

# ECSTASY AS DESCENT: THE PALAMITE AND MAXIMIAN BEDROCK OF THE THEOLOGY OF ST SOPHRONY<sup>1</sup>

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According to St Sophrony, the greater the intellectual riches, the more inexplicably painful is the abandonment by God, the Godforsakenness, which, however, opens the soul up to others, that is it inspires man to initiate a dialogical progress towards achieving consubstantiality, by gathering all creation into his hypostasis. This *descent* seems to be the only possible authentic *ecstasis* in Christ. But we are forever within the blessed context of Hesychasm. As did St Gregory Palamas, and before him St Maximus the Confessor, so St Sophrony ascends to God without any internal dichotomy, without any psychosomatic division, without any separation from the others, but *perichorising* consubstantially all created nature, without the rejection of any passion—since it is possible for everything to be transformed. As St Gregory and St Maximus were, so St Sophrony was, and still is, a presence of Christ in the world.

## I

Although the theological discussion of the theology of St Sophrony has just begun, it promises to be exceptionally important for the identity of Orthodox theology in the immediate future. This is because, as I hope will become clear below, St Sophrony was not simply an ‘ascetic author’, as a group of authors has come to be known, who concentrate their attention on what is wrongly labeled ‘spirituality’ and would perhaps be better called ‘the neptic (νηπτική) tradition’. Indeed, many of the ‘neptic authors’, as they are commonly known, show little or no interest in the incorporation of theology as a whole into their work. Of course, this in no way diminishes their work, since it is true that Orthodox theology is equally interested in genuinely empirical, neptic, and ascetic *theological epistemology*, without which any form of *Eucharistic* or *Ecclesial ontology* is in danger of becoming a kind of stale, incomprehensible, transcendental

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was published in Greek, as part of my book *Οι Τρόμοι του Προσώπου και τα Βάσανα του Έρωτα: Κριτικοί στοχασμοί για μια μετανεωτερική θεολογική οντολογία* [The Terrors of the Person, and the Ordeals of Love: Critical Thoughts for a Post-modern Theological Ontology], (Athens: Armos, 2009).

pursuit of a vague ecstatic communion. Very few of the Fathers, among whom are Gregory of Nyssa, Basil the Great, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas, attempt any deep amalgamation of the neptic/ascetic tradition and its anthropological and theological predicates and consequences. In my view, St Sophrony Sakharov belongs to precisely this latter category of Fathers (and, indeed, we are dealing with a new Father of the Church) and this is something I would like, as an exordium as it were, to demonstrate in the present article. Indeed, the aim of this paper is to serve as a preface to demonstrate that St Sophrony's theology belongs particularly to the tradition of Orthodox Hesychasm—as the latter was expressed through the creative syneresis of the Fathers who went before him, by Gregory Palamas—and also that this theology belongs to the tradition of the great theological compositions, given that the whole range of Patristic theology (and in particular that of theological anthropology) is presented here once again in a most profound manner.

## II

Something of this nature obliges us, in the first place, to trace the meaning of *ecstasy*, of ascetic ascent, towards God, that is, within the bounds of Greek Patristic tradition. With this in mind, I think we must investigate two kinds of this ecstasy towards God, always within the limits of the tradition just mentioned. The first is *Platonizing ecstasy* and the second is *Hesychast ecstasy*, the culmination of which is expressed in the works of Palamas, though it is also the subject of a considerable part of the older Patristic tradition. Let us view these two forms of ecstasy separately.

*Platonizing ecstasy* is briefly, for the East, that which found its highest expression in the works of Origen. It is related to the corresponding theory of the philosophical knowledge of the One of the Neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus (who, in all probability was a fellow student of Origen's at the philosophical school of the former Christian and later Neo-Platonist Ammonius Saccas). I would remind readers that Plotinus considered the human soul, which is the very human essence, to be, by nature, related to the divine. At first traversing the heavenly realms, it then fell, by error, to this earth and was punished by being bound to a material bod that is entirely foreign to our real, 'divine' essence.<sup>2</sup> The duty of a philosopher is to recover the divine through ecstatic contemplation (which departs from matter and creation since these are essentially to be identified with non-being or evil) and is 'he who has being through contemplation', according to the philosopher. In Plotinus, then, the soul is divided into the superior soul, the essence of which is the *nous*, and the

