

THEOLOGY AS A SPIRITUAL STATE IN THE LIFE AND THE WRITINGS OF ST SOPHRONY THE ATHONITE

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Following the tradition of the Holy Fathers, St Sophrony declares that theology bears an experiential character, being the fruit and expression of man's communion with Christ, the source of all theology. Thus, the journey towards experiential theology is the way of ascetic perfection, where asceticism becomes the method of experiential theological knowledge. It is this 'ascetic method' that primarily distinguishes the theological path of St Sophrony. He understood theology as a state of man's spirit, as the narration of his encounter with Christ during his vision of Divine Light. Love for enemies constitutes the summit of theology: it is the pledge that guarantees genuine communion with God, the infallible criterion that verifies the authenticity of experiential theology and validates the word of a true theologian.

*'Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape.
And ye have not his word abiding in you... How can ye believe?'*¹

1. True Theology according to the Patristic Tradition

God's truth constitutes 'a mystery, which was kept secret'² and was made manifest to the world 'by revelation'.³ Bearers of this revelation were initially the prophets of the Old Testament, but its fullness was given to the world 'in the person of Jesus Christ'.⁴ Through the incarnation of the Word, God is revealed now with greater perfection as a Person, and the character of this person is sealed through his love 'to the end'.⁵ From the beginning, the content of Christian theology was built up through the assimilation and interpretation of the revelation 'in Christ'.⁶ According to St Gregory

¹ John 5:37–38, 44.

² Cf. Rom. 16:25.

³ Cf. Gal. 1:12.

⁴ 2 Cor. 4:6 (see Greek text).

⁵ Cf. John 13:1.

⁶ Georgios Mantzarides, *Ὁδοιπορικὸ θεολογικῆς ἀνθρωπολογίας* (Ἅγιον Ὄρος: Ἱερὰ Μεγίστη Μονὴ Βατοπαίδιου, 2005), 21.

Palamas, Christ is ‘the only God and the only theologian’.⁷ Consequently, it is impossible for theology not to bear an experiential character, too, since in its authentic form, it is the fruit and expression of man’s communion with the source of theology, which is Christ.

Christ became for man ‘the only teacher’.⁸ Yet after his Ascension he sent into the world the other ‘teacher’, the Holy Spirit, to guide the faithful ‘into all truth’,⁹ teach and remind them of his life-giving word, to explain the parables and to interpret his proverbs.¹⁰ The need for the Holy Spirit to come upon man for the correct understanding and interpretation ‘of the mystery of God’¹¹ is a point emphasised by many Fathers. St Silouan the Athonite continually indicates in his writings that: ‘The things of this earth we may learn with our minds but knowledge of God and of all heavenly matters comes only through the Holy Spirit, and cannot be learned merely with the mind’.¹²

True theology is a great gift of God to man. In his epistles, the great Apostle Paul constantly refers to the event of God’s revelation in his life,¹³ underlining that the Gospel that he preaches surpasses by far the measure of man, for he did not receive it from man but ‘by the revelation of Jesus Christ’.¹⁴ In the case of the Apostle, theology was preceded by the event of the personal revelation of God, but also by the experience of suffering, which always accompanies such a revelation. For this reason, his word was ‘seasoned with the salt of grace’¹⁵ and imparted the mystery of Christ ‘in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance’.¹⁶

Speaking about knowledge of God, the Apostle Paul uses expressions which can only be understood in the perspective of experiential theology. For example, he prays that the Ephesians may be granted to know ‘the breadth, and length, and depth, and height’ of the love of Christ; and, having said that, he adds that the love of Christ surpasses all knowledge.¹⁷ Here with good reason one wonders: how can the love of Christ be known since it surpasses knowledge? The Apostle gives the answer a few verses before when he encourages the Ephesians to be ‘strengthened

⁷ St Gregory Palamas, ‘Περὶ ἐκπορεύσεως τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος’ [On the Holy Spirit], 2, 16, and 48 in *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμᾶ, Συγγράμματα* (Θεσσαλονίκη: ἔκδ. Π. Χρήστου, 1962), vol. 1, 93 καὶ 122.

⁸ Cf. Matt. 23:8.

⁹ John 16:13.

¹⁰ See John 14:26 and 16:25. See also Archim. Zacharias, *Man, the Target of God* (Essex, UK: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2015), 99–100.

¹¹ Cf. Col. 2:2.

¹² Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *St Silouan the Athonite*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Essex, UK: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1991), 290. In his writings, St Silouan continually returns to the subject of the knowledge of God in the Holy Spirit. See pp. 353, 354, 359, 364, 383, 386–387.

¹³ See respectively Rom. 16:25; 2 Cor. 12:1–4; Gal. 1:12; Eph. 3:3.

¹⁴ Cf. Gal. 1:11–12.

¹⁵ Cf. Col. 4:6.

¹⁶ 1 Thess. 1:5.

¹⁷ ‘...that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all Saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God;’ Eph. 3:17–19.

with might by his Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ might dwell by faith in their hearts.¹⁸ However, since Christ can dwell ‘by faith’ in the heart of man and in Christ are hidden ‘all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’,¹⁹ this means that the heart is ‘the secret chamber’ where all the treasure of the knowledge of God is gathered. The manifestation of this gift has as a prerequisite ‘the purification by means of the keeping of the commandments’,²⁰ so that the eyes of the heart may be enlightened and that man may receive ‘the spirit of wisdom and revelation... that he may know what is the hope of the calling of God, and what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the Saints.’²¹ Authentic theology presupposes ‘purification by virtue’, and in its extreme form it presupposes man’s gradual elevation from the place of the created to the place of the Uncreated presence of God ‘through the exceeding bright splendour of the Spirit.’²²

St Gregory of Nazianzus underlines that ‘the word about God’ presupposes man’s purification and his union with the Hypostatic Word of God. He writes:

Discussion of theology is not for everyone, I tell you, not for everyone—it is not such inexpensive or effortless pursuit... It is not for all men, but only for those who have been tested and have found a sound footing in study, and, more importantly, have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul. For one who is not pure to lay hold of pure things is dangerous.²³

¹⁸ Cf. Eph. 3:16–17.

¹⁹ Cf. Col. 2:3.

²⁰ ‘If, as Saint Paul says, Christ dwells in our hearts through faith, and all the treasures of wisdom and spiritual knowledge are hidden in Him, then all the treasures of wisdom and spiritual knowledge are hidden in our hearts. They are revealed to the heart in proportion to a purification by means of the commandments’. St Maximus the Confessor, ‘Four Hundred Texts on Love’ in *The Philokalia*, Vol. 2, 4:70, trans. and ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1991), 109. PG 90: 1065A.

²¹ Cf. Eph. 1:17–18.

²² ‘We cannot have God in us and purely relate with Him and be mingled with the immaculate light, as much as it is possible for human nature, unless we are first purified through virtue and thus come out of ourselves, or rather unless we surpass ourselves, abandoning together with the senses whatsoever can be perceived through them, rising above thoughts and reasoning and the knowledge they procure, in order to deliver ourselves entirely to the immaterial and noetic energy of prayer, and partaking of the ignorance that surpasses all knowledge, so that we may be filled with the exceeding bright splendour of the Spirit and invisibly contemplate the honourable gift of the nature of the immortal world’. St Gregory Palamas, ‘Ὑπὲρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζοντων’, 1, 3, 42, *Συγγράμματα*, vol. 1, 453.

