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Catherine Creticos, M.D.

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Sacred Hospitality:
The Healing Encounter

2023 OCAMPR Conference Theme

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Organ Donation in Orthodox Christianity:
Prohibited, Permitted, or Morally Required?

John B. DuBois, PhD, DSc

Abstract

Post-mortem organ donation saves and improves the lives of many thousands of recipients each year. It is a concrete way to demonstrate love of neighbor and to carry forward Christ's healing ministry. All this supports a strong presumption in favor of organ donation. Nevertheless, many Orthodox Christians have questions about organ donation that deserve answers, such as: Are organ donors really dead at the time of donation? Is it respectful to remove solid organs and tissue immediately after declaring death? Does organ donation interfere with Orthodox funeral and burial rituals? This paper engages these and related issues. It concludes by reviewing six statements by Eastern Orthodox synods of bishops on organ donation, which generally teach that organ donation is not obligatory, but is good when it is voluntary and done as act of charity, which avoids commodifying the human body.

Orthodox Christian ethics focuses on one thing above all: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:48). If ethics addresses questions such as "How should I live?" and "What should I do?" then the answer is: Do what is necessary to restore the image of God in yourself and become united with God in this life and the next. The guiding principles in all of this are provided by Christ, who summarized the Law and the Prophets: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Mt. 22:37-38) For human beings, this is both the path to perfection and precisely what it means to be perfect; when the image of God is restored in us, we reflect God's love to others. We acquire the strength to love God and others generously in our actions through participation in Liturgy, Confession, fasting, prayer of the heart, obedience, almsgiving, and other forms of participation in the life of the Church.

All of this is well-travelled ground. But how does this general approach to becoming good help us as we ask questions about healthcare technologies that no Church Father imagined and no scriptural passage or liturgical hymn mentions? One such technology is organ transplantation. By mechanically ventilating bodies and performing complex surgeries, we may replace an individual's failing organs with those of another human being. This was, of course, impossible throughout most of human history, but it is commonplace today. We have now performed over one million solid organ transplantations in the U.S. alone.[1]

Orthodox bioethics brings medical information about issues such as organ transplantation into dialogue with the Orthodox Tradition to assist the faithful in making decisions regarding

[1] Mary Kekatos, "US records milestone 1 millionth organ transplant," *ABC News*, September 9, 2022, https://abcnews.go.com/Health/us-records-milestone-millionth-organ-transplant/story?id=89520854.

such technologies.[2] This is much needed because, in my experience, Orthodox Christians are commonly uncertain about organ donation, wondering: *Is it prohibited, permitted, or maybe even morally required?*

The Orthodox Christian Case for Organ Donation

Organ donation saves lives in the ordinary sense of the term. If I am drowning and you throw me a life preserver, you have saved my life even though I will surely die some years later. Similarly, someone with end-stage liver disease, kidney failure, or heart failure will typically die of their condition without a transplant. In her book, *In God's Hands*, the Orthodox mother and teacher, Elissa Bjeletich Davis, tells the story of her youngest daughter, who experienced liver failure and would have died before the end of her first year without a liver transplant.

During his ministry on earth, Jesus healed people both spiritually and bodily. Healing was an act of compassion (Mt. 14:14, 20:34) and a demonstration of the Father's work through the Son (Jn. 11:40-41). After Pentecost, the Apostles continued his healing ministry (Acts). Organ donation would appear to belong to this Christian tradition of healing. It can be a tangible demonstration of compassion and love of the dying neighbor.

It is also a way of practicing Christian hospitality. Fr. Rabee Toumi, an Orthodox bioethicist, reminds us that "Hospitality in its Greek origin, *philoxenia*, the love of the stranger, is central to [our] worldly mission" since it aspires to bring "estranged humanity back to God through Christ's incarnation."[3] In contrast to living organ donation, which is typically directed to a specific person, deceased donation is almost always donation to the stranger. Davis describes this aspect of hospitality as she waited for a donated liver for her daughter:

> I've lost a child…. I know how that feels, and I cannot tell you how much it astonishes me that parents can make the choice to give life to other children at the very moment when their own child dies.… These parents step outside of themselves and show love to people they've never met, to parents sitting vigil in quiet rooms, praying for miracles. Today, we sit patiently and wait to receive the greatest gift—literally, the gift of life—from someone we've never met. We are totally dependent on the kindness of strangers.[4]

I believe that taken together, the commandment to "love your neighbor," the Orthodox virtue of hospitality, and the healing ministry of Christ, which became his Apostles' ministry, create a *strong presumption in favor* of organ donation.

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[2] Bishops and synods of bishops are capable of teaching on moral issues with authority. Bioethicists cannot teach with authority. However, as a general rule, bishops do not have expertise on medical facts and many synodal statements on bioethical issues are very brief, presenting only key conclusions without engaging questions or providing in-depth rationales. (See Part IV below.) This leaves room for bioethicists to provide information and reflections that may be of value to the faithful, or even to synods of bishops, as they discern a right course of action.

[3] Rabee Toumi, Orthodox Christian Bioethics. The Role of Hospitality (philoxenia), Dignity, and Vulnerability in Global Bioethics (Pickwick: Eugene, OR, 2020), 184.

[4] Elissa D. Bjeletich, *In God's Hands. A Mother's Journey Through Her Infant's Critical Illness* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2013), 19.

Accordingly, I will spend the remainder of this article examining a series of concerns with organ donation. These are concerns that Orthodox Christians may want to resolve prior to deciding about organ donation. However, before examining these concerns it would be helpful to review briefly the two major pathways to organ donation in the US.

Who Is Actually Eligible to Donate Organs After Death?

Most people assume that if they agree to organ donation, then their organs will be procured following their death. However, less than one percent of people who die in a given year are actually eligible.[5] Organ donation requires something rare: An individual must die while leaving behind organs that are relatively healthy. When people die of the most common causes of death—heart disease and cancer—usually their organs are not healthy. Even when someone who is relatively healthy dies, their organs will ordinarily die with them in a very short amount of time because they are not receiving oxygen.[6]

The most common causes of the death of actual organ donors are gunshot injuries, opioid overdoses, and traumatic head injury from motor vehicle accidents. The thing that most organ donors share in common is *being on a ventilator* following attempted resuscitation. According to U.S. law, individuals may be declared dead while still on the ventilator if tests indicate that they have permanently lost all major brain functions—consciousness, the ability to breathe, and brainstem reflexes.[7] Most organ donors are declared dead using these neurological or "brain death" criteria.