<sup>2</sup> For the thoughts which follow and the relevant bibliography, see Fr. Nikolaos Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities: The Creation of the Christian Self. Beyond Spirituality and Mysticism in the Patristic Era* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 127–148, 207–217, 337–356; idem., 'Ὁρθοδοξία καὶ Ἐκσυγχρονισμός: Βυζαντινὴ ἐξατομίκευση, κράτος καὶ ιστορία, στὴν προοπτικὴ τοῦ Ευρωπαϊκοῦ μέλλοντος, (Αθήνα: Αρμός, 2006), 156–162.

inferior soul, associated with the affective portion of the soul and linked to the needs of the body. The philosopher is required to abandon both the body and the inferior soul and to intermingle with the One, through the *nous*, to the extent that it is entirely absorbed by it in such a way as to become one with it 'together'.

The Christian Origen similarly considers that the human soul is related to God and is divided into the *superior*, and the *inferior*. The interior has as its essence the *nous* and which existed before the particular person. It roamed the heavens in no material form until the dread moment of *κόπος*, when, precisely because of superfluity, its fall into materiality would occur: into the *inferior* soul, consisting of the emotive and the appetitive parts. It is to be supposed that this inferior portion of the soul was added after the fall (which is, in fact, the creation of humankind, since, in Origen creation and fall are identical) and is due to the lapsarian inclination of the soul to be attached to a body. Here, too, spirituality is the contemplation of God through the ecstatic departure from corporeality through the God-related human *nous*. Origen is a *tripartite-divisionist*. He accepts that in the human person, apart from soul and body, there is also the spirit. Here the human spirit is a kind of created participation in the Spirit of God, and its place in a person's body, irrespective of whether that person is baptized or not, is another legacy from Plato. The body, of course, is merely a punishment for the soul, though the Christian Origen cannot but take the view that there will be some kind of survival for it in the eternity (which he carefully distinguishes from the Kingdom of God) in the 'aethereal' form of the body of the angels. This 'aethereal' body is an artifice which frees us from both materiality as well as from the possibility of the total disappearance of material creation in the last times, because of the complete dominion of the spiritual. However, finally, in the eternal life, all sorts of corporeality will be overcome, in the Kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup>

### III

This one-dimensional Platonizing spirituality which leaves the body and material creation outside any full and real communion with God, as it does the emotive part of the soul, is the absolute opposite of Hesychasm. Of course, its rectification did not wait for the theology of St Gregory Palamas, but was begun immediately and, in fact, with the Cappadocian Fathers. Of these, even St Gregory of Nyssa, who is considered to be the closest to Plato, condemns the theory that the human *nous* is, by nature, related to God. Like the soul, the *nous* is created, made, whereas he is uncreated. The gap between the two is boundless and is bridged only by God's grace. Participation in God occurs not only through the *nous*, but also through the whole person, says Gregory, although he sometimes seems to waver regarding the eternal

<sup>3</sup> See my *Analogical Identities*, 25–28.

future of the affective portion of the soul.<sup>4</sup> It was St Dionysius the Areopagite,<sup>5</sup> of course, who spoke definitively about the *union* between us and God as an ‘analogy of synergy’ (whereas Nyssa called it ‘synenergy’), and this tendency reached its culmination, without doubt, in St Maximus the Confessor. The Confessor explicitly rules out the notion that the human essence is only the soul or only the body or even the sum total of the two. He declares enigmatically that the human person is ‘the whole of itself’. This means that people are not merely a psychosomatic whole, but are also the locus of the Whole, that is, they have the potential, through grace, to become a separate, special, and unique hypostasis of the whole of that which is created and uncreated.<sup>6</sup> Let us not forget that the theology of Saint Maximus on the uncreated *logoi*, in the end tells us precisely this: that God ‘speaks’ (i.e., proposes to beings their mode of existence) in expectation of their own created *logos*; that is their answer. Through this dialogue between God and us humans (synergetic or syn-energetic), of which the Incarnation of the Word is the final context, this answer will lead beings to the fullness of the *κατά φύσιν* (*according to nature*) *mode of existence*, in the end times, in the Kingdom of God.