²³ Cf. St Gregory of Nazianzen, ‘First Theological Oration (Oration 27)’ in *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning, The Five Theological Orations of Gregory of Nazianzen*, 3, p. 218 (PG 36:13D). St Basil the Great expresses the same idea: ‘Just as it is not possible to write in wax without first smoothing down the letters already engraved upon it, so it is impossible to impart the divine teachings to the soul without first removing from it the conceptions arising from worldly experiences’. St Basil the Great, *Letters*, vol. 1, Letter 2, p. 5 (PG 32:225BC). Also St John Climacus speaks about purity as a precondition of theology: ‘A complete state of purity is the foundation of divine knowledge. He who has perfectly united his feeling to God is mystically led by Him to an understanding of His words. But without this union it is difficult to speak about God... Purity makes its disciple a theologian, who of himself grasps the dogmas of the Trinity’. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Lazarus Moore (Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2012), Step 30:20,

St Maximus the Confessor often refers to the gradual scheme: practical philosophy, natural contemplation, and theological mystagogy. Practical philosophy is the purification of the mind from every passionate imagination, whereas natural contemplation is the knowledge of the *logoi* and of the cause of all beings. Theology, for which St Maximus often uses the term ‘theological mystagogy’, aims to make man like unto God ‘by grace’; that is, to deify him as much as this is possible.²⁴

For St Symeon the New Theologian, true theology is the fruit of the vision of God ‘in the uncreated Light’. Commenting on the psalm which says that God ‘did fly upon the wings of the wind and made darkness his secret place’,²⁵ St Symeon underlines that theology is not the study of perceptible things, but of things ‘divine and unfathomable’; and so, it is impossible without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.²⁶ Through the radiance of the uncreated Light, man receives ‘revelations of mysteries’ and from the contemplation of beings, he is lifted up to the knowledge of God ‘Who is beyond all beings’.²⁷ Having had a compelling experience of the ways in which the uncreated Light of God acts, St Symeon considers participation in the uncreated grace to be a necessary precondition for man to afterwards theologise about God. He expresses his opinion in the form of ‘a spiritual law’, saying: ‘Knowledge is not the Light! Rather, it is the Light that is knowledge’.²⁸

Beyond a doubt, a very important turning point in the history of theology is the life and the teaching of St Gregory Palamas, who distinguishes clearly between the theoretical and experiential knowledge of God, using respectively the terms theology and divine vision. Reacting to the scholastic scientism of the Latin *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas and to the ‘Areopagitic apophatism’ of Barlaam of Calabria, Palamas presents the example of ‘the unspeakable words’ of the Apostle Paul

24, p. 246 (PG 88:1157CD). ‘A soul that has united herself to God through purity shall stand in no need of a word of instruction, since this blessed one bears the everlasting Word within herself the Initiator, Guide, and Illumination’. *The Ladder*, ‘To the Shepherd’, 100, p. 262 (PG 88:1201C). In another place St John refers to stillness (and the purity it engenders) as a precondition of theology: ‘Here are the signs, courses and proofs of those who are practicing solitude in the right way: an unruffled mind, sanctified thought, rapture towards the Lord, ... a sure understanding of divine things’, cf. *The Ladder*, Step 27:37, p. 226 (PG 88:1108AB).

²⁴ ‘The task of practical philosophy is to purge the intellect of all impassioned images, while that of natural contemplation is to show forth the intellect as understanding the science of beings in light of the cause that created them, where the aim of theological mystagogy is to establish one by grace in a state of being like God and equal to God as much as this is possible’. St Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers, The Ambigua*, vol. 1, trans. Nicholas Constatas (Cambridge, MA; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2014), Ambiguum 20, 7, p. 419 (PG 91:1241BC).

²⁵ Ps. 18:1–12.

²⁶ ‘If He has made darkness and gloom the hiding place of His mysteries, and if one greatly needs the light of the all-Holy Spirit for the comprehension of His hidden mysteries, how, not yet having become yourself the dwelling-place of the divine light, can you attempt to learn of things for which you have not the strength, you who are still imperfect and without the light?’ St Symeon the New Theologian, *On the Mystical Life: Theological and Ethical Discourses*, I, 12, trans. Alexander Golitzin (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), vol. 1, p. 67 (SC 122:280).

²⁷ Cf. St Symeon the New Theologian, *The Practical and Theological Chapters and the Three Theological Discourses*, trans. Paul McGuckin (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1982), 66–67 (SC 51:75).

²⁸ St Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*, 28, p. 301 (SC 113:146).

in order to underline the ontological character of the contemplation above reason that is accomplished through the radiance of the uncreated Light.²⁹ According to the testimony of St Gregory Palamas, which summarises and recapitulates the whole hesychastic tradition, divine vision is as superior to theology as knowing something is superior to possessing it: 'Speaking about God is not the same as encountering God'.³⁰ The 'supernatural union' with God, which is accomplished through the vision of the Light, grants man both 'to be established according to nature' and 'to theologise in an unerring way'.³¹

In the history of the Church, the name of 'theologian' was given to St John the Evangelist, to St Gregory of Nazianzus, and to St Symeon the New Theologian. For St John the Evangelist there could not be a greater source of theology than his discipleship to the Incarnate Word of the Father. For this reason, in his Gospel and Epistles, he theologises by narrating about him whom his hands had touched, whom his eyes had seen and on whose breast he had leaned.³² In the case of the great Apostle, the name of 'theologian' is surely also related to his witness to the Divinity of the Word. Furthermore, in St John the Evangelist, theology is also directly related to the vision of the uncreated glory of God: he was vouchsafed to see the Transfiguration of Christ on Tabor and later he was once again enraptured in the vision of the Divine Glory on the island of Patmos, according to his description in the Book of Revelation.

St Gregory was characterised as 'the theologian and hymnographer of the Holy Trinity', not only because he defended the Trinitarian doctrine against the heresies of his time, but also because he considered that rapture in the vision of the Trinity is the highest goal of all spiritual life. His teaching on the Holy Trinity reveals the depth of his own personal experience. The Saint writes very discreetly about the experience of rapture, but in some places, he hints at it, especially in the beginning

²⁹ 'Contemplation is different from theology, because to utter words about God is not the same with possessing and seeing God. For apophatic theology is also based on reason, whereas there are contemplations which surpass reason, as this was made clear unto us by him who was vouchsafed the revelation of unspeakable things. Therefore, because apophatic theology is also based on reason, the ineffable contemplation that surpasses every reason is above it; and those who contemplate these things which are above reason, surpass apophatic theology not through reason, but through action, truth, by the grace of God and by the power of the Almighty Spirit, which makes us able to see that which "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard" (1 Cor. 2:9)'. St Gregory Palamas, 'Υπὲρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζοντων', 2, 3, 49, in *Συγγράμματα*, vol. 1, 413.

³⁰ 'Theology is as far from the vision of God in the light, and as distinct from the intimate converse with God, as knowing is different from possessing. Speaking about God is not the same as encountering God'. Ibid., 1, 3, 42, p. 453.

³¹ 'For indeed knowledge about God and His doctrines is a form of contemplation that we call theology, and the natural use and movement of the powers of the soul and of the members of the body produce a transformation of the reasonable image; but this is not the perfect beauty of the noble state which comes to us from on high; it is not the supernatural union with the exceeding bright light, which is the only origin of both unerring theology and natural movement of the inner powers of the soul and body. Therefore, by rejecting it [this union], they have also rejected every virtue and every truth'. Ibid., 1, 3, 15, p. 425.

³² Cf. 1 John 1:1—'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life'.

of his second theological oration,³³ and even more intensely in his poems.³⁴ Having had the experience of contemplation in the Holy Spirit, St Gregory clearly explains in his writings that ‘to authentically philosophise’, that is, to truly theologise, is a gift of God which is given to man when he unites with the ‘most pure’ Light of Divinity.³⁵

Finally, St Symeon was *par excellence* the theologian of repentance and of the vision of the uncreated Light. In innumerable places in his hymns and Catechisms, he describes the vision of the uncreated Light in his life. Repentance and rapture in the vision of the Light became for St Symeon the source of his Triadology, Christology, and anthropology. His life and writings reveal a ‘point’ which unbreakably unites these three great Theologian Fathers, and this point is none other than *living theology as an experience of abiding in the presence of God*. They owe the name of ‘theologian’ to their common witness to divine Love, communion with God, and man’s rapture into the unapproachable vision of the uncreated Light. In the lives of the three Theologians, true experience and existential knowledge anticipate their witness to the mystery of God, which is expressed even in a poetic way. Through these Fathers, but also through their disciples, a ‘chain’ of Saints enters the process of history, the Saints that witness to the vision of the uncreated glory of God. In them, theology constitutes the fruit of the experience of the vision which is past understanding.

2. Theology as a Spiritual State in St Sophrony the Athonite

³³ ‘What experience of this have I had, you friends of truth, her initiates, her lovers as I am? I was running with a mind to see God and so it was that I ascended the mount. I penetrated the cloud, became enclosed in it, detached from matter and material things and concentrated, so far as might be, in myself. But when I directed my gaze I scarcely saw the averted figure of God, and this whilst sheltering in the rock, God the word incarnate for us. Peering in I saw not the nature prime, self-apprehended (by “self” I mean the Trinity), the nature as it abides within the first veil and is hidden by the Cherubim, but as it reaches us at its furthest remove from God, being, so far as I can understand, the grandeur, or a is divine David calls it the “majesty”’. Cf. St Gregory of Nazianzen, ‘Second Theological Oration (Oration 28)’ in *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning, The Five Theological Orations of Gregory of Nazianzen*, trans. Lionel Wickham and Frederick W. Norris (Leiden; NY; København; Köln: E. J. Brill, 1991), 3, p. 225 (PG 36:29AB).

