

ST SOPHRONY'S 'TESTAMENT': THE TRINITY AS A MODEL FOR MONASTIC COMMUNITY

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The article examines various implications of the 'Testament' that St Sophrony bequeathed to his monastery, where he puts forth his idea of the Holy Trinity as a model of monastic community. Man is created in the image and likeness of God the Trinity, not as an isolated individual, but as a communal being. The principles of life within the Holy Trinity are set out as the main principles of cenobitic monastic life, when 'the Trinity becomes our ascetic project'. Monastic vows, such as obedience and poverty, are explained through the prism of the teaching on the Holy Trinity.

Towards the end of our life, we dwell on what is most important, while all other 'details' remain behind. Christ, in his earthly sojourn, expressed his final wish in Gethsemane, as the completion of his 'work' (Jn 17:3): 'Let them all be one as we are one' (Jn 17:21–22). The same message is contained within St Sophrony's final Testament: 'That all should be one as God the Trinity is one'.

It is striking that a monk in his final 'Testament'¹ should apparently bypass such monastic virtues as humility, obedience, poverty, prayer, etc., and focus exclusively on the dogmatic foundation of monastic cenobitic life. St Sophrony's Testament shows to what extent all our ascetic tradition, with all the virtues we aspire to obtain, is based on our vision of God, the Divine prototype in the image of Whom we are created (Gen. 1:26). Without this undistorted vision of our Divine model, it is impossible to have a perfect and holy life, as St Sophrony reiterates on many pages of his writings. Dogmas of the Church for him are the supreme articulation of the Divine Revelation, the voice of God which translates Divine truths into human language, the heavenly reality into our human life. Therefore, St Sophrony writes: 'I consider any act imperfect that does not proceed from a *dogmatic mind*'.²

¹ See: Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, 'Testament', in *Dukhovnye Besedy* [: Spiritual discourses (in Russian)], Volume 1 (Moscow: Palomnik, 2003), 326–327.

² Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, *Perepiska s Protoiereem Georgiem Florovskim* [: Correspondence with Protopresbyter Georges Florovsky (in Russian)], (Sergiev Posad: St Trinity Lavra, 2008), 55–56.

St Sophrony writes to David Balfour: '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.'³ This vision allows St Sophrony to look beyond the monastic vows and virtues to go deeper to the very basis of monastic life. And the deeper we go, the closer we get to the very heart of human existence. In his Testament St Sophrony writes: 'Man is conceived as one, as a single entity, but in a large number of hypostases.'⁴ Man is the Image of God, and all the monastic virtues depend directly on this revelation.

The Fathers considered the idea of the Image of God primarily in Christological terms. However, St Sophrony opens up an important dimension in his perception of the Divine Image, by emphasising the triadological dimension: 'Reasonable man has to become perfect after the image of the Triune Divinity. This is the meaning, the purpose and the task of Christ's Church. "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us . . . [John 17:21]"'⁵ Therefore, all his vision was focused on the divine perfection of the Trinity model, which for him was to be applied in every aspect of our human life.

If we look at the Scriptures, the Mystery of the Holy Trinity remains a mystery, but we are given some glimpses of Divine life. The Father loves the Son so much that he gives to him all things: his glory, his life, his authority. The Son empties himself in relation to the Father, and returns this fulness in his ultimate self-emptying to the point of death on the Cross. The Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father, comes to serve Christ. From all these references we understand that these Three Persons live in absolute love.

To love is to live for and in the beloved whose life becomes our life. Love leads to singleness of being. Thus, it is within the Trinity. 'The Father loveth the Son' (John 3.35). He lives in the Son and in the Holy Spirit. The Son 'abides in the love of the Father' (John 15.10) and in the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit we know as love all-perfect... This love makes the sum total of Divine Being a single eternal Act. After the pattern of this unity mankind must also become one man. ('I and my Father are one' (John 10.30). 'That they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us' (John 17.21)).⁶

³ Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, *Striving for Knowledge of God: Correspondence With David Balfour* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist), 270–271.

⁴ Sophrony, 'Testament', 327.

⁵ Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, *We Shall See Him as He Is* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of John the Baptist, 1987), 108.

⁶ Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, *His Life is Mine* (Oxford: Mowbrays, 1977), 29.

We learn that what constitutes the very foundation of Divine life and Divine beatitude is the relationship between the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Relationship is something that we have inherited from God; this means we are able to love like God, to live like God and to treat other persons as God does.

St Sophrony liked to stress that our God is not the God of Islam, nor such a God as was understood by Judaism.