One of the greatest fruits of this tradition is undoubtedly the work of St Symeon the New Theologian. There is no room in this article for a more extensive discussion,<sup>7</sup> though readers of this supreme ascetic/theological work know that in it the union between God and humankind in Christ is described as an event in which literally every member of the human body and every part of the soul, without exception, takes part. The whole person becomes God by grace, with no confusion of the created and uncreated, but also without any distancing between them.

The inheritor and leading representative of this spiritually fertile tradition, which is what we call Hesychasm, is unquestionably St Gregory Palamas. We Orthodox theologians have, unfortunately, barely realized that what Palamite theology was mainly concerned with combatting was the Neo-Platonizing anthropology and epistemology described above. This wholly sacred and, at the same time, profoundly anti-idealistic and, we would say, literally ‘materialistic’ nature of Hesychasm is precisely that which makes it so deeply relevant today and so capable of answering the most challenging questions that have arisen both in philosophy and human sciences, including neuro-science.<sup>8</sup> The main characteristics on this theme in the Palamite *oeuvre* are the following: first, complete acceptance of the passive part of

<sup>4</sup> See Fr Nikolaos Loudovikos, *Ὁρθοδοξία καὶ Ἐκσυγχρονισμός*, 195–197.

<sup>5</sup> See Fr Nikolaos Loudovikos, *A Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor's Eschatological ontology of being as Dialogical Reciprocity*, (Boston: Holy Cross Seminary Press, 2010), 217–220.

<sup>6</sup> See Fr Nikolaos Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities*, 161ff; idem., *Ὁρθοδοξία καὶ Ἐκσυγχρονισμός*, 73–86, 167–169.

<sup>7</sup> For a long discussion of the anthropological and theological presuppositions and consequences of the work of St Symeon, see Fr Nikolaos Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities*, 89–126.

<sup>8</sup> See one such preliminary discussion in Fr. Nikolaos Loudovikos ‘Ἐσχατολογικὴ κοσμολογία καὶ ἀνθρωπολογία: Ὁ ἀποφατισμός στὴ φιλοσοφία, τὴν ἐπιστήμη καὶ τὴ θεολογία σήμερ’, in *Ἁγία Σιών*, vol. 1, (Μυτιλήνη, 2006), 15–22.

the soul, that is, of the feelings and of desire, within the perspective of communion with God. The saints are not merely ‘gazers’ upon, but are also ‘participants’ in God, says Palamas,<sup>9</sup> alluding here to the Macarian union of *nous* and heart: we do not merely think about God but we also love him and desire him, and so participate in him. Secondly, complete acceptance of the body. According to the *Triads in Defense of Those Who Practice Sacred Hesychasm*, the body possesses ‘ingrained spiritual inclinations,’<sup>10</sup> that is, as a blessed creation of God it can be spiritualized together with the soul and can be ‘immortalized’<sup>11</sup> with it. Thirdly, as a consequence of this, union with God is a union through the heart, the *nous* and the body, simultaneously. Palamas, the hesychast Archbishop of Thessaloniki, says that our passions not only must not be lost, as, for example, the Stoics taught, but they should actually be transformed in the Holy Spirit, changing their orientation and objectives so that the whole of the real person can embrace the whole of the real God by grace.

We now come to the essence of our subject: what is the way of this new ascent to God or ecstasy, which this time is non-Platonic? The description which St Gregory Palamas<sup>12</sup> undertakes seems astonishing. There exist two sorts of ascent to God, he tells us. The first sort of ascent occurs only through the *nous*/mind, he tells us. This is the ascent of the philosophers towards God, and Palamas does not hesitate to call it bluntly ‘fantastical’, in other words not real and full of imaginary false images of God. The second kind of ascent is that of the ascetics/theologians. This occurs, as the hesychast saint so compellingly describes it, ‘with the whole of the created being, so that the image [of God] is complete’.