Apart from brain death, potential organ donors might be declared dead after the ventilator is removed once they have permanently lost circulation. This can enable so-called "donation after a circulatory determination of death" or DCD.[8] The most common form of DCD in the U.S. is called "controlled." Ordinarily, patients are eligible to donate if they were relatively healthy prior to ending up on a ventilator (e.g., due to stroke or head trauma). Most DCD donors are profoundly brain injured prior to being placed on the ventilator, and the family or proxy decision-maker decides to withdraw mechanical ventilation because there is no chance of recovering consciousness. The most recent international consensus guidelines recommend that DCD donors are not declared dead until after the ventilator is removed, breathing has stopped, and circulation has been lost for at least five minutes.[9] Most DCD protocols say a patient is eligible to donate organs only if death follows removal of the ventilator within a specific amount of time—

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[5] Ellen Sheehy et al., "Estimating the Number of Potential Organ Donors in the United States," *New England Journal of Medicine* 349:7 (2003), 667-74.

[6] For information about the general process of death, see Kenneth V. Iserson, *Death to Dust: What Happens to Dead Bodies?* (Tucson: Galen, 2001).

[7] D. M. Greer et al., "Determination of Brain Death/Death by Neurologic Criteria: The World Brain Death Project," *JAMA* 324:11 (2020), 1078-97; F. M. Wijdicks Eelco et al., "Evidence-based guideline update: Determining brain death in adults," *Neurology* 74:23 (2010), 1911-1918.

[8] David Talbot and Anthony M D'Allesandro, eds., *Organ donation and transplantation after cardiac death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); B. Dominguez-Gil et al., "Expanding controlled donation after the circulatory determination of death: statement from an international collaborative," *Intensive Care Med* (Feb 26 2021), 1-17.

[9] Dominguez-Gil et al., "Expanding controlled donation after the circulatory determination of death: statement from an international collaborative."

commonly 60 or 90 minutes. Otherwise, organs are often damaged from inadequate (rather than absent) respiration and circulation. Predicting who will meet this third criterion is often difficult.

Exploring Concerns with Organ Donation

Before presenting what Eastern Orthodox synods of bishops have taught on organ donation, I want to examine briefly five questions that commonly arise in Christian circles when discussing organ donation.

1. Is brain death really death? Might organ donation actually cause death? [10]

As noted already, when organ donation follows a declaration of brain death, the body is being maintained on a ventilator. It is still pink, warm, and capable of processing urine. In short, the body shows many signs of life, which leads some people to question whether brain-dead donors are truly dead. On this, Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., an Orthodox bioethicist and physician, writes:

> After the early periods of gestation, when a person's brain is destroyed, that person is dead, although certain human biological life may continue in cell cultures, tissues, and organs. The remains of the body can be transplanted without transplanting the person. The kind of human life sustained in cells, tissues, organs, and even in decapitated bodies is not that of a person.[11]

Similarly, Fr. John Breck writes:

> From a Christian perspective the most basic requirement for "personhood" is the unity of the body and soul. However we may define "soul," it is clearly related to the brain function (although it is certainly not limited to that). That is, once "brain death" occurs, the organism is dead.[12]

Both Engelhardt and Breck offer their support for whole brain death criteria. These criteria do not exclude survival of some brain functions; rather, they focus on the permanent loss

[10] The synod of Greek bishops' bioethics committee seems to imply that organ donation can occur even if brain death is not death: "Even if brain-death is not identified with the final separation of the soul from the body, as some people claim, when someone wishes to offer his/her organs, along with his/her organs he/she would also offer his/her life. His/her act would not only include the element of offering but also the one of self-sacrifice." "Basic positions on the ethics of organ transplantation," 1999, accessed June 9, 2023, https://www.bioethics.org.gr/en/03_b.html#4. This appears to be a minority position: Most synods and bioethicists insist that vital organs be donated only following a trustworthy determination of death. See Part IV below for key references to synodal statements.

[11] H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr, *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics* (Exton, PA: Swets & Zeitlinger, 2000), 333-334.

[12] John Breck, *The Sacred Gift of Life. Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 232.

of two central features of the human being: the capacity for consciousness and the ability to breathe.[13, 14]

Please note that brain death is not the same as a persistent or permanent vegetative state (PVS). Terri Schiavo is perhaps the most famous case of a patient in a PVS. Patients in a PVS commonly have their eyes open, retain brain reflexes, and breathe spontaneously.[15] It is important that we continue as a nation to reject the use of higher-brain-death criteria, which would include patients in a PVS, who can still breathe spontaneously. This is out of respect for the significance of breath. From a theological perspective, the recent work of Matthieu Pageau on symbolism in the Genesis creation narratives is instructive:

> In the story of the Garden of Eden, humanity is described as a microcosm of creation. Thus, Adam is created by joining a body from the earth and a breath from heaven. … the word 'spirit' simultaneously refers to the wind of heaven and the breath of living creatures. These are one and the same in biblical cosmology.[16]

Moreover, breath is closely tied to the ability of the conscious mind to express itself: We cannot speak without breath. Accordingly, within Pageau's interpretation of the creation of Adam, the head represents "the source of meaning for the body" given its link to breath.[17]

2. Are DCD or circulatory criteria sufficient to ensure the donor has died prior to donation?

What about DCD, which involves removing the ventilator and waiting approximately five minutes after the loss of circulation before determining death? First, DCD should occur only when there is no meaningful chance to restore the individual to health, and when the decision to withdraw the ventilator is appropriate. Regarding the use of circulatory criteria to determine death, the latest international consensus statement offers a view that I think is not problematic for Orthodox Christians: Once we ascertain that circulation is permanently lost, e.g., by waiting for at least five minutes, to rule out the possibility that circulation might spontaneously resume, then

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[13] On this point, Fr. Breck may have lacked access to sufficient medical information about neurological criteria. He writes: "Or should death be declared only where *brain-stem* activity has ceased?" As we have pointed out, brain-stem death means the onset of putrefaction. It signifies the "death of the whole organism" rather than merely "death of the organism as a whole." Therefore, once brain-stem death has occurred, it is too late to harvest organs." However, if by brainstem death one means a permanent loss of key brainstem functions (e.g., as determined through reflex testing and apnea testing), then this is a current requirement of nearly all protocols, and necessary to fulfill the Uniform Determination of Death Act. When a patient is on a ventilator, this routinely precedes putrefaction. Breck, *The Sacred Gift of Life: Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics*, 256.