³⁴ ‘Long ago I tore my spirit more from the world and mingled it with a shining spirit of heaven. The lofty mind bore me far from the flesh, set me in that place, and hid me in the recesses of the heavenly abode. There the light of the Trinity shown upon my eyes, a light than which I have known nothing brighter. It is enthroned on high and gives off an ineffable and harmonious radiance, which is the principle of all those things that time shuts off from heaven. Therefore, I died to the world and the world to me’. St Gregory of Nazianzus, ‘Concerning His Own Affairs’ in *Three Poems*, coll. The Fathers of the Church, trans. Denis Molaise Meehan, O.S.B. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 31 (PG 37:984A–985A).

³⁵ ‘Whoever has been permitted to escape by reason and contemplation from matter and this fleshly cloud or veil (whichever it should be called) and to hold communion with God, and be associated, as far as man’s nature can attain, with the purest Light, blessed is he, both from his ascent from hence, and for his deification there, which is conferred by true philosophy, and by rising superior to the dualism of matter, through the unity which is perceived in the Trinity’. St Gregory of Nazianzus, ‘Oration 21’ in *Select Orations of St Gregory Nazianzen*, coll. The Writings of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, trans. Charles Gordon Browne & James Edward Swallow (Michigan: WM. V. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1893), 270 (PG 35:1084CD).

Throughout the historical development of the term ‘theology’ in the understanding of the Fathers, the true nature of theology is understood as an existential communion and union with God. True theology requires the transcendence of objective phenomenology and man’s access to ontological—spiritual—knowledge. The journey towards experiential theology finally identifies itself with the way of ascetic perfection, where asceticism becomes the method of experiential theological knowledge. *It is this ‘ascetic method’ that primarily distinguishes the theological path of St Sophrony.*

After the departure of St Sophrony from this life, personal notes in Russian were found in his cell, written in the form of chapters, probably for another book which he intended to publish. In the end, these notes circulated in Greek as an independent edition with the title: ‘The Mystery of Christian Life’. One of the chapters of the book is entitled, ‘*Theology as Prayer and as a State of Our Spirit*’.³⁶ This title expresses with great clarity the way in which he understood, or rather lived theology.

Although St Sophrony appreciated most highly the experiential theological knowledge, the fruit of the communion of God and man, yet we must note that he did not disregard academic theology in any way. On the contrary, he always sincerely respected and honoured its representatives, for he considered their ministry praiseworthy and necessary for the historical course of the body of the Church.³⁷ He himself would underline that, although the Saints may receive the revelation of God directly in their heart, on the human level, this word given ‘by revelation’³⁸ afterwards needs a certain elaboration, so that it becomes more widely known and understood.³⁹ For this purpose, however, he considered that analogous experience is necessary, even if only partial, otherwise man has no share in the true knowledge of spiritual realities.⁴⁰ The Elder describes two different paths which evidently bring forth different fruits, comparing the intellectual approach to God with ontological knowledge of God.⁴¹ Intellectual theological activity gives answers on the rational plane but does

³⁶ Cf. St Sophrony the Athonite, *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς* (Ιερὰ Μονὴ Τιμίου Προδρόμου: Ἑσσεξ Ἀγγλίας, 2006), 347–65.

³⁷ See *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 334. A characteristic example of his attitude is his approach to the regeneration of the Church of Russia, after the impoverishment to which it was led by the communist regime: one of his first recommendations concerns the re-establishment of the Theological and Academic Schools. See *Ἀσκησις καὶ Θεωρία* (Ιερὰ Μονὴ Τιμίου Προδρόμου: Ἑσσεξ Ἀγγλίας, 1996), 103–104.

³⁸ See Gal. 1:12.

³⁹ Cf. *Οἰκοδομώντας τὸν ναὸ τοῦ Θεοῦ*, vol. 1, 413.

⁴⁰ Cf. *On Prayer*, 74.

⁴¹ Cf. Saint *Silouan*, 189. St Maximus the Confessor makes the same distinction between intellectual and existential-charismatic knowledge, clearly praising the second: ‘The word of Scripture recognises that knowledge of divine realities is twofold. On the one hand, there is relative knowledge based only on reasoning and concepts, and lacking the actual perception of what is known through experience, and it is this knowledge that we use to order our affairs in this present life. On the other hand, there is knowledge that is true and properly so called, which is gained only by actual experience—without reasoning and concepts—and provides, by grace through participation, a whole perception of the One who is known. By this latter knowledge we attain, in the future rest, the supernatural divinization that is actualised unceasingly’. Cf. St Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture, The Responses to Thalassios*, Question 60,

not lead to the true possession of the gifts of grace and does not raise man to the realm of 'Divine Being'.⁴²

There is a great danger for those who attempt to approach the mystery of God intellectually: that of 'reducing the Word of God to the level of the human word, and finally transforming the theology of revelation into a religious teaching or ideology'.⁴³ The way of rationalism is a 'superficial solution' which fails to impart to man the 'irrefutable witness' of eternal life.⁴⁴ Along with these views, however, St Sophrony never ceases to underline the vital importance that the right dogma has for spiritual life, since it is impossible for truly righteous life to exist without the correct understanding of the Holy Trinity. Every deviation from the right dogma is inevitably reflected in man's spiritual life.⁴⁵ The loss of correct Triadology inevitably leads to essential mistakes both on the level of anthropology and spiritual gnoseology, and on the level of ecclesiology and soteriology. At the time when he was still on the Holy Mountain, St Sophrony wrote about this in one of his letters:

There are three things that I do not understand: 1) faith without dogma; 2) Christianity without the Church; 3) Christianity without asceticism. And these three—the Church, doctrine and asceticism (that is, Christian asceticism)—form for me one single life.⁴⁶

In order to understand the mystery of divine revelation and of the dogmas, rigorous intellectual research and study is not sufficient. What is needed is the enlightenment granted by the liturgical and ascetic experience which is preserved in the Church as a most precious treasure. According to the teaching of St Sophrony, spiritual perfection consists of the harmonious combination of prayer and theology:

429–430 (PG 90:621D). The same text of Maximus can be also found in 'Two Hundred Texts on Theology and Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God' in *The Philokalia*, vol. 2, 4:29, 242 (PG 90:1316BC). About the same subject extensive references are also made in texts of St Gregory Palamas. Certainly, St Gregory underlines that without repentance and asceticism, man can be but far from knowing himself as he should and even farther from knowing God. 'As for us, we believe that the true glory is not the one we find through words and reasonings, but that which is proved by deeds and by life: it is not only the only true, but also the only sure and immutable. "Every word", it is said, "disputes another word," but what word can dispute life? We think that it is even impossible to know oneself by the methods of distinction, reasoning and analysis, unless, through fierce repentance and strict asceticism, the mind is rendered free from pride and evil'. Cf. St Gregory Palamas, 'Υπὲρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζόντων', 1, 3, 13, *Συγγράμματα*, vol. 1, p. 423.

⁴² Cf. Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *We Shall See Him as He Is*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Essex, UK: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2004), 182.

⁴³ Cf. Georgios Mantzarides, 'The Participation in the Energy of God as a Condition for the Realisation of the Hypostatic Principle in Man', in: *Πρακτικὰ Διορθόδοξου Ἐπιστημονικοῦ Συνεδρίου: Γέροντας Σωφρόνιος, ὁ θεολόγος τοῦ Ἀκτίστου Φωτός*, (Minutes of the Inter-orthodox Scientific Conference, Elder Sophrony: The Theologian of the Uncreated Light), (Ἱερὰ Μεγίστη Μονὴ Βατοπαίδιου: Ἅγιον Ὄρος, 2008), 250.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Saint Silouan*, 191.

⁴⁵ Cf. *We Shall See Him*, 9.

⁴⁶ Cf. Archimandrite Sophrony, *Striving for Knowledge of God, Letters to David Balfour* (Essex, UK: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2016), 274.