We are at the theological and anthropological heart of Hesychasm. In other words, St Gregory tells us that, in order for ecstasy or ascent to God to be real and true, it presupposes a preceding, most profound motion of *descent or kenosis*, so that people can lift and raise up to God not only themselves but the whole of creation as well—other people and also all the rest of created beings. The cross of sacrifice of this descent is the sole inviolable prerequisite for the resurrective ascent of the faithful towards God. Ecstasy is thus not a motion that leaves behind the nature of things (as today’s Orthodox personalist theologians would have the *person*, considering it, in an unconsciously Platonizing manner, to be an ecstasy or departure from a nature which is identified with blind necessity or the fall). Rather, it is a personal ecstasy of *created nature itself* towards God. Moreover, this ecstasy/ascent is decisively and solely *koinonetic*, not in the sense that the individual person is eliminated, but, on the contrary, that it is precisely this person who is *universalized—becomes katholikos*. It would appear, then, that ecstasy and koinonetic universalization coincide. Each validates the truth of the other. This allows us to speak of ecstasy as, initially, a

<sup>9</sup> See Gregory Palamas, *Ἀντιρρητικός πρὸς Ἀκίνδυνον* ζ’, 12, 38.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory Palamas, *ὑπὲρ τῶν ἱερῶς ἡσυχάζόντων*, 2, 2, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 3, 50.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory Palamas, *Ζ’ Ἀντιρρητικός*, 11, 36.

*descent*, a motion of voluntary sacrifice (and this is precisely the existential mystery of the Cross!) towards the consubstantial *perichoresis* (the ‘interpenetration’) and sustainment of the whole of Being, a motion which, in and of itself, demonstrates that ecstasy as ascent is real and true only in Christ, who was the first to start this *perichoresis*.

It is precisely in these terms that we can say that Palamas saves the soteriological—Christological and Ecclesiological—concept of consubstantiality as this was coined by St Maximus the Confessor. As I have claimed recently,

The mode of this participatory and apophatic constitution of ecclesial being is given to us ontologically right at the beginning of the first chapter of the *Mystagogy* as ‘imitating the activity’ of God—the concept of imitation is precisely the second decisive term in the Maximian corrective appropriation of the Areopagitic and Origenic legacy. This activity (or energy) of God is nothing other than the ‘providential binding together’ of all ‘sensible and intelligible’ beings ‘to himself, as, beginning cause and end. Despite the different and divergent natures of the multitude of beings, God draws them, because of their deep relationship to him, to a catholic ‘inclination (*synneusin*) towards each other’, an ontological convergence towards each other, we might say, and indeed to ‘a pure and unconfused identity of movement and existence’, which even becomes an ‘unconfused union’ (*aphyrtos symphyia*), an absolute ontological communion without confusion, of course, or conflation of the natures. God thus leads all created beings, all the ‘particular relations’ of the distinct natures, to an unconfused union without abolishing their natural differences. This demonstrates the reference of each one to the wholeness of being, the totality of common, created and caused nature in relation to its one, single, uncreated, and supernatural Cause. God demonstrates, I would say, the consubstantiality of created beings, not by negating the differences of natures, but by joining them without confusion in a harmonious and undivided integrating ‘identity’, which is ontological because he is ‘cause, principle, and end of all, the creation and beginning of all things and eternal ground of the circuit of things’.

This consubstantial ‘gathering’ of all creation in God takes place in Christ’s human nature—it is a Christological consubstantiality transferring the Trinitarian consubstantiality [...] in creation. The Church as the Body of Christ consequently imitates/participates in—in its own mode—precisely this ‘activity’ of God, by which he realizes consubstantiality among created beings. In this way the Church is nothing other than a fundamental image of God, as fulfilling his eschatological will for the consubstantial unification of

beings in him (i.e., in Christ through the Spirit, in a manner that is undivided and of the same nature).<sup>13</sup>

It is impossible not to detect these views behind the Palamite understanding of the ontological background of Hesychasm. And it is precisely in this sense that we can claim that Orthodox Hesychasm, when it is theologically sound, is nothing other than *experienced ecclesiology*.

#### IV

After this, let us come to the work of St Sophrony and, in particular, to an aspect that concerns many of those who study him: that is the matter of *kenosis*. It is, I believe, possible to demonstrate that St Sophrony is a hesychast, and, moreover, is such in the sense of Palamite Hesychasm, conditioned by Maximian theology, as this was discussed above.