[14] The most common objections to brain death criteria arise from early work on the concept that insisted on defining it in questionable terms such as the "loss of all functions of the entire brain, including the brain stem" indicating death of the organism as an integrated whole. The problem is that some brain functions commonly persist, and the body may continue to display some impressive signs of being an integrated whole. Nevertheless, the loss of consciousness, ability to breath, and reflexes is permanent. Catholic scholasticism often shares the Aristotelian belief that to know something is to be able to define it; this can lead to an insistence that we "define" death. In contrast, the Orthodox Christian tradition relies more heavily on lived experience and description. In this sense, I believe it is closer to phenomenology than scholasticism.

[15] Iserson, *Death to Dust: What Happens to Dead Bodies?*, 25.

[16] Matthieu Pageau, *The Language of Creation: Cosmic Symbolism in Genesis: a Commentary* (self-pub., CreateSpace, 2018), 51.

[17] Pageau, *The Language of Creation*, 52-53.

we have also ascertained that brain functions are permanently lost.[18] Major brain functions are lost very quickly after circulation is lost—e.g., consciousness, spontaneous respiration, and reflexes are lost within 30 seconds or fewer. If circulation is permanently lost, then so too are these neurological functions. Therefore, DCD criteria may be used for reasons similar to those offered on behalf of brain death.

3. Is it sacrilegious to cut up and remove organs from a body that is sanctified by the sacraments?

The Orthodox Christian tradition forbids cremation.[19] Deacon Mark Barna, author of *A Christian Ending*, explains that all bodies are sacred insofar as they preserve the image of God, but the body of one who was baptized, anointed, and received the Eucharist is particularly sacred and must be treated as such. Cremation destroys the body, whereas traditional burial—without the embalming and the concrete vaults widely used in the US—permits the body to return quickly to the earth from which it came. Orthodox funeral rituals require the presence of a body.[20]

This might seem to speak against organ and tissue donation, which involves surgical removal of solid organs, intestine, some skin, some bone, corneas, and other tissues. The Orthodox moral theologian, Fr. John Breck, notes that some Orthodox Christians have opposed organ donation for this reason.[21]

However, there are several considerations that make this conclusion questionable. First, cremation is not motivated by love, hospitality, and the desire to extend Christ's healing mission. Second, there is precedence within the Orthodox tradition for using pieces of the deceased body for healing, namely, relics. Pilgrims frequently travel to visit relics that have been associated with physical healing. Relics may range from a whole incorrupt body, a skull, or bones, to even desiccated portions of the body such as fingers. Thus, we know it is possible to use portions of a deceased body for the purpose of healing in a spirit of love and respect.

Finally, in the *Book of Needs*, we read a prayer for those about to undergo an operation:

> O Lord Jesus Christ our God, Who patiently endured the scourging and wounding of Your most-holy Body, so that You might save the souls and bodies of Your people: Look graciously, we beseech You, upon the suffering body of this Your servant…granting that she may so endure her sufferings in the flesh, that the wounding of her body may serve for the correcting and salvation of her soul.[22]

This illustrates two further points: First, Christ allowed his body to be cut and wounded for the healing of others; and second, every surgery patient does the same for the healing of their

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[18] Dominguez-Gil et al., "Expanding controlled donation after the circulatory determination of death: statement from an international collaborative"; James M. DuBois, "Avoiding common pitfalls in the determination of death," *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 7:3 (2007), 545-60.

[19] Fr. Mihai Vasile, *Orthodox Canon Law Reference Book* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2014), 202.

[20] Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov, *The Great Book of Needs*, vol. III (Waymart, PA: St. Tikhon's Press, 1998).

[21] Breck, The Sacred Gift of Life. Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics.

[22] Quoted in Bjeletich, *In God's Hands: A Mother's Journey Through Her Infant's Critical Illness*, 38. Elissa Bjeletich Davis recalls reciting this prayer on behalf of her daughter who was preparing to undergo surgery to receive a donated organ.

own bodies. How much more then is it permissible for us to undergo some degree of bodily harm *after death* to save the life of another?

4. Is organ donation incompatible with Orthodox funeral rituals, which ordinarily involve an open casket and prompt burial?

Organ donation can lead to some delays—about one day on average—in delivering a body to a funeral home or similar destination. However, it generally does not preclude a prompt burial without embalming, nor an open casket funeral.[23] The process of achieving this may not seem very natural—the organ procurement organization may use PVC piping to replace removed bone; desiccants may be applied where skin was removed to prevent oozing; and plastics may need to be placed underneath garments. But then death never is very natural. Even in his book *A Christian Ending*, which describes a traditional Orthodox approach to burial, Deacon Barna talks about the need to use ice sometimes to reduce the risk of odors and to superglue lips together to keep a jaw closed. As he says, death is not natural—this is not how things were meant to be. It is ugly, and it is the main consequence of original sin.[24]

5. Does the influence of money pervert organ donation?

Deacon Barna, in *A Christian Ending*, writes that he has signed his donor card but is considering rescinding it. He offers two interrelated concerns. First, he claims that the transplant system is almost completely unregulated and that this leads to terrible things such as "transplant tourism" and organs being shipped abroad for profit. Second, he claims that everyone makes a profit from transplantation except the donors; he also complains that there is a market in organs and some people are being exploited. He writes that he now might permit donation of his organs only on the condition that his organs be used locally, and he encourages others to do the same.

I strongly agree with Deacon Barna's general concerns that organ donation needs to be regulated and that the human body must not be commodified. However, his specific concerns are not valid when referring to the U.S. context,[25] and to solid organ transplantation rather than tissue donation.[26] I have served on the governing board of Mid-America Transplant, an organ procurement organization, or OPO. According to U.S. law, all OPOs must be non-profit entities.