Those who have the tendency to perceive divinity in an intellectual way, through theological science, do not acquire the living experience of eternity. Those who are satisfied only with prayer do not attain to perfection, although, at certain moments, they do approach God with greater tension than the first. Neither intellectual theology without the prayer of repentance, nor prayer, not even fervent prayer, without the noetic, spiritual theological vision constitute perfection. Only the knowledge that includes both aspects as a unified life can approach plenitude.⁴⁷

From the Elder's life it is clear that, for him, theology is the narration of the event of his encounter with Christ during the rapture of his vision of Divine Light. In his writings, he especially emphasises the fact that authentic theology is not the result of critical research or of human conjectures, but is 'a statement of the life into which man has been introduced by the action of the Holy Spirit'.⁴⁸ In order to describe his writings, it may be appropriate to use the expression that Father Georges Florovsky uses in order to describe the writings of St Gregory the Theologian: 'His writings seem to be a description of what he has actually seen, and not only an exposition of his reasoning'.⁴⁹

True theology is 'abiding in God' and union with Him. In this state, the uncreated energy of God is reflected on all levels of human existence and generates in the soul new feelings and new thoughts about God and the world.⁵⁰ The heart 'burns' with the flame of grace and apprehends deeper mysteries which surpass any intellectual understanding.⁵¹ This experience is so intense, that it is enough for man to be caught up only once into the heavenly world of Christ in order for him to receive the privilege and the blessedness of knowing the way.⁵² For this reason when the Fathers

⁴⁷ One of the prominent representatives of contemporary academic theology, Metropolitan John of Pergamon, comments on this opinion of St Sophrony: 'Elder Sophrony is a rare case in which theology as experience and theology as a "theological word" are combined. In the history of the Church there were many Fathers who had a deep experience of communion with God, but they did not express it in a theological word... The gift of the theological word was not given to all. Nowadays some claim that experience alone is sufficient and that the theological word is not necessary. They are mistaken just as those who claim the opposite... Academic theology which despises the experience of the desert Fathers and does not incorporate it in its theological word, makes the same mistake as those who despise theology and are satisfied with experience alone. The Church needs both and it is this combination that characterises the Elder Sophrony of blessed memory'. Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, 'Elder Sophrony's Perception on the Person, in Relation to the Contemporary Theological Currents' (Greek), in: *Πρακτικά Διορθοδόξου Ἐπιστημονικοῦ Συνεδρίου: Ἐργοντας Σωφρόνιος, ὁ θεολόγος τοῦ Ἀκτίστου Φωτός*, 254.

⁴⁸ *Saint Silouan*, 170.

⁴⁹ Georges Florovsky, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, Collected Works of Georges Florovsky, vol. 7 (Belmont, Massachusetts: Notable and Academic Books, 1987), 130.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Saint Silouan*, 149.

⁵¹ Cf., p. 172.

⁵² Archimandrite Zacharias (Zacharou), *Christ, Our Way and Our Life: A Presentation of the Theology of Archimandrite Sophrony* (Essex, UK: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2012), 148.

theologise, they do not allow reason to judge the revelation of God, but rather they judge themselves 'in the light of the knowledge given to them'.⁵³

True theology is not a system of 'cunningly devised fables', because true theologians first become 'eyewitnesses of His divine glory and majesty'⁵⁴ and then narrate with human words that which they have truly beheld and known. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, when Ananias received Saul Paul in Damascus, he explained to him in more depth the vision of the Light that shone upon him, but also the voice of Christ which he was vouchsafed to hear: 'Brother Saul... the God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth. For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard'.⁵⁵ Authentic witness to the mystery of Christ presupposes the vision of his form and the resounding of his voice in man's heart:

Suddenly, the great Light unexpectedly overshadows us; it speaks to us a short phrase, but together with this phrase infinite horizons open before us. This wondrous Light plunges our spirit in the depths of Being; it lifts us up to the heavens of knowledge of Him.⁵⁶

The ineffable radiance of the Light permeates '*the entire man*'⁵⁷ and imparts to him profound knowledge '*of the mysteries of the world to come*'.⁵⁸ When along with the vision of the uncreated Light man is also vouchsafed to hear the voice of God, then the divine Sower throws his good seed in the earth of the heart and his word becomes the life of man.⁵⁹ In the light of the divine words, '*everything that man is to meet with and experience in his existence will be revealed to him*'.⁶⁰ He comes to know the measure of 'earthly Adam', but he also receives the life of the 'Heavenly Man',⁶¹ of the Master Christ.⁶²

One of the greatest gifts which accompany the vision of the uncreated Light is that of theology. The vision of the 'form' and the hearing of the 'voice' of Christ lead to man's birth in the eternal Kingdom which cannot be moved.⁶³ Then the Eternal Truth which 'lies at the root of all being' is revealed,⁶⁴ and the mind acquires that

⁵³ Cf. Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *On Prayer*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Essex, UK: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1996), 171.

⁵⁴ See 2 Pet. 1:16–18.

⁵⁵ Acts 22:13–15.

⁵⁶ Cf. St Sophrony the Athonite, *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 343.

⁵⁷ Cf. *Saint Silouan*, 309, 353.

⁵⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 174, and *We Shall See Him*, 181.

⁵⁹ Cf. *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 420.

⁶⁰ Cf. *Saint Silouan*, 215.

⁶¹ Cf. 1 Cor. 15:45–49.

⁶² Cf. *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 420.

⁶³ Cf. *ibid.*, 356–60; Archimandrite Zacharias (Zacharou), *The Enlargement of the Heart* (Essex, UK: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2012), 44–74.

⁶⁴ Cf. *We Shall See Him*, 68, 131, 222.

which the Fathers call ‘wisdom inspired by the Holy Spirit’, for it cleaves to God and conforms to his light.⁶⁵ This gnoseological path differs in quality from that of philosophical deliberation because it imparts knowledge as a state of the spirit. By the energy of divine grace, together with the perception of the realities of the spiritual plane, another form of life is imparted to man’s whole being.⁶⁶ In this state, knowledge of God and theology bear an experiential character without any element of objectification. By grace, knowledge is imparted as the fruit of the union of two subjects, two persons, of God and man.⁶⁷ Then, the true theologian becomes ‘the mouth of God’ imparting to his brethren ‘the knowledge of the mystery of the ways of salvation’⁶⁸ through words which are loaded with the saving and renewing power of the Spirit.

It is clear from what has been said above that rapture into the vision of the uncreated Light has immense gnoseological consequences. Through the radiance of the Light, even cosmology ceases to bear the objective character of empirical knowledge, since man now perceives beings through the Uncreated words of God. In Holy Scripture, it is evident that the will of the Creator God precedes matter, since all things were created through His thought: ‘Thou hast designed the things that are now, and those that are to come. Yea, the things thou didst intend came to pass, and the things thou didst will presented themselves.’⁶⁹ God thinks the world and his creative thought becomes ‘created being’.⁷⁰ Through the vision of the Light, understanding of all phenomena is received from the only Source and Cause which is the Creator God.⁷¹

⁶⁵ ‘According to theologians, noetic, pure, angelic prayer is in its power wisdom inspired by the Holy Spirit. A sign that you have attained such prayer is that the intellect’s vision when praying is completely free from form and that the intellect sees neither itself nor anything else in a material way. On the contrary, it is often drawn away even from its own senses by the light acting within it; for it now grows immaterial and filled with spiritual radiance, becoming through ineffable union a single spirit with God.’ St Gregory of Sinai, ‘On Commandments and Doctrines’ in *The Philokalia*, vol. 4, 116, p. 239 (PG 150:1280D–1281A).

⁶⁶ Cf. *On Prayer*, 35.

⁶⁷ Cf. *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 123–24.

⁶⁸ The phrase ‘the knowledge of the mystery of the ways of salvation’ is a comprehensive expression of St Sophrony, through which in essence he refers to the great mystery of the knowledge of the way of Christ and consequently of man’s deification. He uses this phrase at least eleven times in his writings. Cf. *We Shall See Him*, 31, 76, 85, 122, 133, 181, 223, 229. *On Prayer*, 16, 30, 149. The knowledge of this mystery presupposes man’s passage through three stages of spiritual life, which according to St Sophrony are: a) the stage of the first grace, b) the stage of the withdrawal of grace or of God-forsakenness and c) the stage of the reacquisition of grace. In this journey, man is vouchsafed knowledge of ‘the entire Christ’ (*toti Christi*), that is, of His indescribable self-emptying but also of His eternal glorification. For more cf. Archim. Zacharias, *Christ, Our Way and Our Life*, especially the chapter ‘The Mystery of the Ways of Salvation’, 117–52. Also, about knowledge of ‘the entire Christ’ (*toti Christi*), cf. Archim. Zacharias, *The Enlargement of the Heart*, 74; *The Hidden Man of the Heart*, 241, and *Remember Thy First Love*, 352.

⁶⁹ Judith 9:5–6. St Paul expresses the same: ‘Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.’ Heb. 11:1–3.

⁷⁰ Cf. St Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily on 1 Cor. 15:28* (PG 44:1312A). ‘All things are brought to manifestation not from any underlying matter, but from the divine will which became matter and substance for such created things.’