It seems to me that there are two mutually complementary forms of *kenosis* in the work of St Sophrony. The first form is *Godforsakenness*.<sup>14</sup> If *Godforsakenness* is seen as a wise admonition on the part of the love of God towards the ascetic (as St Sophrony seems to infer), then what is this admonition other than an attempt by God to cure us of a spiritually ‘voluptuous’, individualistic—or, better, narcissistic—over-enjoyment of grace? This is a tendency which dwells unconsciously within the fallen human person, impelling them unwittingly towards the likely temptation of narcissistic loquacity, even within the light of the grace of God. What else is this wise admonition of abandonment by God/Godforsakenness if it is not a philanthropic stimulus to ascetics on the part of God to get them to open their soul to others, to embrace, through *kenosis*, their suffering fellow human beings and suffering creation in order to ascend to God *with them—and only with them*? Perhaps this also explains why the greatest degree of *Godforsakenness* is not borne by the ordinary faithful, but much more by ascetics and believers who, at the same time, are intellectuals (and such, of course, are most of the Fathers). This is mainly because they are more tempted than most of the regular faithful to engage in an individual/noetic vision of God, with the narcissism this likely involves, while abandoning the rest of creation somewhat to the sidelines.

As has already become clear, the second form of *kenosis*, to which *Godforsakenness* leads through God’s admonition and kindness, is the grace of *perichoresis*, the exis-

<sup>13</sup> See my *Church in the Making: An Apophatic Ecclesiology of Consubstantiality* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2016), 45. This is a consubstantiality which does not confuse the different natures of beings, but it brings forth their deeper ‘one and the same logos’ (i.e., their deeper ontological-eschatological unity). See this book for references to the Maximian work, and for a full exploration of the concept of ‘ecclesiology of consubstantiality’.

<sup>14</sup> See Archimandrite Sophrony *Ὁψόμεθα τὸν Θεὸν καθὼς ἐστὶ* [We Shall See God as He Is], (Essex, UK: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist), 193–220. All references to the Greek edition.



tential embracing of all beings, in other words precisely what St Sophrony calls the *birth of the hypostasis* within the prayer of Gethsemane—ascetic and liturgical—for the whole world. In this sense, due to the first *kenosis* is given the grace for the second. Since it is a sound remedy for the root of self-love, Godforsakenness not only does not engender despair, but indeed it finally generates gratitude and praise for the true love of God, which brings us to our ontological completion:

Drawn by the Spirit of God to prayer for the whole world, to share in the Lord's prayer in Gethsemane, we suddenly behold in ourselves a divine miracle—a spiritual sun rises in us, the name of which is *persona*. It is the beginning in us of a new form of being, already immortal. At the same time we apprehend, not superficially, not with our reason, but in our very depths, the revelation of the Hypostatic Principle in the Holy Trinity. We behold in Light the sublime mystery of Unoriginate Being—the *Living* God: One in Three Persons; the only true God of love.<sup>15</sup>

With prayer for the whole world, we now give hypostasis to our common human essence—in an *ontological/existential* manner, of course, since in the *logical sense* everyone is a hypostasis, even the devil. With the prayer of love towards our consubstantial fellow human beings<sup>16</sup>, we become dynamic hypostases of the whole of humankind, as well as of the whole of creation, whereas in our former mode of existence we were merely rational parts of the human and created essence in general. So here we have, again, the essence of Palamite Hesychasm, with its Maximian connotations: ecstasy through descent, people humbly giving, in themselves, hypostasis (i.e., consubstantiality) to the whole of creation, raising it up to God. In other words, imitating, by grace, precisely the work and action of the incarnate Word. Or, to use the words of St Sophrony: <sup>17</sup>

Through Him (i.e., Christ) the character of this God of love has been revealed to us. This perfection consists in that this love is humble, that means it offers itself without reservation. The Father completely empties Himself in the Son's generation. But also the Son returns everything to the Father. The Son performed precisely this act of perfect kenosis in His Incarnation, in Gethsemane, and in Golgotha.