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[23] "Deceased donation," United Network for Organ Sharing, 2023, accessed September 14, 2023, https://unos.org/transplant/deceased-donation/.

[24] J. Mark Barna and Elizabeth J. Barna, *A Christian Ending. A Handbook for Burial in the Ancient Christian Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Manton, CA: Divine Ascent Press, 2017).

[25] A. E. Roth et al., "Criminal, Legal, and Ethical Kidney Donation and Transplantation: A Conceptual Framework to Enable Innovation," *Transpl Int* 35 (2022):10551, https://doi.org/10.3389/ti.2022.10551.

[26] Tissue donation is a different matter altogether. Here Deacon Barna's concerns seem highly relevant. The Donate Life America website currently states that tissue donation can help heal and improve the lives of up to 75 people. Tissue donation used to focus on corneas and heart valves, things that restore sight and prevent cardiac death. Tissue donation is a lightly regulated, generally for-profit industry; even within non-profits, it is a highly profitable endeavor. Tissue donation now includes not only corneas and heart valves, but skin, muscle, and bone. It is often used not only in restorative surgeries but also in cosmetic and transgender surgeries. For the tissue research context see Keith Bauer, Sara Taub, and Kayhan Parsi, "Ethical issues in tissue banking for research: a brief review of existing organizational policies," *Theoretical Medicine* 25 (2004): 113-42. For emerging international recommendations on the regulation of tissue donation see J. Sanchez-Ibanez et al., "Tissue and Cell Donation: Recommendations From an International Consensus Forum," *Transplant Direct* 9, no. 5 (May 2023): e1466, https://doi.org/10.1097/TXD.0000000000001466.

It is currently illegal to pay for organs in the U.S. (though this is legal in some nations such as Iran).[27] Organ transplantation is a highly regulated enterprise. One regulation requires broad sharing of organs between states when feasible. Thus, any insistence that one's organs only be used locally is not permissible by law—unless the individual becomes a living donor.

I think a further word on payments for organ donation is merited. Some Orthodox bioethicists have argued in support of permitting the sale of human organs, but their arguments are largely secular.[28] The overwhelming opinion is that the sacred should never be treated like an object that is for sale, and that one cannot serve both God and mammon.[29] The only justification for the violence done to the body at a time of mourning and Christian burial rituals is love of neighbor, the desire to be God's instrument of healing. The National Organ Transplantation Act currently forbids payments for deceased donor organs, but if this changes Orthodox Christians may need to refuse payments.[30] From a transplant community perspective, the primary purpose of payments is precisely to serve as an incentive, as a motivation for donation, and such a motive regarding the disposition of the human body is not appropriate.

There are many other questions about organ donation which I hope to explore elsewhere, including: Are some organs (e.g., the heart or testicles) too special to donate? Might our organs be received by someone who does not deserve them (e.g., a person with alcoholic cirrhosis)? Might granting permission for organ donation compromise the quality of care I receive in the event of serious injury? To be clear, I do not think these questions involve insurmountable concerns with organ donation, but people ask these questions, and they deserve informed answers. I plan to engage these questions in future work. Here I will circle back to the broad issue of organ donation through the lens of Orthodox Synods before offering concluding reflections.

Statements of Orthodox Synods

I have identified and reviewed synodal statements on organ donation from six jurisdictions: the Antiochian Orthodox Church; the Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Archdiocese of USA, Canada, and Australia; the Greek Orthodox Church (GOA); the Orthodox Church of America (OCA); the Romanian Orthodox Church; and the Russian Orthodox Church.[31] These

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[27] T. Moeindarbari and M. Feizi, "Kidneys for Sale: Empirical Evidence From Iran," *Transpl Int* 35 (2022): 10178, https://doi.org/10.3389/ti.2022.10178.

[28] Engelhardt, Jr., *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*, 335; Mark Cherry, *Kidney for Sale by Owner: Human Organs, Transplantation, and the Market* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005).

[29] Stanley Samuel Harakas, "An Eastern Orthodox Approach to Bioethics," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 18, no. 6 (1993): 531-48; Patrick Henry Reardon, "The commerce of human body parts: an Eastern Orthodox response," *Christian Bioethics* 6: 2 (2000), 205-13; James M. DuBois, "Organ Transplantation: An Ethical Road Map," *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 2:3 (Autumn 2002), 411-51. See also section IV below.

[30] 2018 and 2021 proposed Amendments to NOTA would permit pilot programs that reimburse living donors for expenses and provide non-cash benefits. If approved, this would indicate a major shift toward allowing payments for human organs.

[31] See the Antioch Patriarchate, "Family, the Joy of Life," https://antiochpatriarchate.org/en/page/2460/#Part3.2, 2019; Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Diocese of the USA, Canada and Australia "Policy Statements on Contemporary Moral Issues," https://www.bulgariandiocese.org/policies, 2023; The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece Bioethics Committee, "Basic positions on the ethics of organ transplantation," https://www.bioethics.org.gr/en/03_b.html#4, 1999, accessed June 9, 2023; Orthodox Church of America, "Guidelines for Clergy," https://www.oca.org/files/PDF/official/2023-OCA-Guidelines-for-Clergy.pdf, 2023; The Romanian Orthodox Church, "Transplant of Organs," https://patriarhia.ro/transplant-of-organs-6021-en.html,

statements range from one paragraph (e.g., OCA) to several pages in length (e.g., GOA). The statement of the Holy Synod of Antioch is fairly representative:

> The Church accepts organ donation as an act of love, which donors suggest in complete freedom, provided that they do not hurt themselves. In cases of sudden death, the decision belongs to the deceased's executor. The Church warns against the spirit of utilitarianism and commercialism which can exploit medical standards with the aim of removing parts of a living person in order to sell them to others, since it is not permissible in any circumstance for human parts to become a commodity.[32]

All of the synodal statements teach that organ donation is permissible under specific conditions: It must be voluntary, a gesture of love or altruism, and free from financial payments. None of the synods speak of an obligation or duty to donate; they emphasize, rather, that a gesture of love requires freedom and voluntariness.[33]

The Freedom and Responsibility of Conscience (*syneidêsis*)

The title of this paper asks whether organ donation is forbidden, permitted, or maybe even morally required. The answer is not simple. The synods that have addressed organ donation speak of the permissibility and goodness of donation but stop short of referring to a moral obligation. Orthodox Tradition emphasizes that donating organs after death must be voluntary.