⁷¹ ‘A true philosopher is one who perceives in created things their spiritual Cause, or who knows creat-

St Sophrony had expressed orally the opinion that ‘our cosmology depends on the experience of grace that we have.’⁷² He also expressed the same in one of his revelatory texts:

Introduced into the sphere of the Mind of God the Creator, man’s created spirit begins to see God ‘as he is’ in Himself [cf. I John 3:2]... In prayer of this kind, our mind-spirit is included in the Mind of God and receives understanding, the nature of which our everyday language is not qualified to define. For instance, all things are created by His will, His thought. He conceives of the world and His creative thinking becomes created being [Judith 9:5-6]. Not matter but the thinking of God the Creator is the initial factor. Thus we live in this world not only through the prism of experimental knowledge, but in the Spirit we also behold it in another fashion [cf. Heb. 11:1-3].⁷³

From the Fathers of the Church, St Maximus the Confessor often refers to the fact that the *logoi* of all the things that are and will be made ‘pre-exist in God, being in Him in an unshakeable way’:

The concepts (*λόγοι*) of all that is and shall be in an essential and existential way—of all the things that are and will be made, that appear or will appear—pre-exist in God, being in Him in an unshakeable way... For there is none among these existences whose concept (*λόγος*) does not pre-exist of a surety in God. And those things which have their concepts (*λόγοι*) pre-existing in God, surely come into being by the will of God.⁷⁴

At this point, a connection can be made between St Sophrony’s view and that expressed by St Maximus. The ‘inclusion’ of the human mind ‘in the Mind of God’ which occurs during the vision of the uncreated Light, also entails knowledge of ‘the concepts (*logoi*) of beings pre-existing in God’. The mind receives an inexpressible understanding of things, an understanding which is related to the pre-existing

ed things through knowing their Cause, having attained a union with God that transcends the intellect and a direct, unmediated faith: he does not simply learn about divine things, but actually experiences them.’ St Gregory of Sinai, ‘On Commandments and Doctrines’ in *The Philokalia*, vol. 4, 127, p. 245.

⁷² From the Archive of the Monastery.

⁷³ *We Shall See Him*, 226–27. This view of St Sophrony about the connection between the vision of the Light and cosmology is also indirectly expressed in other places in his writings, cf. *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 226–27 and 273–74.

⁷⁴ St Maximus the Confessor, ‘Περὶ ἀποριῶν’ (The Ambigua), 109 (PG 91:1329AB). See also St Maximus the Confessor, ‘Two Hundred Texts on Theology and Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God’ in *The Philokalia*, vol. 2, 2:4, p. 138 (PG 90:1125D–1128A): ‘The centre of a circle is regarded as the indivisible source of all the radii extending from it; similarly, by means of a certain simple and indivisible act of spiritual knowledge, the person found worthy to dwell in God will perceive pre-existing in God all the inner essences of created things’.

‘conception’ of the world by the Mind of God. That is, in a certain way, man then understands creation through the Mind of the Creator.

In the lives of the Saints there are many examples which confirm St Sophrony’s view mentioned above. Perhaps one of the most relevant cases is that of St Benedict. In his life it is described how he was overshadowed by the uncreated Light while he was keeping vigil in the middle of the night, and the whole room radiated with the Light greater than the light of the sun at noon day. St Gregory Dialogus, his biographer, writes that the indescribable shedding of Light was accompanied by a very particular phenomenon: in a beam of Light, St Benedict saw the whole creation, all created things of this world.⁷⁵

According to St Maximus the Confessor, in the state of contemplation, the human mind receives from God ‘an all-embracing knowledge’, knowledge of his providence and judgment for all his creatures.⁷⁶ Man’s ineffable contact with the creative Mind of God gestates the experiential knowledge of theology, anthropology, soteriology, but also of cosmology. In this case therefore, we can see a reverse direction to that of empirical sciences, for they result in the formulation of general laws through the observation of particular phenomena.

As St Gregory Palamas writes, through the vision of the uncreated Light man receives the uncreated energy of grace which reaffirms within him the *logoi* of beings and reveals the mysteries of nature. Moreover, together with the vision of the Light, without seeking for it, man receives divine gifts, such as foresight and clairvoyance. He is imparted knowledge not only ‘of what is past and of what is present’ but ‘even of what is to come’, that is of the future.⁷⁷

An element of fundamental importance for the understanding of St Sophrony’s experiential theology is the fact that in his life he first received a revelation from on high, the experience of the ontological knowledge of God, through the vision of the uncreated Light, and only after many years did he set it down in writing. This

⁷⁵ St Gregory the Great, *The Life and Miracles of Saint Benedict*, Book 2, 35, 2–3 (SC 260:236–239).

⁷⁶ ‘A perfect intellect is one which by true faith and in a manner beyond all unknowing supremely knows the supremely Unknowable; and which, in surveying the entirety of God’s creation, has received from God an all-embracing knowledge of the providence and judgment which governs it—in so far, of course, as all this is possible to man’. St Maximus the Confessor, ‘Four Hundred Texts on Love’ in *The Philokalia*, vol. 2, 3:99, p. 99 (PG 90:1048B).

⁷⁷ ‘The intellect that has been accounted worthy of this light also transmits to the body that is united with it many clear tokens of the divine beauty, acting as an intermediary between divine grace and the grossness of the flesh and conferring on the flesh the power to do what lies beyond its power... It is then that the intellect is illumined by the divine Logos who enables it to perceive clearly the inner essences—the *logoi*—of created things and on account of its purity reveals to it the mysteries of nature. In this way, through relationships of correspondence the perceiving and trusting intelligence is raised up to the apprehension of supernatural realities—an apprehension that the Father of the Logos communicates through an immaterial union. From this arise various other miraculous effects, such as visionary insight, the seeing of things future, and the experience of things happening afar off as though they were occurring before one’s very eyes... According to the degree of purity they truly attain a knowledge of what is past and, of what is present, and even of what is to come’. St Gregory Palamas, ‘Letter to the Most Reverend Nun Xenia’, in *The Philokalia*, vol. 4, 62, pp. 318–19.

is not unusual; even the Apostles and the Evangelists recorded their testimonies a long time after the Ascension of the Lord. In the history of the Church, most of the Fathers allowed themselves to speak about their experiences only towards the end of their ascetic life, whilst many others kept silent until the end. Precisely because it is the fruit of a lifelong 'discipleship' in the education of the Lord, the teaching of the Fathers does not have the character of a scholastic dissertation, but is rather a self-revelation from the abundance of their soul.⁷⁸ The Fathers theologise only after they have gone through many years of alternating between the visitations and the withdrawals of grace. Having learnt from the way of the Cross, but also from the blessedness that springs forth from this way, when they speak about God, they impart from the 'abundance of life'⁷⁹ which they bear in their heart.⁸⁰ They share with their brethren 'things new and old'⁸¹ from the spiritual reserve of their life in hope that some, 'if only a single soul' as St Silouan wrote, may hear the word and turn to repentance unto salvation.⁸²

In the case of St Sophrony, theology is essentially the narration of events that he had previously experienced. However, in order to be able to impart to his contemporaries 'the light of the knowledge of the ways of the Spirit',⁸³ he had to seek for appropriate terminologies not only in the Patristic writings, but also in the theological and philosophical writings of his time. As far as the linguistic style of his texts is concerned, there is a subtle point which must be clarified, so that any exaggerations or misunderstandings may be avoided. St Sophrony was undoubtedly not ignorant of the thinking of the philosophical currents of the twentieth century. This, however, does not mean that his theology is supported by the 'spectrum' of contemporary philosophy. Such a conclusion would be a tragic misunderstanding of the truth. Just as the claim that St Gregory Palamas and other Fathers of the Church adopted the philosophy of the Neoplatonists is invalid, so is the argument that St Sophrony's theology is founded on the philosophy of existentialism. A thorough study of his life and writings brings to light the truth of the matter: his gnoseology is founded on the Orthodox ascetic tradition.⁸⁴ In this context, the only figure that most profoundly

⁷⁸ Cf. *Saint Silouan*, 185–86.

⁷⁹ Cf. John 10:10.

⁸⁰ This truth is also expressed in Holy Scripture: 'With nine thoughts I have gladdened my heart, and a tenth I shall tell with my tongue.' Sir. 25:7. For this particularity of the theological word of the Saints, see Archim. Zacharias, *Man, the Target of God*, 116.

⁸¹ Matt. 13:52.

⁸² Cf. *Saint Silouan*, 187.

⁸³ Cf. *ibid.*, 188.

