory makes, an assumption shared by all of the Fathers who teach on the subject, is that therapy in true Christian asceticism has its roots in repentance. This is clear in the ascetic reading of the story of the paralytic, in which three of the four ‘friends’ that carry the paralytic to Christ are directly connected to repentance: self-condemnation, confession, and renunciation of evil ways. The direct link between repentance and healing is highlighted by Palamas in *Homily 9*: ‘When we lie wounded let us call upon the Lord who can soothe and bind up our injuries. Please do not let us give up calling upon him with fasting, vows, tears and every other means, until he draws near and heals us.’<sup>59</sup> Here the fasting is accompanied by tears—in other words, asceticism is grounded in repentance and therefore leads to healing.

### *Aspects of the Soul*

We have seen already how fasting is a psychosomatic event and thus is therapeutic for the whole person.<sup>60</sup> It is evident that Palamas operates from the assumption that the human person is a psychosomatic being. He also works, however, from the assumption that the soul itself has different aspects:

For the soul too has members after a fashion: those parts of it concerned with growth, desiring, anger and reason. Therefore true fasting must extend to every part, cleansing and healing them all. Fasting, brethren, gently and kindly restores the soul to health, and that is why our Fathers imposed it on us during these days.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Homily 9*, 64.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

The concept of the soul's possessing 'members or powers,' as well as the terminology for these, is drawn from Greek philosophy.<sup>62</sup> Palamas happily uses the terminology and some of the anthropological assumptions involved, but without canonising them. While receiving from Greek philosophy the assumption regarding the diversity of powers within the soul, he clearly rejects the assumption from Platonism that the body acts as the prison of the soul. It is not difficult to see, however, why any of the Fathers who had a therapeutic understanding of asceticism would have been attracted to the idea that the soul possesses distinct faculties. This distinction between the powers of the soul provided the Fathers, Palamas included, was a very useful diagnostic tool and allowed them to develop a more nuanced and specific therapeutic framework for asceticism.

### *Diagnosis and Therapy*

The diagnostic tools developed by Palamas allow him to identify the prevailing pathologies encountered in the spiritual life. These pathologies are highly nuanced and reveal themselves in different ways, depending on which aspect of the soul is afflicted by them. Collectively, however, they may be identified by one word: passions. Saint Gregory says, 'Let us mortify those parts of us which belong to the earth: fornication, impurity, evil passion and covetousness. . . .'<sup>63</sup> The passions are mortified so that the different aspects of the soul might be restored. Palamas states in a practical way what the mortification of the passions entails: 'Crucifying the flesh with its passions and longings means stopping all activity which is displeasing to God.'<sup>64</sup> Asceticism, then, can be equated with obeying the commandments of Christ. Indeed, since asceticism is taught in the Gospels—though the word itself is not used by Christ—the equivalent term, 'obedience to Christ,' may well prove itself to be a useful alternative biblical expression.

### *Asceticism and the Eschaton*

Another basic operating principle of Palamas is the connection between asceticism and the *eschaton*. In *Homily 9*, the Father makes the statement, 'Christ will cut into pieces anyone incapable of being healed.'<sup>65</sup> There is a further soteriological assumption here that a refusal to engage in therapeutic asceticism is tantamount to a rejection of salvation—a rather imposing premise. It makes complete sense, however, in an eschatological context. Asceticism is itself a vigil in anticipation of

<sup>62</sup> n. 117, 546–47.

<sup>63</sup> *Homily 10*, 65.

<sup>64</sup> *Homily 11*, 83.

<sup>65</sup> *Homily 9*, 63.

the arrival of the Bridegroom. Those who consciously reject this kind of asceticism demonstrate that they are not inclined to meet the Bridegroom.

The connection between asceticism and the *eschaton* is made frequently in *The Homilies*. In *Homily 9*, Palamas states, 'Clearly those called by Christ's name must pass their whole lives in self-control and fasting, looking forward with good hope to his terrible Coming Again'.<sup>66</sup> The eschatological orientation of asceticism in *The Homilies*, however, is not only a reference to the future. There is a realized eschatology at work in *The Homilies* that makes asceticism the appropriate response to Christ's preaching about the imminence of the Kingdom of God in the Gospels. In an appeal to his community, Palamas says: 'Since the kingdom of God is at hand and within us and will soon arrive, let us make ourselves worthy of it by works of repentance. Let us exercise force on ourselves, driving away evil prejudices and habits. For the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force (Matt 11:12)'.<sup>67</sup> The awareness of the Kingdom's presence becomes the driving force behind asceticism. Here it is not a question of moral progress or self-improvement. What we see instead is a radical response to the preaching of Christ. We 'exercise force on ourselves' precisely because the Kingdom is a current and not only future reality. The taking of the Kingdom by force reflects the decision of the Christian to live mindfully of the presence of the Kingdom and to fight the resistance to the Kingdom that comes from the passions within. This deliberate choice to engage the ascetic life does not mean, however, that we practise the ascetic disciplines on our own. Quite on the contrary, it is God's presence that empowers our asceticism and allows it to become salvific:

Let us imitate David, brethren, and not only turn our backs on lush and dissipated living, but undertake fasts, psalmody and prayers, as if God himself were present and watching. We know that fasting, psalmody and prayer cannot save us in their own right but carrying them out before God can. For when the Lord's eyes are upon us they sanctify us, as the sun warms everything upon which it shines.<sup>68</sup>

### *The Mystery of the Cross*

'But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world'.<sup>69</sup> In *Homily 11*, 'On the Precious and Life-Giving Cross', Saint Gregory Palamas, through an ascetic reading of Galatians 6:14, initiates his listeners into the mystery of the Cross and the

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>67</sup> *Homily 10*, 65.

<sup>68</sup> *Homily 9*, 63–64.

<sup>69</sup> Gal 6:14 NKJV.

deeper meaning of asceticism. The Saint locates two separate but related mysteries of the Cross in the one verse. The *first* mystery is a movement away from the world, a rejection of sin, through which the world is crucified to the Christian ascetic. The *second* movement is the mirror image of the first. In this case, the Christian does not flee from the passions; instead, the passions flee the Christian. *The first movement is one of struggle, the second an experience of healing.* The first represents a beginning, the second a fulfillment. Palamas describes it this way: ‘When, through action [*praktikē*], we approach contemplation [*theoria*] and cultivate and cleanse our inner man . . . then it is that we crucify ourselves to the world and the passions.’<sup>70</sup> Through *praktikē*, the world is crucified to us. As we are crucified to the world, we reach the vision of God. Palamas goes on to describe this second mystery of the Cross, which he equates with *theoria*: ‘Through meditation of this a certain warmth is born in our heart, which chases away evil thoughts like flies, instills spiritual peace and consolation in our soul, and bestows sanctification on our body.’<sup>71</sup> Palamas is clear in stating that the evil passions do not leave us completely unless we enter the stage of *theoria*. This vision of God is also the mystery of the Cross.<sup>72</sup>

#### *Four Expressions for Christian Maturity*

The state that Saint Gregory is describing is that of *apatheia* or dispassion. Palamas describes self-control as ‘the mother of dispassion.’<sup>73</sup> The Archbishop presents yet another way of describing this state of spiritual maturity that is the objective of asceticism: ‘Let him flee lethal self-indulgence and run towards fasting and prayer which make divine. . .’<sup>74</sup> What we are seeing in Palamas is not the convergence of four separate realities, but four different ways to describe the same thing: *the mystery of the Cross, the vision of God, dispassion, and deification.* Each of the four terms describes the mystery from a different angle. All four describe the goal of the life in Christ.

#### *Theoria in the Old Testament*

One final important question needs to be answered by Palamas: Is the state that he is describing in four different ways attainable in this life? To answer this question, the Saint turns to the Old Testament. There he finds examples of the experience of *theoria*. In the same way that the Archbishop presents a history of fasting from Scripture in *The Homilies*, so also he provides a history of *theoria* in the Old

<sup>70</sup> Homily 11, 76.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Homily 10, 66.

<sup>74</sup> Homily 13, 95.

Testament. Here we find Moses and Abraham. Moses experienced *theoria* when he encountered God in the burning bush. The three Persons of the Trinity were revealed to Abraham through the angels who came to him by the Oak of Mamre.<sup>75</sup> Isaac and Joseph were types of Christ in the Old Testament.<sup>76</sup> Jacob, however, articulates his own experience of *theoria*. Palamas says of him: ‘He actually bears witness himself to his vision and his salvation. “For I have seen God”, he says, “face to face, and my soul is saved” (Gen 32:30 LXX).’<sup>77</sup> Summarizing his position, the Saint says: ‘Where are the people who still go along with the loathsome prattle of those heretics who have appeared in our day? Let them hear that Jacob saw God’s face, and not only did he not lose his life, as he says himself, he was also saved, even though God said, “There shall no man see me, and live” (Exod 33:20).’<sup>78</sup> Palamas’ thesis is simple but compelling: if there is clear scriptural evidence that the saints attained to the vision of God in the Old Testament, then how much more must it be possible for the New Testament saints, who live in the ‘latter days’, to attain to the same or even a greater experience of the vision of God? The heretics to whom the Archbishop alludes are those who deny the possibility of attaining the vision of God in this life. While Saint Gregory is almost certainly referring to Barlaam, Akyndinos, and Gregoras, who held that *theoria* was a possibility only in the next life, he is in fact taking a position against all who minimise the potential of the spiritual life. While Palamas does not explicitly do this in *Homily 11*, we can extrapolate and suggest that he is also opposing all who deny the possibility of attaining deification, dispassion, and the mystery of the Cross in this life. Since, as we have already seen, he uses these terms more or less synonymously, such an extrapolation is entirely reasonable.