The Hypostasis in the Divine Being we do not think of as static, self-contained principle. This might be possible in the perspective of the henotheism of Islam, and even within the bounds of the Old Testament, but can in no way apply to the Trinity, as revealed to us, the Triune totally dynamic Being. We have learned to see these dynamics in the love that is the most profound moment in the *fact* of eternal Self-determination of the Persons of the Holy Trinity.⁷

We do not worship a God who lives enclosed in his own existence and self-contained. Our God is the Trinity: he is One yet he is a relational Being. The very life of God is a relationship—a relationship of love. Relationship is thus the foundation of all life. That is why for us as Christians, ‘relationship’ is the cornerstone of our spirituality. *Amo ergo sum*; I love, therefore I am. The *alterum*, the other whom I love (that is any other person) becomes the content of *ego*: ‘*Thou* art my life’. Thus, the Image of God is related to our life in a most real and concrete way; there is no closer ‘daily reality’ to us than OUR INTER-HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS, and above all in a monastic community, which is designed to implement the Divine Model in its fulness.

When we come to the ascetic teaching that we received from St Silouan and St Sophrony, we find similar words, similar love: ‘Our brother is our life’,⁸ St Silouan says. Just as for each Person of the Trinity the other two constitute the very content of His life, so it is for St Silouan—the other person is the content of his life. The presence of Divine grace is above all manifested in one’s relationship towards others. ‘Grace proceeds from brotherly love, and by brotherly love is grace preserved; but if we do not love our brother, then the grace of God will not come into our souls’, St Silouan says.⁹ Long before St Sophrony, many ascetic writers of the patristic age—St John Climacus, St Maximus, and St Diadochos, to name but a few—regarded love as the supreme virtue, the goal of all monastic endeavours. But we do not find in any of the Fathers such an articulate dogmatic Trinitarian expression of love as we find in St Sophrony.

⁷ Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He is*, 205.

⁸ Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, *Saint Silouan the Athonite* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of John the Baptist, 1999), 47, 371.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 372.

St Sophrony says that the monk is called to realise within himself the Divine Trinitarian prototype of ‘love in unity’ and ‘unity in love’—that is how St Sophrony understands the commandment of Christ, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’.¹⁰ He once said in his talks: ‘If in our monastic life we don’t learn to love, then I don’t know what justification I can find for monasticism’.¹¹

The monastery is a place where you learn to lay down your life for your neighbour. ‘I understand monasticism as a special form of love’, as St Sophrony writes to David Balfour¹². In countless various ways we lay down our life: there are endless various opportunities to learn how to give space to another person.

St Sophrony never stopped emphasising the significance of Christ’s high-priestly prayer, which manifests the unity of God the Trinity, and the oneness of mankind as a replica of this unity. St Sophrony said that this prayer is not given to us as a commandment, but because it comes at the climax of Christ’s ministry, after the Last Supper and before his passion and death, it can be seen as the final Testament of God to human race. We are called to be one just as God is one.¹³ For St Sophrony this prayer of Christ manifests the fulfilling of his humanity, but it is also a manifestation of the fulness of his divinity.

God himself is manifested in love for our neighbour, for mankind. St Sophrony connects God’s presence in us with the love for our fellow humans in the final words of his Testament:

If, like Christ, I love all men ‘unto the end’ (Jn 13:1), the being of all men, through the power of love, becomes my being... through the transfiguration, by God’s grace, of my own humanity. This then, will be the particular form of our dwelling in God and of God in us. And this is living eternity—personal, hypostatic eternity.¹⁴

St Sophrony used to say that our community is a small model of the whole of mankind. That is why for St Sophrony it was so important to see unity in any community—and above all in a monastic community, which should reveal the image of God as nowhere else. The monastery, as no other earthly institution, reflects and implements the life of the Trinity on a human plane: ‘Monastic community is an ideal form of life on earth’, as St Sophrony once said in a talk.¹⁵

If we learn to live together in love and unity with just one person in this community, it means we learn how to live together with millions of similar persons.

¹⁰ Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, *La félicité de connaître la voie* (Geneva: Labor Fides, 1988), 21; cf. *His Life Is Mine*, 30.

¹¹ Sophrony, *Dukhovnye Besedy*, 192, 223.

¹² Sophrony, *Striving for Knowledge of God*, 249–250.

¹³ John 17, 21.

¹⁴ Sophrony, ‘Testament’, 327.

¹⁵ Sophrony, *Dukhovnye Besedy*, 162.