⁸⁴ For a comparison between St Sophrony's theology on the person and western Personalism, see Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas, 'Elder Sophrony's Concept of the Person in Relation to Contemporary Theological Currents' (Greek), in: *Πρακτικά Διορθόδοξου Ἐπιστημονικοῦ Συνεδρίου: Γέροντας Σωφρόνιος, ὁ θεολόγος τοῦ Ἀκτίστου Φωτός*, 253–264, where His Eminence writes: 'Therefore, while the western Personalism (of the 20th century) moves towards the direction of individualism and rationalism, among the thinkers arising mainly from the younger Russian theologians, a Personalism gradually develops, which places itself in the context of love and communion. In this context, Saint Sophrony's teaching about the person makes its appearance. Yet, although one can find many common points between Saint

influenced and reigned in his thought was that of St Silouan the Athonite. After his discipleship to St Silouan, St Sophrony was naturally and deeply rooted in the Patristic tradition, since St Silouan was a living witness of this tradition. Referring to him, St Sophrony emphasises:

Saint Silouan was an event of extreme importance on my journey through life. Thanks to him, year after year I was able to observe at close quarters a truly Christian life, and even become a disciple. I am incomparably more indebted to his prayers than to all my other preceptors, though among them were several outstanding representatives of our Church—grace-endowed ascetics in monasteries and hermitages, bishops and priests; likewise professors in theological schools.⁸⁵

A superficial reading of St Sophrony's writings can easily give the impression that he has received personalistic influences. Nevertheless, after more profound study, a completely different conclusion may be drawn that: the words and the structures of expression that he employs only hint to the truth and constitute means for its relative discovery through experience. His writings are in essence a provocation to verify through experience the path they indicate.⁸⁶

Besides, human linguistic expressions inevitably lessen the experience: 'Human language does not allow one the possibility to express appropriately either spiritual experience or the knowledge of God that Christ revealed'.⁸⁷

St Sophrony goes so far as to say that it is almost impossible to preach true Christianity to the world, because the Gospel preaching 'is not after man',⁸⁸ that is, it surpasses human measure. For this reason, those who know by experience both the greatness of the Christian's calling and the self-renunciation required by way of the Gospel, prefer to pray for the salvation of all rather than to preach:

Manifold and most fiery are the ordeals set before them that love God... The one who knows by experience the sublimity and the difficulties of the Christian way is rent in two. On one side there is the burning desire for all men to know the True God and the light of eternal life; on the other, fear lest those who are called be unable to sustain the heavy ordeal. This is why

Sophrony and other Russian theologians, there is a particular contribution of the blessed Elder, which not only enriches, but also purifies the meaning of the person. This contribution consists in placing the concept of person in the light of ascetical experience.' *Ibid.*, 258–259.

⁸⁵ *We Shall See Him*, 207–208.

⁸⁶ Cf. Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Letters to His Family* (Essex, UK: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2015), 59. See also Hieromonk Nikolai (Sakharov), *I Love Therefore I Am* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 67–68.

⁸⁷ *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 334.

⁸⁸ Gal. 1:11.

he generally prefers to turn to God and pray for the salvation of one and all, rather than preach.⁸⁹

According to the truthful words of the Lord, only the fruit of experience proves in what measure a teaching is a human fabrication or ‘is from God.’⁹⁰ St Sophrony uses the example of the psalms, of the prophecies of Scripture, but also of the works of the great Fathers, in order to show that they follow no ‘scholastic system’, in the sense of methodically setting out the material, but that they show something much higher: a deep inner unity of vision.⁹¹ The Patristic teaching is not primarily characterised by logical sequence, but by an inner ontological unity whose richness is inexhaustible because of the energy of the One God. On the one hand, human language may well fail to render ‘duly’ the ‘eternally living currents of the boundless ocean of divine Life,’⁹² but on the other hand, what is logically incomprehensible and inexpressible is understood existentially by faith and true living communion with God.⁹³ Besides, even Christ himself avoided to describe in words the perfection to which man is called, but he only said: ‘I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth... And in that day ye shall ask me nothing.’⁹⁴ Man surpasses the stumbling blocks of ordinary reason only through experience, by participating in the uncreated Divine Energies:

The dwelling in us of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Who is inseparable from Them, gives us the one and only right knowledge of God in its most existential reality. We, as the habitation of Divinity, become in a unique way bearers of the fulness of divine Eternity.⁹⁵

When man’s mind abides in God, then whatever he says is theology, for theology becomes the state of his soul.⁹⁶ This is how the written testimonies of all the Fathers have come about, expressing in words the experience of authentic theology which is ‘past understanding’. In this way, their words become indicators that point the way for those who desire true ontological knowledge of God, that is, union with him in

⁸⁹ *Saint Silouan*, 219–20. More generally, in many places of his writings, St Sophrony expresses his perception about ‘the exceeding greatness of the power’ (Eph. 1:19) of the Christian way. His words often manifest in a very strong way the conscience that he himself had of the greatness of the calling that Christ addresses to man. For example, cf. *Saint Silouan*, 236: ‘To live a Christian life is impossible. All one can do as a Christian is “die daily”, like Saint Paul (1 Cor. 15:31)’.

⁹⁰ ‘Jesus answered them, and said, my doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.’ John 7:16–17.

⁹¹ Cf. *Letters to His Family*, 67.

⁹² Cf. *Saint Silouan*, 187, and *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 340–41.

⁹³ Cf. *Saint Silouan*, 187.

⁹⁴ John 16:12–13 and 23. Cf. *Saint Silouan*, 192.

⁹⁵ Cf. *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 335.

⁹⁶ Cf. *Οἰκοδομῶντας τὸν ναὸ τοῦ Θεοῦ*, vol. 2, 245.

the Holy Spirit. Man is delivered from the prison of reason only when he verifies the theology of the Fathers through his own personal experience. Then ‘it is the Spirit that beareth witness’ and ‘the witness of God is greater.’⁹⁷

In the dogmas of the Church, we apprehend this truth more clearly than anywhere else. Typical examples are the antinomies contained in the Trinitarian dogma, but also the Christological declaration of the fourth Ecumenical Council.⁹⁸ Only through the communion of grace can man know existentially the truth contained in the dogmas:

The Church, as guardian of the fulness of revealed truth, by her dogma forbids the crossing of certain limits. She holds fast the human mind as if in a vice from which it cannot easily free itself. In order to reach Truth the human intellect must cease to act on the level of rational thinking, and must rise vertically into another sphere.⁹⁹

Dogmas are not findings of intellectual research or of theological dialectical thinking, but are founded on divine revelation, which they express as ‘evidence’.¹⁰⁰ For this reason true understanding requires ‘the crucifixion of the mind’¹⁰¹ and the expulsion of every element of imagination, since ‘no human conjecture or proposition has any place in Trinitarian dogma’.¹⁰² Consequently, man is called to assimilate the truth of the dogmas through the power of grace which ‘leads him into the Divine eternity, that is, in the Life of God Himself’.¹⁰³ Inspiration from on high and rapture in the vision of the Light lead to the faith of contemplation, through which ‘things not seen’¹⁰⁴ are examined. This is precisely the foundation on which the Church establishes the ensemble of its dogmas:

⁹⁷ Cf. 1 John 5:6 and 9. See also *Saint Silouan*, 192: ‘... man has direct knowledge of his immortality, knows for certain that he is a participant in eternal life; when the Holy Spirit, as the Staretz (Silouan) expresses it, bears witness to the soul of her salvation’.

⁹⁸ See Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Truth and Life* (Essex, UK: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2016), 31.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 28.

¹⁰¹ Vladimir Lossky also describes the Trinitarian dogma as a literal crucifixion of the human mind: ‘The question is, indeed, crucial—in the literal sense of the word. The dogma of the Trinity is a cross for human ways of thought. The apophatic ascent is a mounting of calvary. This is the reason why no philosophical speculation has ever succeeded in rising to the mystery of the Holy Trinity. This is the reason why the human spirit was able to receive the full revelation of the Godhead only after Christ on the cross had triumphed over death and over the abyss of hell. This, finally, is the reason why the revelation of the Trinity shines out in the Church as a purely religious gift, as the catholic truth above all other’ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., Ltd, 2005), 66.

¹⁰² Cf. *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 336.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 337.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Heb. 11:1.