### Conclusion

The *Homilies* reveal Palamas as a spiritual master and a gifted archpastor. The Orthodox Church, as we saw at the beginning of this study, discerned in his ministry the charism of a Father. The occasional passage in *The Homilies* that reflects an apologetical orientation does not, therefore, alter the fundamental character of the latter, or change the basic spiritual identity of the homilist. Instead, it reveals the fundamental unity between the spiritual and dogmatic dimensions in Orthodox theology. I have selected two quotations from *Homily 11* that serve to illustrate this point. In the first citation, Palamas recapitulates his position regarding the attainability and indispensability of *theoria* in the spiritual life here and now:

<sup>75</sup> *Homily 11*, 77.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*



So contemplation in God [*theoria*] and the sacred mystery of the Cross do not just drive away evil passions, and the devils who devise them, from the soul, but also heretical doctrines. They refute the advocates of such ideas, and thrust them outside the boundaries of Christ's Holy Church, within which we have the privilege now to celebrate and declare the grace and energy of the Cross among our Fathers in the time before the Cross.<sup>79</sup>

That there is an apologetical tone to the above statement by the Archbishop is undeniable. It would even be tempting to locate in the above citation more than a hint of triumphalism coming from a newly vindicated apologist—tempting, but not justified, in my opinion. The teachings of Palamas, as noted earlier in this article, were affirmed and proclaimed at several councils of the Church, indicating that in this homily the Saint is expressing an ecclesial opinion, not a personal one.

Palamas bolsters his statement on *theoria* by referring to a slightly different but nonetheless closely related point, that of the distinction between essence and energies in God. The Archbishop says:

The face of God visible at the time of his manifestation to those who are worthy, is his energy and grace. Whereas his face which is never seen is what is sometimes called the nature of God, and is beyond the scope of any manifestation or vision. As it is written, 'No one hath stood in the substance and essence of the Lord' (Jer 23:18 LXX), and either seen God's nature or made it known.<sup>80</sup>

The face of God, which Jacob saw and the New Testament saints experienced, is not God's essence. The saints instead are participating in his divine and uncreated energies. Saint Gregory knows his detractors held that the hesychast position regarding *theoria* was tantamount to pantheism. The doctrine on the distinction between essence and energies allows him to make the teaching on the experience of *theoria* more nuanced, providing it with a theological framework to defend its integrity.

The doctrine of the essence and energies, as well as the teaching on *theoria*, is hardly original to Palamas. The grand contribution of the Archbishop to the enterprise of Orthodox theology was not innovation, but synthesis and articulation. Palamas made explicit what was already known and taught in Orthodox empirical theology. His explication was unusually powerful, however, the scope of his synthesis impressively wide, and his argumentation enormously compelling. While we cannot attribute to Palamas any contribution to the development of Orthodox doctrine—a concept entirely foreign to the Orthodox theological tradition to begin with—we

<sup>79</sup> *Homily 11*, 79.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

can discover in him a new level of synthesis and theological precision. In his theological work, we encounter a cohesive and nuanced theological articulation of the Orthodox spiritual life. Whether in complex argumentation, as in his apologetical works, or in simple biblical language, as in *The Homilies*, Palamas presents, defends, and preaches the essence of Orthodox empirical theology. In him, the distinction between spiritual theology and dogmatic theology—a distinction generally accepted in the Christian West—disappears. Dogma and spirituality are united in one person, a person who articulates not only his own experience, but also the life of the *ekklēsia*. This is why the Orthodox Church recognized Palamas as a Father, and contemporary Orthodox theologians have understood the necessity of studying his works. The ‘Palamite synthesis,’ to cite the term used by Vladimir Lossky,<sup>81</sup> represents a defining moment in Orthodox spiritual and dogmatic theology—a moment that not only cannot be ignored but has normative implications for the entire Orthodox theological enterprise.

<sup>81</sup> Vladimir Lossky, ‘The Palamite Synthesis,’ in *The Vision of God*, trans. Asheleigh Moorhouse (Leighton Buzzard, Beds: The Faith Press, 1973), 124–37.