The final aim of monastic life is prayer for the whole world, which is a perfect realisation in man of the Divine Image and likeness. The human *hypostasis* is called, as St Sophrony puts it, 'to achieve the fulness of god-manhood', 'to become dynamically equal to humanity in the aggregate', just as the divine hypostasis is to the Whole Trinity.¹⁶

We find a connection between the Trinity and the monastic community already in St Sergius of Radonezh, founder of a monastery dedicated to the Holy Trinity. St Sergius mentions that he wants his brethren to be one as the Holy Trinity is one. St Sophrony develops this idea theologically to a greater degree than any predecessors. In his Testament he writes: ...the monastic community sets out to achieve unity... in the image of the oneness of the Holy Trinity... each one of us in some sense within his own hypostasis, is the centre of all... There is no one greater, no one lesser.¹⁷

In all the monastic virtues, St Sophrony sees the manifestation of this image. Thus, monastic humility reflects the humility of God. My ego, my 'I' is last in the community. Others, other persons, are my life, not me, not I: 'When Divine humility touches us, then we rejoice not because of our power to oppress our brother, but because the love for our brother becomes the very content of our life.'¹⁸

The monastic practice of poverty, or non-acquisition, is often seen as a life of self-deprivation. Yet for St Sophrony it has a different meaning. The vow of poverty does not imply that one shuns possessions as something intrinsically evil. Poverty is rather understood as an eternal act of *sharing with others*—a Trinitarian act. The model of Trinitarian love becomes an inner imperative to share one's 'substance' with his 'con-substantial' fellow human.¹⁹ Thus, poverty is not so much a state, but rather a dynamic manifestation of real ontological communion in being. Such understanding of poverty is rooted in the ethics of wealth that are set out in the writings of St Luke. In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19–31), the rich man is denied a human name, and thereby the status of human person, not because of his wealth but because of his lack of love, and his refusal to share with the poverty-stricken Lazarus. Abraham reminds the rich man of his lack of compassion towards Lazarus during his lifetime, when he failed to realise the image of God and remained self-enclosed in his egoism: it is the latter that constitutes an unbridgeable *chasma* between the fellowship of *persons* and the separation of individuals, incapable of communion with others.

Zaccheus (Lk. 19:2–10), on the contrary, finds his human integrity—which is indeed his 'salvation' (Lk. 19:9)—through the loving act of 'sharing fellowship', and not in a mere disposal of possessions (Lk. 19:8). Therefore, monastic poverty is

¹⁶ Sophrony, *His Life is Mine*, 29.

¹⁷ Sophrony, 'Testament', 327.

¹⁸ Sophrony, *Dukhovnye Besedy*, 192.

¹⁹ Ibid.

rooted in the principle of fellowship set out in the Acts (2:44–45). As St Sophrony concludes: ‘all that the monk has and his whole self, he surrenders to each and all’.²⁰

The same is true of obedience. It is not an army discipline that is based on a set of legalistic rules—it is a *personal* act of love and expression of *personal* love. Love implies an appropriation of the beloved person’s will, the fulfilment of which becomes an existential drive for the person who loves—so much so that the beloved person becomes the rule of our existence, our ‘typicon’. ‘If you love me, keep my commandments... He that has my commandments and keeps them, he it is that loves me, and he that loves me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him (Jn 14:15–21)’. This lies behind the Johannine concept of the *hypodeigma* (example) of Christ (Jn 13:15), who sets his own personality, manifested in actions, as an example and instructs believers to follow Him. Love is the motivation behind obedience to one’s *hegoumen*, one’s spiritual father, and—as promised in the service of Monastic Profession, to all the brethren.

St Sophrony never ceased to emphasise that anything that is imposed upon someone, or compromises his freedom of will, has no lasting spiritual value.²¹ Spiritual progress in the ascetic virtue of love cannot be ensured by a set of rules, discipline or external authority (if *authority* is understood as power over others). The Synoptic Gospels reject such a vision of authority as intrinsically *pagan* in Mt. 20:25–26. This Gospel passage highlights an inherent antithesis between love, as fulfilling the will of others, and authority, as imposition of one’s own will on others. The essence of Christian personhood consists in focusing on concern for others, so that the others become the content of one’s life. By contrast, ‘Luciferism’ implies that one implements one’s own ego as the content of life for others. St Sophrony writes:

The first sign of emancipation [from passions] is a disinclination to impose one’s will on others. The second—an inner release from the hold of others on oneself. Mastery over the wish to dominate is an extremely important stage which is closely followed by dislike of constraining our brother.²²

According to St Sophrony, Eastern monastic spirituality dwells on the Johannine understanding of the concept of *exousia*, which transforms its meaning into *capability*, *capacity*: ‘*exousia* (authority) to become the children of God’ (Jn 1:12). There is a distinctive understanding of *exousia* within the monastic community and within the Orthodox Church as a whole. It acknowledges

²⁰ Sophrony, ‘Testament’, 327.