In every age, theological development has had no other function than to make accessible unchanging dogmatic truths, by 'translating' them into a language adapted to those for whom they are intended. But... all dogmatic 'problems' fall away once a man comes to an immediate vision of God.¹⁰⁵

The mind of man is by nature 'extremely limited' and incapable by itself of penetrating the mysteries of God, because there, according to St Sophrony, 'a God-given order of things' is at work.¹⁰⁶ Man begins his journey towards the knowledge of God through faith that is exceedingly more boundless and more perfect than the mind. Then follows the sensation of grace which imparts charismatic knowledge of God. Through repentance and humility, in time, the 'place' of the deep heart emerges. Learning to live with his mind in his heart, man is gradually transformed and he acquires the ability to receive in every instant the life which springs forth from God himself.¹⁰⁷ He now lives 'unceasingly in God through the Holy Spirit'¹⁰⁸ and then theology becomes the state of his being.¹⁰⁹

Through his incarnation, Christ became for man the only Teacher, since he has made known his unique way through his life and words. This way is described by St Paul in an unparalleled way: 'When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)'¹¹⁰ Christ traced his path descending lower than any other, 'being made a curse for us'.¹¹¹ His descent to the nethermost parts of the earth, to the lower regions, became a source of every spiritual gift. When man follows the kenotic way that the Lord traced, his life becomes truly prophetic. Through repentance and by bringing his mind down into the deep heart, man is initiated into the indescribable way of Christ and then a truly great path is revealed unto him. St Sophrony testifies that whosoever is vouchsafed to enter, be it only in part, into the eternal stream of the prayer of Christ in Gethsemane, and then to arise and go forth, again only in part, to the deathless Golgotha, such a one acquires true knowledge of the mystery of the person of Christ.¹¹² He now bears within him the faith of contemplation, through which he 'hath the witness in himself... that God hath given to us eternal life'.¹¹³ This is the

¹⁰⁵ *Truth and Life*, 30.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *Striving for Knowledge of God*, 96.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. *Οικοδομώντας τὸν ναὸ τοῦ Θεοῦ*, vol. 2, 246.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 245.

¹¹⁰ Eph. 4:8–10.

¹¹¹ Cf. Gal. 3:13. Also, about the way of Christ, cf. Archim. Zacharias, *Christ, Our Way and Our Life*, 52–57 and *The Hidden Man of the Heart*, 229–33.

¹¹² Cf. *We Shall See Him*, 234.

¹¹³ 1 John 5:10–11.

true faith: when the longed for and sought after Truth comes to dwell in the heart for all eternity.¹¹⁴

The divine anointing that each Christian receives at baptism is a secret teacher which should normally initiate him into the mystery of the revelation in Christ: 'But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but the same anointing teacheth you of all things'.¹¹⁵ However, if this anointing is to be at work, the Christian must be in a living relationship with the 'only Teacher' Christ.¹¹⁶ The starting point towards this living relationship is not reason, but faith, which leads to hope and finally becomes true love. Love is the final enlightenment 'of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'.¹¹⁷

In the perception of the ascetic Fathers, theology was always inseparably linked with prayer, whence came the classical definition: 'If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian'.¹¹⁸ For someone to know 'the things pertaining to God', he must receive the Spirit of God, because only he 'searcheth the deep things of God' and reveals to man all 'the things that are freely given to us of God'.¹¹⁹ The Apostle Paul expressed it more concretely by asking the Corinthians: 'Who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him?' and immediately, through the boldness which he had because of his rapture 'to the third heaven', but also because of the persecutions and his bonds for Christ's sake, he completed his answer: 'But we have the mind of Christ'.¹²⁰ Pure prayer, the fruit of true repentance, delivers man to the Spirit which searches the depths of God.¹²¹ For as long as divine illumination increases, according to the word of St Sophrony, the mind of man 'is included in the mind of God':¹²² man receives 'the ethos' of the Lord and acquires the mind of Christ,¹²³ so as to be able to assume but also to impart the fullness of the mystery of his mighty love.

3. Love for one's enemies as the Ultimate Criterion of Theology

A particular feature of St Sophrony's theology is the manner in which he connects the union with God in the Light, wherein man hears 'unspeakable words', and the cataphatic expression of deification, which is concentrated in Christ-like love for one's enemies. For St Sophrony, the loftiest theology is martyrdom and crucifixion

¹¹⁴ Cf. *We Shall See Him*, 158.

¹¹⁵ 1 John 2:27.

¹¹⁶ 'One is your Master, even Christ.' Matt. 23:8.

¹¹⁷ 2 Cor. 4:6.

¹¹⁸ Evagrius of Pontus, 'On Prayer: One Hundred and Fifty-Three Texts' in *The Philokalia*, vol. 1, 61, p. 62.

¹¹⁹ Cf. 1 Cor. 2:9–12.

¹²⁰ 1 Cor. 2:16.

¹²¹ Archim. Zacharias, *Christ, Our Way and Our Life*, 291.

¹²² Cf. *We Shall See Him*, 227.

¹²³ Cf. Phil. 2:5 and Eph. 3:19. See also *On Prayer*, 56.

together with Christ.¹²⁴ From this perspective, love for enemies constitutes an infallible criterion and the summit of theology.¹²⁵

At the time of prayer, abiding in God is usually combined with awareness of the world. When, however, the energy of grace increases and man is united with God wholly, with all the powers of his mind and heart, and then 'the world is quite forgot'.¹²⁶ Yet, at this point a crucial question arises: if in his total union with God during the rapture of a vision man completely forgets the world, how can this experience be 'translated' into words when the vision comes to an end? What is the pledge or assurance that guarantees genuine communion with God and what criterion verifies the authenticity of experiential theology? Finally, what is the 'sign' that seals and validates the word of a true theologian, for whom theology is a state of his spirit?

To abide wholly in God and to abide wholly in the world are two incompatible states, which man cannot live at the same time.¹²⁷ This means that the authenticity of the vision can only be assessed when man returns to consciousness of the world. Whether the vision was genuine or not can be known by the fruits which accompany it. 'God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him'.¹²⁸ According to St Sophrony the infallible criterion which confirms our love for God is love for neighbour and especially love for enemies.¹²⁹ It is impossible for man to be united with God and at the same time hate his brother. If when the vision of the Light recedes there is no love for the enemies, and for all creatures, it is a clear indication that the presumed contemplation was not communion with the true God.¹³⁰ If the spiritual state of the vision is accompanied by hatred, jealousy or a proud indifference to the fate of the world, then there is no doubt that man is in delusion.

Speaking about love for enemies as the unquestionable criterion of the presence of the Holy Spirit, St Sophrony refers to St Silouan's words:

The Lord is meek and humble, and loves His creature. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is humble love for enemies and prayer for the whole world. And if you do not have this love, ask and the Lord Who said, 'Ask, and it shall be given you' [Matt. 7:7], will grant it to you.¹³¹

Only love for God through active communion with him can grant man true knowledge of God. Then God becomes known not in an abstract but in an ontological way, for he makes his abode in man and becomes the content of his life.

¹²⁴ Cf. *We Shall See Him*, 20, *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 86, and *On Prayer*, 62.

¹²⁵ Cf. *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 121.

¹²⁶ Cf. *Saint Silouan*, 114.

¹²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 116.

¹²⁸ 1 John 4:16.

¹²⁹ Cf. *Saint Silouan*, 116–117.

¹³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 116.

¹³¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 162–163.

Moreover, this love increases according to the measure in which man overcomes his passions. Theology as a spiritual state of union with God is acquired on the path of the struggle against the passions and the 'law of sin'.¹³² Divine love comes to dwell in man only when he opens his heart to the uncreated energy of grace and acquires Christian passionlessness, which is the surest way to true theology, that is, to participation in divine and eternal life.¹³³ The uncreated Light makes the spirit radiant with love for God and includes man in the life of the Godhead.¹³⁴

In a strange manner, the energy of the Light goes hand in hand with self-hatred and love for enemies.¹³⁵ Full knowledge of God is acquired by fulfilling the two great commandments of love, the summit of which is the commandment of love for enemies. Through love for enemies, man fulfils love for God in an acceptable way: he is conformed to the Spirit of him who stretched out his arms upon the Cross so as to draw all men to himself. Moreover, Christ-like love for enemies reveals the perfection of love for neighbour, because it embraces all without exception.¹³⁶ Love for enemies 'slays' man's selfishness and provides him with the possibility to discern even with his own reason whether he goes astray or not. The commandment 'love your enemies'¹³⁷ is the fire that Christ brought down to earth through his incarnation. It is the uncreated Light that shone round about the disciples on Mount Tabor and the fiery tongues wherein the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles on the day of Pentecost. Love for enemies is the Kingdom of God 'come with power'¹³⁸ that reveals man's highest measure and the perfection of likeness with God.¹³⁹

This love is a precious criterion that 'makes it possible to detect without fail the presence of a will alien to God's will, "Who will have all men to be saved" (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4), and Who gave us the commandment, "Love your enemies".'¹⁴⁰ This combination of Light, self-hatred and love for enemies led St Sophrony to formulate a unique theory about the perfection of theology on the empirical and ontological level. In St Sophrony's view, the commandment of love for enemies is the ultimate synthesis of all theology. It reveals to the world the perfect love of the Triune God, and for this reason it is 'the corner stone'¹⁴¹ of the whole teaching of the Church.¹⁴² St Sophrony speaks with a lofty spirit about this infallible theological criterion:

¹³² Cf. Rom. 7:23. Cf. *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 49.