But to borrow a phrase from Orthodox bioethicist Deacon Sampson Nash, not everything that is voluntary is optional.[34] For those who have prayed about the decision and overcome concerns with organ donation, as I have at this time, granting permission for organ donation after death may in fact be morally required. Thus, the question about a moral obligation to donate organs is complex precisely because it cannot be answered in the same way, for all people, at all times. It is a mistake to think—as many ethicists do—that all obligations are general.[35] We are all

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2014; Patriarchate of Russia, "The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church" (section XII.7), https://russianorthodoxchurch.ca/en/the-basis-of-the-social-concept-of-the-russian-orthodox-church/2408, 2000.

[32] The Holy Synod of Antioch, "Family, the Joy of Life,"p. 29. This is the entire statement on organ donation.

[33] This paper has focused on the context of deceased organ donation. At the 2023 OCAMPR conference, where this text was delivered, someone asked about living organ donation. While it raises many unique issues, the issues of voluntariness and love come even more strongly to the forefront. If deceased donation is like traditional tithing (a very imperfect analogy), living organ donation is like selling your car to give to the poor: It is a much bigger decision, more generous, and may be good if one has prayed about, feels called, and doing so will not interfere with other obligations.

[34] Dcn Sampson (Ryan) Nash, *The Spirit of St. Tikhon's*, "Meet the Professor: Dn. Sampson Nash," July 7, 2023, https://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/sost/meet_the_professor_dn_sampson_nash.

[35] This line of thinking is most clearly articulated by Kant in his categorical imperative found in Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1785/1993). The phenomenologists challenge this view. See, e.g., Viktor E. Frankl, *The Will to Meaning (expanded 4th edition)* (New York: Meridian, 1988), which contains a description of Frankl's prayerful decision whether to travel to America with his new wife to escape the Nazis or stay in Austria and try to protect his parents. For a development of the ethical theory behind Frankl's view that some duties are individual, see James M. DuBois, "Psychotherapy

generally obliged to practice love of neighbor, to provide hospitality, and to offer healing to others; however, *how* we do this may look different for different Christians.

and ethical theory: Viktor Frankl's non-reductive approach," *Logotherapy and Existential Analysis. An Interdisciplianry Journal of Education, Research and Practice* 1 (2000), 39-64.

Listening as Hospitality:
Elder Sofian the Apostle of Bucharest
Ioan Gheorghiu

Early Years

Elder Sofian was born to a family of pious farmers on October 7, 1912, in a village on the shore of the Prut River in Basarabia (formerly part of Romania).[36] His name in the world was Serghei. When he was 14, his mother died, leaving behind seven children. Serghei had enjoyed the quiet, peaceful atmosphere of monasteries from a young age and desired to leave the world. Yet, he faced a dilemma: if he left, there would be no one to care for his youngest brother, the future Hierodeacon Lucian, who was two years old. Serghei listened to his inner calling and knocked on the door of Rughi-Socova Skete with his baby brother on his back.[37] From the start, Serghei's sacrificial spirit was clear.

After two years in the skete, he went to Dobrușa Monastery for the ecclesial school of chanting and then to seminary at Cernica Monastery. In his final year, on December 25, 1940, he was tonsured a monk at Dobrușa Monastery (Basarabia) with the name Sofian.[38] However, six months later, the invading Soviet army forced Sofian to flee Basarabia for Caldarusani

Monastery (where he is buried), and eventually Bucharest, the capital city.

Intellectually and artistically gifted, Sofian began studying both fine art and theology at the University of Bucharest in 1940. Finishing in 1945, he was ordained a priest at Antim Monastery—an urban monastery in the heart of Bucharest. While a student, he began his vocation as an iconographer, which would later lead him abroad to Lebanon and Syria; he continued to deepen his prayer life through his participation in the "Burning Bush" movement at Antim. There he met a celibate Russian priest in exile, Fr. Ivan Kulighin ("the Stranger"), who had acquired the prayer of the heart at Optina Monastery before the Russian Revolution and had preserved it throughout numerous imprisonments.[39] Fr. Ivan initiated Fr. Sofian into this mystical practice. Like his spiritual father, Elder Sofian would have to assimilate and preserve this gift in the Communist prisons.

God's Personal Presence in Prison

In 1958, Fr. Sofian was imprisoned along with other members of the Burning Bush movement for "conspiring against the state" and spent six years in Aiud and Jilava, as well as the Baltile Brailei labor camp. He rarely spoke about his time in prison, saying that we all have our

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[36] Pr. Sofian Boghiu, "Marturisirea Monahului Pictor," in *Părintele Sofian: Duhovnici Români Contemporani* [Father Sofian: Contemporary Romanian Elder] (București: Editura Bizantină, 2007), 13. The publication of the English translation by Ioan Gheorghiu is forthcoming from Saint Herman Press.

[37] Lucia Turcea, "Părintele Sofian Duhovnicul Bucureștilor," Trinitas TV. July 5, 2021. Video, 00:03:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrAyI4mLGCo.

[38] Ioan Gheorghiu, "Elder Sofian Boghiu: The Urban Hesychast," The Orthodox Word, vol. 57, no. 3 (338) (May-June, 2021), 106-108.

[39] Ibid, 108.

Cross to bear. Like his fellow inmate Fr. Dumitru Staniloae, he experienced heights of prayer that he would not find afterward. As he recounts, "I never felt abandoned in prison. I felt a Presence that kept me alive and in a state of inner peace. *Prayer was much more personal in prison than outside*."[40]

In addition to God's presence, danger and terror were ever present in prison as well. As he once described to a spiritual child:

> In prison, we could be killed dozens of times in a day. Then I promised the good God that if I could again hear confessions when I was freed from prison, I would not turn anyone away without being guided towards the good, without being helped, and without being listened to, despite all his sins.[41]

These words would define the rest of his life, because God, Who honors every request made from a sincere heart, would hold Fr. Sofian to his word.