²¹ Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, *Rozhdenie v Tsarstvo Nepokolebimoe* [: Birth into the Kingdom That Cannot Be Moved (in Russian)] (Moscow: Palomnik: 2001), 105.

²² Sophrony, *His Life is Mine*, 73.

the fact of inequality, hierarchy, division into upper and lower, into overlord and servant; but Christ turns the pyramid upside down... The incontestable apex of this pyramid is the Son of man, and He says of Himself that He came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mt. 20:28) ... and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant (Mt. 20:27). Here we are shown both the designation and the *raison d'être* of the ecclesiastical hierarchy—to raise those low in the spiritual scale to a higher degree of perfection... Christ took upon Himself the burden, the sin of the whole world. He is the summit of the inverted pyramid, the summit on which the whole weight of the pyramid of being falls. In an inexplicable way those who follow after Christ become like Him taking upon themselves the burdens of the infirmities of others.²³

Thus, *exousia* in the context of ecclesiastical and monastic authority is understood as being the image of the supreme authority of Christ (*see* Mt. 28:18), as the capacity for carrying the weight and the burden of all the brethren. St Sophrony writes: The Christian goes downwards, into the depths of the overturned pyramid where the crushing weight is concentrated—to the place where the Lord is, who took upon Himself the sins of the whole world.²⁴

An Orthodox ascetic is expected to imitate the consistent pattern of behaviour shown in Christ as he is presented by all four evangelists, which avoids any striving towards secular authority. This is affirmed from the outset of the Gospel narrative in the *pericope* of Christ's temptation (Lk. 4:7).

Thus, the monastic practice of obedience receives new theological ground. In fact, obedience, as no other *praxis*, shows the love in God the Holy Trinity manifested in human life. St Sophrony writes:

The principle of personalistic obedience is indissolubly linked with our theological concept of Persona-Hypostasis, which derives from the Orthodox understanding of the Divine revelation concerning our Creator and Prototype—the Holy Trinity, where each Hypostasis is the bearer of the whole absolute fulness of the Divine Being. The loss of, or deviation from, this theology would lead to the conscious or unconscious striving towards the 'supra-personal', with the result that the 'general' will prevail over the 'personal'. Obedience in this case will be required not in relation to the human person, but as a subjection to the 'law', 'rule', 'function', 'institution' etc.²⁵

²³ Sophrony, *Saint Silouan*, 237–8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 238–9.

²⁵ Sophrony, *Rozhdenie*, 175.

We have referred to the distinction St Sophrony makes between discipline and evangelical obedience. In his talks St Sophrony once said: ‘If a monastery introduces “discipline”, it becomes useless’²⁶. In our monasticism obedience is not to a rule but to a person.²⁷ I give my comfort, my very will, so as to fulfil the will of the other and give him ease. So crucial for St Sophrony was this personal dimension in obedience that he even believed that discipline, as an impersonal element, may arrest the development of the hypostatic potential in man. When discipline prevails over evangelical obedience, ‘there is a possibility, as he says, of the ultimate loss of the very aim of Christianity and the sense of life.’²⁸ Such a view of obedience envisages the idea of the monastic community not as an institution, but as an organism of the Body of Christ, where each person has a potential for his or her own creative development. Having spoken of the goal of selfless love, St Sophrony goes on to say:

If the members of the monastic community truly bear this aim in their mind, they have a favourable effect on one another in their common ascetic striving to attain unity in God. This gives birth to joint effort, to close collaboration, to a common aspiration towards pious creativity, towards a sure ascent into the spiritual sphere of the kingdom of the Holy Trinity.²⁹

St Sophrony concludes:

Deviation from the right perception of the principle of Person in the being of God will diminish the power of our striving towards perfect personalistic obedience, and this is a loss which cannot be redeemed by any external success of an institution or the perfection of the infrastructure of any impersonal ‘whole’.³⁰

For a Christian ascetic the clear theological paradigm of interpersonal communication ensures that obedience is exercised not out of necessity or as subjection to a stronger power or authority, but out of personal love that *naturally* moves the ascetic to do the will of the beloved. This theology once again derives from the Trinitarian perception of authority and obedience: the beloved person becomes your rule, commandment, and living principle. This mode of being is illustrated by the patristic Trinitarian concept of *perichoresis* (inter-coinherence)—the everlasting and dynamic exchange of giving space to each other, a dynamic movement of love, of desire to do the other person’s will. The patristic idea of the *monarchia* of the Father understands

²⁶ Sophrony, *Dukhovnye Besedy*, 58.