¹³³ Cf. *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 86–87.

¹³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 49–50 and 90.

¹³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 50.

¹³⁶ Cf. Archim. Zacharias, *Christ, Our Way and Our Life*, 309.

¹³⁷ Luke 6:35.

¹³⁸ Mark 9:1.

¹³⁹ Cf. *Saint Silouan*, 232.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 232.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Luke 20:17.

¹⁴² Cf. *Saint Silouan*, 232.

The bearer of such love communicates in eternal life, to which his soul can testify. He is the tabernacle of the Holy Spirit, and in the Holy Spirit knows the Father and the Son, knows with authentic and life-giving knowledge. In the Holy Spirit he is the brother and friend of Christ—he is a son of God and a god through grace.¹⁴³

True and living theology is man's crucifixion together with Christ.¹⁴⁴ This state is generated in man by the fire of divine fear and ardent repentance, and it leads him to the ontological reality of divine Being through the illumination of the uncreated Light.¹⁴⁵ The highest measure of theology on earth is martyrdom for Christ and his eternal Gospel. The way of martyrdom renders man like unto God himself in his self-emptying love unto the end. Yet, martyrdom is not only the violent death which someone may endure for confessing Christ. Martyrdom is every hardship that one suffers to fulfil the commandment of Christ in the world, and especially the commandment of love for enemies. When man loves and prays for those that offend and persecute him, helps those that hate him and blesses those that curse him, he endures true and 'indisputable martyrdom'.¹⁴⁶ We find a similar view about love for enemies as a precondition and criterion of true theology in St Diadochus of Photice. According to this great Saint, lack of love for enemies constitutes a serious obstacle for true theology, as it hinders the mind from receiving divine visions.¹⁴⁷

Certainly, a reasonable question arises: 'Who is sufficient for these things?'¹⁴⁸ For St Sophrony, the only man able to love his enemies is the one who, according to the word of Christ, has seen the Kingdom of Heaven coming 'with power'.¹⁴⁹ As the Holy Fathers testify, perfect love is given through the illumination of divine Light, because then man approaches the perfection of the likeness of God.¹⁵⁰ Crucifixion together with Christ, through the painful path of love for the enemies, widens man's

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, 233.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. *We Shall See Him*, 20.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. *On Prayer*, 62–63.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 50 and 86.

¹⁴⁷ 'Even when a worldly person becomes angry with us for no reason, this intense compunction in our conscience fills us with uneasiness and anxiety because, in some way, we have become a stumbling-block to one of those who speak after "the wisdom of this world" (1 Cor. 2:6). As a result, the intellect also neglects contemplation; for spiritual knowledge, consisting wholly of love, does not allow the mind to expand and embrace the vision of the divine, unless we first win back to love even one who has become angry within us for no reason.' St Diadochus of Photice, 'On Spiritual Knowledge' in *The Philokalia*, vol. 1, 92, p. 290 (SC 5:153–54).

¹⁴⁸ Cf. 2 Cor. 2:16.

¹⁴⁹ See *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 86.

¹⁵⁰ 'For through its power of perception the intellect regains all the virtues, other than spiritual love, as it advances according to a measure and rhythm which cannot be expressed; but no one can acquire spiritual love unless he experiences fully and clearly the illumination of the Holy Spirit. If the intellect does not receive the perfection of the divine likeness through such illumination, although it may have almost every other virtue, it will still have no sharing in perfect love. Only when it has been made like God—in so far, of course, as this is possible—does it bear the likeness of divine love as well.' St Diadochus of Photice, 'On Spiritual Knowledge' in *The Philokalia*, vol. 1, 89, p. 288 (SC 5:149–50).

cognitive abilities and renders him able to assume all the fulness of revelation in Christ:

Only devoted following of Christ 'unto the end' can reveal the higher potentials of our nature and make us capable of apprehending the Gospel in its eternal dimension.¹⁵¹

In the life of our sacred father Sophrony the Athonite the '*rule of prayer*', that in him was characterised by deadly thirst for God and inconsolable repentance, became a '*rule of faith*', through which the lessons of grace were assimilated to such a degree that they took the form of 'dogmatic consciousness'.¹⁵² Nevertheless, even more noteworthy is the way in which St Sophrony connects the *dogma*, as the fruit of the vision of the Light and of the chastening of Godforsakenness, with the *ethos* of love after the example of Christ's love to the end.¹⁵³ Thus, the faith of the vision becomes the '*rule of life*': it becomes faith which 'worketh by love',¹⁵⁴ and in its perfection, this love includes even the enemies.

Some years ago, in a conference dedicated to St Gregory Palamas, a crucial reference was made to the need for true theology in our secularised times:

The great illness of theology nowadays lies in the fact that it was made autonomous, that it is considered independently from its living source, which is spiritual experience... precisely because our times are secularised and material, we are in need of theology. However, an intellectual theology dominated by rational thinking fails to give answers and solutions to the existential queries and problems of the contemporary world. Theology must be lived and experienced, it must minister unto the Church in its work of salvation and deification of man. It is such theology that we need in our times, a theology which will be able to stand by man's side as a helper and comforter, an assistant and guide.¹⁵⁵

St Sophrony always referred with great inspiration to the spiritual event of authentic theology, that is, of existential knowledge of God. He believed that academic theology can give profitable and good results when 'combined with living faith'.¹⁵⁶ On the other hand, when logical systematisation reaches extremes, scholas-

¹⁵¹ *On Prayer*, 66.

¹⁵² Cf. *Saint Silouan*, 188.

¹⁵³ Cf. John 13:1.

¹⁵⁴ Gal. 5:6.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Georgios Galites, 'Theology and Experience: St Gregory Palamas' Message in Our Times' in *Πρακτικά Διορθόδοξου Ἐπιστημονικοῦ Συνεδρίου: Ὁ Ἅγιος Γρηγόριος ὁ Παλαμᾶς στήν ἱστορία καί στό παρόν (Minutes of the Inter-Orthodox Scientific Conference: Saint Gregory Palamas in History and in the Present)*, (Ἱερὰ Μεγίστη Μονή Βατοπαιδίου: Ἄγιον Ὄρος, 2000), 487–8.

¹⁵⁶ *On Prayer*, 63.

ticism 'slays' the spirit and 'radically distorts all the positive things given by God through fiery tongues and the ineffable manifestation of the Light'.¹⁵⁷

True theology follows the path of Prophet Moses who, after entering the presence of God on Mount Sinai, received the commandment from God: 'According to all that I shew thee, ... even so shall ye make it... And thou shalt rear up the tabernacle according to the fashion thereof which was shewed thee in the mount'.¹⁵⁸ The immaterial tabernacle that Moses saw was Christ, 'the power of God and the hypostatic wisdom of God'. Just as Moses, after the vision, raised a material tabernacle and thus, 'through a material imitation, showed to those below the immaterial tabernacle',¹⁵⁹ so also the true theologians strive to impart through created words the mystery of Christ, which was revealed to them by the uncreated energy of divine Light. This supra-cosmic Light imparts to man the revelation of heavenly mysteries and introduces him 'into the grace of theology not as some scholastic science but as a state of communion with God'.¹⁶⁰

Those who were vouchsafed to receive the personal revelation of God leave their mark on a multitude of Christians. Thanks to them

'the living tradition of the spirit of life' is preserved throughout the ages of history.¹⁶¹ Through their abiding in the Light of love they know the indescribable way of Christ. They follow 'the Lamb of God' in the self-emptying of His Cross and attract grace which makes them like unto Him and reveals unto them 'in part'¹⁶² the glory of His Resurrection. Theology, then, is a gift of the Holy Spirit that quickens the heart of man. Whoever acquires this gift becomes a 'luminary in the world' and possesses the 'word of life'.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁷ Cf. *Τὸ μυστήριον τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς*, 345.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Exod. 25:9 and 26:30.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. St Gregory Palamas, 'Υπὲρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζοντων', 2, 3, 55, in *Συγγράμματα*, vol. 1, p. 588.

¹⁶⁰ *On Prayer*, 171.

¹⁶¹ Cf. *We Shall See Him*, 131.

¹⁶² See 1 Cor. 13:9 and 12.

¹⁶³ See Phil. 2:15–16.