The Desert of the Capital

After being released from prison following the Amnesty Decree of 1964, Fr. Sofian returned to Antim Monastery in Bucharest, where he served as the staretz until his death. Silently confessing the faith through unceasing inner prayer, Fr. Sofian lived a hidden life within the tumult of the capital. Even the secret police who followed him were impressed by his upright character and hard work ethic, although they noted that he was sadly "a bit too mystical."[42]

How difficult this must have been for Fr. Sofian. Bishop Timotei Prahoveanul, Vicar of the Archdiocese of Bucharest, recounts how Fr. Sofian once came to the Metropolis of Iasi's headquarters, and during a meeting with the metropolitan and a few priests, a novice monk from Putna—one of the largest monasteries in Romania—appeared, expressing his dissatisfaction with life in the community and seeking a blessing to leave for the "stillness of the desert." Turning to Fr. Sofian, who was sitting silently, the metropolitan asked:

> "In what desert do you struggle, Elder Sofian?" "In the desert of the Capital," answered the Avva, and then became silent once again. The monk from Putna was given the example of Elder Sofian, who had spent a total of more than 40 years in the rush of the capital, serving the Savior Christ with complete self-offering and humility.[43]

Through this revealing example, we see that Elder Sofian's desert was internal rather than external. Describing this inner state, he says, "This is possibly the greatest benefit of the Prayer

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[40] Părintele Sofian Boghiu, *Smerenia şi dragostea, însemnele trăirii ortodoxe,* pref. de prof. acad. Virgil Cândea; ed. îngrijită şi postf. de protosinghel Teofan Popescu, ed. a 4-a, reviz. şi adăug (Iaşi: Doxologia, 2022), 140. This, and all other proceeding translations, are my own.

[41] Ibid., 139.

[42] George Enache, "Un isihast în ţara absurdului: părintele Sofian Boghiu," *Ziarul Lumina*, October 7, 2009. https://ziarullumina.ro/actualitate-religioasa/documentar/un-isihast-in-tara-absurdului-parintele-sofian-boghiu-38776 .html.

[43] Timotei Prahoveanul, "Misionarul din 'Pustiul Capitalei," in *Un Iconar de Suflete: Părintele Sofian Boghiu*, ediția a II-a, volum îngrijit de Arhim. Mihail Stanciu, Arhim. Veniamin Goreanu (Basilica: București, 2017), 45-46.

of the Heart: you feel that you are no longer in this world, as if in the desert."[44] In a similar conversation between St. Nikolai Velimirovich and St. Silouan, the Serbian bishop recounts,

> One time I asked him: "Father Silouan, doesn't having all these people around bring turmoil to your mind and to your prayer? Wouldn't it be better for you to go to a hermitage in Karoulia and live in peace, like Fr. Artemios, Fr. Dorotheos, and Fr. Kallinikos? Or to live in a remote cave, like Fr. Gorgonios?" "I do live in a cave," Fr. Silouan answered. "My body is the cave of my soul. And my soul is the cave of the Holy Spirit. I love the people of God and serve them without leaving my cave."[45]

Like St. Silouan, Fr. Sofian's cave—his desert—was his heart. Like St. Silouan, he loved the people and served them without leaving his cave, without losing the sense of God's presence in his heart.

Listening as Hospitality

When Communism in Romania ended in 1989, the Church's doors opened and countless young men and women—including my parents—came to Fr. Sofian for confession and guidance. As Elder Sofian had promised God, he did not turn anyone away; he received everyone with hospitality, often hearing confessions until two or three in the morning. Elder Cleopa of Sihastria named him the "Apostle of Bucharest" for hearing confessions and teaching the Jesus Prayer to countless around him, regardless of whether they were monastics or laypeople. He had attained the inner peace that St. Seraphim of Sarov describes and now was spreading it to those around.

Yet, the burden of listening to others and receiving all who came to him was a heavy Cross to bear. Fr. Arsenie Muscalu, a spiritual son of Fr. Sofian, sheds light on his inner struggle:

> "Father," someone once asked him, "if I have guests over and am tired, do I close my door on them?" And the Elder responded: "How can you close your door? Look, more than 40 people came to me this evening [for confession], each with his own problems, and I could not think about myself. They had time, but I really did not have time. And I endured in this way: I responded to all of their problems; I handled each one in this way. One kept me for almost two hours, and I was extremely tired. But I know that people today need this spiritual unburdening—at least for someone to listen to them. You see that I often hear confessions until late at night, and people here judge me: 'what is this priest doing that he never finishes?' But this is what I do—I listen. And from time to time I also say something; because today there is great suffering in the world, and people in fact

[44] Boghiu, *Smerenia şi dragostea, însemnele trăirii ortodoxe*, 269.
[45] Saint Nikolai Velimirovich, "All that remains is prayer and love (On Saint Silouan the Athonite)," *Pemptousia*. June 2, 2021, https://pemptousia.com/2021/06/all-that-remains-is-prayer-and-love-on-saint-silouan-the-athonite/

are very lonely. And to close my door is something demonic; it is the sign of a monstrous egotism."[4611]

The fruit of Fr. Sofian's spiritual struggle was his willingness and ability to lay aside his own needs and attend to those of others. He had overcome the "monstrous egotism" that closes a person in on himself.

Elder Sofian did not *do* anything special; as he says, *I listen. And from time to time I also say something*. He would pray for the person whose confession he was listening to, and "although he gave very good and practical advice, you could feel the effect of his presence and his prayer, even if he did not say anything," a spiritual son of his testifies.[47] Although he was physically, emotionally, and spiritually drained after hours of listening, having no time or energy left for himself, he nonetheless could give this burden to God and remain in the joy of the Lord. As he had learned in prison, Fr. Sofian effectively transformed every psychological state into a spiritual state by turning everything into prayer. He did this for others as well, acting like a converter that transformed people's pain and suffering into hope and joy, unburdening them by bringing God's presence into their midst and offering God their psychological energy so that they could receive His uncreated energy in its place.[48]

Elder Sofian's listening was pure because his heart was pure, that is, devoid of egotism and its offspring, codependency. He was dependent on God. The majority, if not all, of us are codependent, that is, we seek to have our needs met by others, or to meet others' needs instead of taking care of our own. We live unconsciously, unaware that we are acting on subconscious patterns of maladaptive behavior. As Schema-nun Siluana Vlad—who herself was a spiritual daughter of Fr. Sofian for some time—says, the saints, by contrast, do not have an unconscious; they become fully illumined, made transparent by God's light; that is, their unconscious content becomes conscious.[49]