<sup>15</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony, *Οψόμεθα τον Θεόν καθώς εστί*, 301.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 309: 'In this kind of prayer one experiences the consubstantiality of the human race. Such prayer reveals the ontological meaning of the second commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself". All Adam becomes One Man—mankind'.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 382



What God teaches us, then, is nothing less than how to achieve his own consubstantial mode of existence. We are not dealing with an abstract revelation of principles, however, but rather with the astonishing communion with God in being. The person/hypostasis is the active result of *being made Christ* through grace, as a painful, anti-narcissistic consubstantial unification of all things in it, and it is not a comfortable and euphoric ecstasy towards an imaginary freedom (with or without some brush strokes of imagined communion) which, at bottom, disdains the fragmented nature of beings and identifies it with the fall and with blind necessity in the manner of Plato or Kant, (or of some Christian existentialists). Indeed, without working with this fragment nature, in a sacrificial manner, any sort of *personal communion* practically remains an ecstatic and imaginary inter-subjectivity, which, philosophically speaking, is another form of transcendental idealism, or, in psychoanalytic terms, it is another form of narcissism—since the latter does not mean lack of inter-personal relations, but an imaginary realization of these relations *within* the narcissistic empire of the ecstatic person, and, in reality, in the terms of his love for himself, i.e. his *philautia*. At the exception perhaps of Sartre, for the rest of the existentialists and personalists in modern times, starting from Heidegger and his concept of ‘co-being’ (*Mitsein*) already in his *Sein und Zeit*, and ending with Mounier, Marcel, Buber, and Levinas (while Feuerbach and Hegel had already prepared the ground), the greatest *common* discovery of modern philosophy and psychology (European and American alike) has been precisely *intersubjectivity*, i.e. the person as love and communion. The only difference between this philosophical or psychological sense of being as communion and the Christian experience of being related, is that, in a philosophical or psychological context, it becomes finally practically almost impossible to realize this inter-subjectivity as a real dialogical reciprocity, since narcissism cannot be philosophically, psychologically, (or even theologically, in the academic sense of the term) defeated. In this case the real otherness, i.e. the *other's otherness*, as I call it, is almost practically totally forgotten, as we deny *the sacrificial* way of his reception. In this sacrificial/ascetic manner, man, on the contrary, becomes, according to St Sophrony,

bearer of the fullness of the theanthropic being, by his unification with Christ through the prayer that makes him similar to Him. This is a rare privilege that combines the extreme ordeals of love and its ultimate triumph. Man, reborn through such a prayer, through the life-bringing pain enters slowly in the active sense of the resurrection of his soul.<sup>18</sup>

We find ourselves at the deep core of Hesychasm. Here we see the identification of personal resurrection, that is ecstatic ascent to God with the living consubstantial

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 389.

*perichoresis* of all things, that is with the carrying of the whole of suffering from fragmentation creation to the feet of God. Human internality here accompanies the most profound kenotic communion through the existential mystery of the Cross (which is the ascetic martyrdom, the struggle against narcissism that such consubstantial communion presupposes), in such a way that the one confirms the other. Authentic introversion is thus expressed as humble, kenotic, sacrificial consubstantial communion which in turn can be achieved only through the humble *kenosis* of the inner man.

In the thought of some modern personalists, we encounter an incurable allergy to any form of internality or introversion, even to a conscious ascetic life, which is usually dismissed as being, supposedly, a form of psychologism.<sup>19</sup> However, St Sophrony's theology of personhood, by deeply integrating Maximian and Palamite theology, has very little to do with modern personalism in general—Orthodox included. (And, moreover, this, more or less Platonizing, dialectic opposition between the 'ontological' and the 'psychological' (and, subsequently, the 'ethical', which has to do with action, and thus it is considered to be lower than being, or even opposite to it) is fortunately alien to the mature holistic Patristic anthropology—that was precisely the underlying conflict between the Hesychasts, and the anti-Hesychasts). Thus, for him, internality or introversion are not 'psychologism' but part of a sound human ontology. The 'inner person' (an expression well-known to be Biblical) is nothing other than the locus of the *gnomic/personal will-for-consubstantiality*,<sup>20</sup> that is our freedom, the place where (consciously, of course, and in full awareness, not unconsciously or unawares!) the mystery of our consubstantial universalization is celebrated, following our painful ascetic assimilation of the mystery of the Cross, through the humble and kenotic 'synergy' of the human will with that of God in Christ. Following Maximus and Palamas, Sophrony *practices consubstantiality*, as I have termed this recently,<sup>21</sup> referring to the spiritual work of the Theotokos in the Temple, which was the fervent prayer for all humanity. Let us not forget that, according to St Gregory Palamas, in his Sermon 53, dedicated to the entrance of the Theotokos to the Temple, Mary has been the first Hesychast, precisely because of her intensive prayer, completely uniting mind, body and the passive part of the soul in her supplications wherein all created beings were consubstantially unified.