²⁷ Fr.Sophrony’s expression, quoted in Sr.M.Shepherd, *The Orthodox Tradition of Spiritual Guidance* (1996) (unpublished talk), 9.

²⁸ Sophrony, *Rozhdenie*, 175.

²⁹ Sophrony, *Dukhovnye Besedy*, 327.

³⁰ Sophrony, *Rozhdenie*, 175.

him as the Prime Mover, who (eternally) originates this movement of love within the Trinity: in the pre-eternal Act of the generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit, the Father conveys his fulness (τά πάντα, cf. Mt. 11:27) to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Monastic humility imitates divine *perichoresis*: 'Love transfers the existence of the person who loves into the beloved, thus the person assimilates the life of the beloved',³¹ and therefore: 'The existence of the beloved people whom I love becomes the content of my life... If I, like Christ, love all to the end (Jn. 13:1), then the being of all becomes my own being through the power of love'.³²

Within such a Trinitarian perspective monastic obedience excludes anything that is non-personal or supra-personal. Love, as a personal category, cannot be exercised within the realm of the impersonal: one cannot love the rule, one can only love a person. Within Orthodox spirituality, obedience is exclusively inter-personal: monks obey (i.e., listen to and hear) a person, not a rule. Although someone in authority may have a particular function, notably the abbot, he is obeyed as a person and not an impersonal 'holder of that function', let alone a 'preserver of the rule'. That is why Orthodox monasticism shuns any institutional 'orders' as they are found in other ascetic traditions. Monastic obedience becomes an introduction *par excellence* into the Trinitarian mode of being. It ensures progress towards communal being, teaching how to love, and to live with and for, another person; how to assimilate through love another person's will, mentality, aspirations, experiences,³³ becoming thereby 'the express image of their hypostasis' (cf. Heb. 1:3). It facilitates the growth of the human person so as to extend its embrace to a universal scope. An obedient monk's heart is enlarged to include the one he freely obeys, setting him directly on the path to the goal mentioned above: to bear the whole of mankind in his heart as his own life.

This freedom is what makes monastic obedience different in essence from discipline:

Monastic obedience is a religious act, and, as such, it should be free, otherwise it would lose its religious significance. Obedience is fruitful only when it has the character of the free denial of one's own will and reasoning... for the sake of learning the will of God... If in the monastery the abbot or other spiritual guides are obliged to use 'discipline', it is a sure sign of the decline of monasticism, and perhaps even of the entire understanding of its goal and essence.³⁴

³¹ Sophrony, *Felicité*, 21.

³² Sophrony, *Rozhdenie*, 191.

³³ Sophrony, *Dukhovnye Besedy*, 327.

³⁴ Sophrony, *Rozhdenie*, 142.

In another passage St Sophrony writes: ‘Progressing in obedience—to God and to neighbour, we progress in love: we broaden our being,’³⁵ until we learn to live the life of the whole Adam, the whole of mankind as our own.

All our ‘We’ must become ‘One’. Indeed, this is what takes place in the Liturgy, when we, partaking of the one Cup and one Body, become all One. For St Sophrony, the Liturgy did not start or end at the same time as the Church service itself. All monastic life in community is a continuation of the Eucharistic Liturgy. All forms of service in the monastery are liturgical acts, even the most ‘banal’. Unity, expressed *par excellence* in the Liturgy, becomes the very basis of our daily ascetic life. That is why St Sophrony said in his talks as a legacy to his monks: ‘Keep the Liturgy’. This means not only: ‘Preserve the reverent celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy’. It means also: keep unity throughout your daily life, so that your Liturgy may be truly unifying—so that you may become as one. Above all unity is expressed, maintained, and deepened in prayer: ‘Everyone, bearing in his prayers all the members of the community, strives to achieve what the commandment sets before us: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”—that is, as one’s own life.’³⁶

The monastery is, in his words, ‘a school of salvation and of eternal life’.³⁷

³⁵ Ibid., 138.

³⁶ Sophrony, *Dukhovnye Besedy*, 327.

³⁷ Ibid., 62.