Fr. Sofian was illumined—one could see this on his face—having been purified of subconscious impulses and patterns of behavior. As Fr. Symeon Kragiopoulos describes the saints, by "surrendering their whole self to God…slowly their whole subconscious, their whole unconscious, i.e. their whole soul, became conscious. That is the reason a saint has complete control over himself."[50] Fr. Sofian names this self-control "wisdom—to know how to weigh every word, and every thought, to be a master of yourself, to always be able to control what you say and what you think."[51]

When we live unconsciously according to our fallen self, we lose our conscious connection with God—with His joy that is deep within us; we are unable to control ourselves; we react rather than respond; we see others through the prism of our unhealthy needs and

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[46] Arsenie Muscalu, "Nevoința duhovniceasca a liniștirii în viața și învățăturile Pr. Sofian." Doxologia.ro. November 23, 2018. Video, 0:15:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kc7Vr_MO_44&t=757s.

[47] Personal testimony by Grig Gheorghiu.

[48] Based on the teachings of Schemanun Siluana Vlad, herself a spiritual daughter of Elder Sofian for a time.

[49] Schemanun Siluana Vlad, *God Where is the Wound*, trans. Grig Gheorghiu (Alhambra: Sebastian Press, 2021).

[50] Archimandrite Symeon Kragiopoulos, *Timeless Truths: The Annual Liturgical Cycle for Every Year* (Thessaloniki: Nativity of the Theotokos Hesychasterion: 2022), 360.

[51] Arsenie Muscalu, "Conferința 'Calea vieții duhovnicești – de la minte la inimă' Ierom. Arsenie Muscalu - Partea I." *Doxologia.ro.* Dec 7, 2018. Video, 00:24:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4prXffAgGGo.

attachments;[52] we become weighed down, burnt out, full of stress and anxiety. Elder Sofian, by contrast, was an image of a true human being, healed of the passions, wholly and freely dependent on God. Permanently in God's presence, he was able to be permanently present for others—in season or out of season (2 Tim 4:2).

Final Years

Elder Sofian's health eventually deteriorated. He would listen to confessions bent over, with his ear close to the penitent's mouth in order for others in church not to overhear, remaining in this position for hours. Late one night, when he got up from his confessional chair, he suffered a herniated disk, and because of his advanced age, being 90 years old, he could not be operated on. Already afflicted with diabetes and eye problems, his health rapidly declined from this.[53]

On September 14, 2002, during the Divine Liturgy for the Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross, Elder Sofian fell asleep in the Lord. His life had been a Cross upon which he was lifted from a young age, and from which he did not come down. Like Christ on the Cross, he transformed his pain and suffering into prayer for the world,[54] emptying himself of himself by not turning anyone away without being listened to, as he had promised God in prison.

His life, beginning with caring for his baby brother, then caring for others in prison, and finally caring for those who came to him for confession, had been a continuous act of hospitality. He had decreased so that others could increase (cf. Jn 3:30). He is now buried at Caldarusani Monastery where many miracles have already taken place at his grave. He was recently placed on a list by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church to be canonized in 2025 along with other contemporary Romanian Elders, such as Elder Justin Parvu and Fr. Dumitru Staniloae.

Conclusion

So, how can we too find inner peace and spread it to those around us? As Fr. Arsenie Muscalu says:

> Elder Sofian's spiritual stability, his peace, as well as the spiritual force and firmness that emanated from his being, I believe came from a very powerful, a very deep faith…from the fact that he had built the house of his soul on the unshakeable, unmovable rock of Christ the Savior's commandments.[55]

Elder Sofian's inner stillness was not just an exercise in self-control, but discipline rooted in faith. As St John Climacus writes: "Faith is the mother of the solitary; for if he does not believe, how can he practice solitude?"[56] Without faith, the practice of stillness and silence becomes an impersonal meditation, a subtle delusion of seeking the gifts rather than the Giver.

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[52] Idea taken from Nun Efrema of the Saint Silouan Convent in Iasi, Romania.

[53] Arhim. Mihail Stanciu, "Biserica Azi. Părintele Sofian Boghiu - Iconar De Suflete (20 09 2022)." Trinitas TV. September 20, 2022. Video, 0:29:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zc20z-_9pcY.

[54] "Elder Sofian Boghiu: The Urban Hesychast," p. 113

[55] Arsenie Muscalu, "Nevoința duhovniceasca a liniștirii în viața și învățăturile Pr. Sofian." Doxologia.ro. November 23, 2018. Video, 0:09:29, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kc7Vr_MO_44&t=757s.

[56] St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Lazarus Moore (Harper and Brothers, 1959), 27.69, 117.

Fr. Sofian's *isihia,* the peace that he spread to others, was the result of a living, personal relationship with the living, personal God. As he notes, "Prayer was more personal in prison."[57]

In prison, he learned:

> Faith is the certainty that you are not alone. And you feel this, especially when you are abandoned by people, by any human help, when all roads are closed to you, when you are alone in the world and no one can help you. Then you must be certain that you are not alone. (69-71, Caut fata domnului)

His faith, that is, his dependence on God, kept him in constant contact with God. It *leavened the whole lump* of his life (cf. Gal. 5:9), giving him the spiritual strength and stability to listen to others for hours.

Elder Sofian's faith was not rational or psychological.[58] He had a higher form of faith described by Sts. Kallistos and Ignatios Xanthapouloi in their *Direction to Hesychasts in 100 Chapters* as being "ignited in the soul by the light of grace…and revealed by the Spirit to those who feed at the feast of Christ by practicing His laws."[59] Elder Sofian's deep faith came from discovering Christ hidden in His commandments.[60]

Rooted in fulfilling the commandments, Elder Sofian's faith not only opened his heart to God but also to others. Fr. Dumitru Staniloae, commenting on the *Direction to Hesychasts in 100 Chapters* in volume eight of his translation of the *Philokalia*, asks:

> Who can define another's persona, infinite in its ever-new manifestations? It cannot be contained in exact definitions based on rational knowledge. All the more, who can define the experience of the presence and action of the supreme Person of God? Faith is the way of understanding the most subtle realities, itself being the most subtle mode of knowledge. Because only faith reveals another's persona, who does not want to be reduced to an object and cannot be reduced to an object.[61]

Faith gives a person new eyes to perceive realities deeper than the rational mind can comprehend. Faith allows one to see the other as a subject rather than an object, to see his or her personhood—*hypostasis* created in God's image, "resting under" his or her outer layers of sin, wounds, and brokenness.