## V

<sup>19</sup> For a critique of these theologians as regards these matters, see my book *Ὁρθοδοξία καὶ Ἐκσυγχρονισμός*, 72–82, 84–86.

<sup>20</sup> As I described this recently in my *Analogical Identities*, 237–242.

<sup>21</sup> Fr Nikolaos Loudovikos, 'Practicing Consubstantiality: The Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary between Synergy and Sophia in St Nicholas Cabasilas and Sergius Bulgakov, and in a Post-modern Perspective', *Analogia: The Pemptousia Journal for Theological Studies* 1.1 (2016): 53–76.

One final observation: the view has been expressed that, as regards the theology of *kenosis*, St Sophrony follows the Russian religio-philosophical line, as this is formulated mainly in the writings of Sergei Bulgakov. It may, indeed, be true that St Sophrony was inspired by Bulgakov on the surface, but he profoundly rectified what he had adopted, which, in any case, was permeated with the philosophies of Hegel and Schelling. In these philosophies, both unity and *kenosis* are preconceived, dialectical necessities, perforce abstract and unreal.<sup>22</sup> In St Sophrony, on the other hand, unity, as kenotic consubstantial perichoresis of beings and their elevation to God, is not a pre-conceived necessity, nor an abstract, intellectual ecstasy but is rather step-by-step, sacrificially activated love. As in St Gregory Palamas, following St Maximus the Confessor, consubstantiality is now activated within creation in a sacrificial way, with the whole soul, the nous, the heart, love, and the whole body, which also participate in the exigencies of the ascetic struggle. In communion with the whole of creation, we *become love*, entering into the light of real divine knowledge. There is, however, a fine distinction between Christ's *kenosis* and our own: whereas Christ is emptied for our sake, we, as we have said, are first emptied for the sake of our imperfection (Godforsakenness) and secondly for the sake of others (consubstantial *perichoresis*). Only after the first phase, as a divine instruction in existential openness, is it possible for us to follow Christ into the hell of the uttermost narcissist trauma, which is the (usually unrequited) love of the consubstantial perichoresis of others. It is only thus, that is only after this strange, ecstatic descent, that real ascent to God is possible.

## VI

I cannot, however, close this paper without a few last words on the universal significance of St Sophrony's theology. A whole paper could be devoted to this, but there is now no room for anything of the kind. As the merest indication, I would like to stress that Western theology, though it seems that, mainly through Thomas Aquinas, is well-acquainted with the intellectual ascent to God, (though without the body and without a necessary struggle for achieving consubstantial perichoresis), there is much evidence that it also finds itself today at the critical point of beginning to understand the vain idealism, the futile individualism and also the passivity involved in this ascent, since it does not have either true communality nor the dialectic synergy between God and humankind.<sup>23</sup> There is a great need to find Orthodox theologians today who can speak to the West about ascent through perichoretic/consubstantial descent, about participation in God through body and soul, and in communion with all beings. This rectifies the disastrous fantastical/intellect-

<sup>22</sup> For more on this, see the fourth study in my book *Church in the Making*, 184–88.

<sup>23</sup> On this see Fr Nikolaos Loudovikos, *A Eucharistic Ontology*, 233–237.

tual vision of him. Orthodox theology has been unbelievably slow to understand and explain all this.

## VII

St Sophrony tells us that the greater the intellectual riches, the more inexplicably painful is the abandonment by God, the Godforsakenness, which, however, opens the soul up to others. But we are forever within the blessed context of Hesychasm. As did St Gregory Palamas, and before him St Maximus the Confessor, so St Sophrony ascends to God without any internal dichotomy, without any psychosomatic division, without any separation from the others, without the rejection of any passion—since it is possible for everything to be transformed. As St Gregory and St Maximus were, so St Sophrony was, and still is, a presence of Christ in the world.