Elder Sofian saw others through this lens of faith, listening to them "despite all their sins." Like Abraham who gave hospitality to the three visitors by giving them a place to rest (cf. Gen. 18:6-7), Elder Sofian gave hospitality to others by allowing them to rest in his presence imbued by the peace and joy of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, as Fr. Constantin Coman, Professor at the University of Bucharest, emphasizes,

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[57] See note 5.

[58] Arsenie Muscalu, "Nevoința duhovniceasca a liniștirii în viața şi învățăturile Pr. Sofian."

[59] *Filocalia* vol 8, ed. Dumitru Staniloae (Bucureşti: Editura Institutului Biblic, 1979), 184.

[60] See St. Mark the Ascetic, "On the Spiritual Law," Ch. 190 in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text* Volume One, trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware (New York: FSG, 1979), 123: "The Lord is hidden in His own commandments, and He is to be found there in the measure that He is sought."

[61] *Filocalia* vol 8, 47n49.

"Elder Sofian is a treasure we are discovering more and more only after his falling asleep in the Lord, due to the fact that he was an extremely humble, extremely discreet and delicate presence, very invisible from a human, worldly perspective."[62] Elder Sofian's quiet, humble, hidden example is an encouraging example for all of us serving inside and outside the church. He shows us that we can put prayer above all else, regardless of the outer circumstances; that we can be perpetually in God's personal presence; and that the root of attentive listening—the source of hospitality—is to remain in connection with God while being connected to others.

New Confessor Sofian, pray to God for us!

[62] Constantin Coman, "Film Documentar. Părintele Sofian Duhovnicul Bucureștilor," Trinitas TV. July 5, 2021. Video, 00:01:35, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrAyI4mLGCo.

The Problem of the Gnomic Will:
A Proposed Model for Spiritual and Psychological Development

Steven-John M. Harris, PhD

Abstract

This paper will briefly describe and relate the gnomic will to a model for assisting persons in spiritual guidance and psychotherapy/counseling. With its many conflicted manifestations, both spiritual fathers and similarly oriented psychotherapists encounter these challenges. Spiritual fathers prioritize aligning the human will with the divine will. Introduced will be four types of presentation styles based on levels of Openness and Introspection, and their apparent opposites, Closed and Unreflective. In this preliminary and theoretical consideration, various interactions between them are defined and the implications for each will be briefly illustrated. Suggestions for the future of such an approach are discussed.

Introduction

The first Adam, created in the image of God, possessed the potential for living out the divine life (before surrendering it) as the Second Adam ultimately did. It would require some time after Christ's earthly ministry, death, and resurrection for theologians and the Church's fathers to understand the nature of God's image through Christ's personhood. It was considered heresy to affirm His divinity to the exclusion of His humanity, and it was also considered heresy to relegate Him to being a mere human, such as a prophet, but not equal to the Father or the Holy Spirit. This theological tightrope not only has great implications for the beliefs of the church, but it also carries with it powerful implications for anthropology, if not the *Theanthropology*[63] of humans. In the seventh century, St Maximus the Confessor would account for both Christ's divinity and His human qualities, and in so doing, he defined the gnomic will of humans.[64]

Gnomic Will: Two Wills

Adam possessed a natural (or divine) will in the Garden of Eden, living freely in Paradise in full communion with God. Whereas natural willing is acting in accordance with the Logos, gnomic willing is a form of willing that involves deliberation and making choices. As a result of choice leading to the Fall, the soul autonomously detached itself from the divine will. Thus, humankind broke communion with God and became conflicted between allegiance to this fallen will and self on the one hand, and the authentic self and will which seeks the divine will on the other. This meant that persons came to oppose the divine will and became potentially and often perpetually divided against themselves. Now, a choice always has to be made. Christ's human

[63] Panayiotis Nellas. *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person.* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987).

[64] St Maximos the Confessor. *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios*, trans. Fr Maximos Constas (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 42.2, 241-2.

will acts in complete accord with the divine will. Christ has two wills, human and divine, which are permanently united. This ideal, whose presentation was made in absolute humility and sacrificial love, offered to humans the potential for "redemption of the will: perfect communion with God."[65] Difficulties resulting from the gnomic will are a focus of this work, which will consider the person's spiritual and emotional condition.

What can the gnomic will mean for the rest of humanity? The salvific goal of *theosis,* or uniting the person's will with the Divine will, comes as close to a return to paradise as we can attain. Given the potential confusion accompanying conflicted wills, practicing faith requires awareness and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Without this, we become vulnerable to misapplying what we think is "the will of God." In a parallel vein, with limited psychological awareness, one may fail to see the difference between one's perceptions and desires and divine intentions (*logoi)*.[66] Further, one could miss the entire point by mistaking the legalism of rigid adherence to rules, practice, and the administration of one's articles of faith as being faith itself and working in cooperation with God.[67] Similarly, might one apply secular ideas about emotional and spiritual health and mistake them for salvific ones? In these examples, one's receptiveness to the Holy Spirit and discernment may be obstructed or curtailed.

Spiritual Guidance & Psychotherapy

Certainly, spiritual practice demands that one recognize the two voices or wills, one divine and the other human. We are referring to discernment. Spiritual fathers are experts in teaching this difference. From the psychological viewpoint, it seems necessary to inquire into ways our psychological dispositions affect discernment. Psychologically, the ability to engage with internal dialogue in the context of both external and private expressions of faith can be helped by psychological awareness. For example, in a publication in Greece, I was asked, alongside a pastoral counselor, to write in response to a case of a young man who was instructed to pray quietly by his spiritual father. Obedient to these instructions, his efforts did not seem to be rewarded. Instead, his mind would race, and he became increasingly unable to concentrate. Ordinarily, this recommended practice aimed at inner peace should be helpful. However, because he tended towards obsessional thought and intellectualization, he became debilitated by the approach. Somehow, the psychological space required in his mind became foreclosed by his problematic disposition—other psychological sequelae interfered with the *mental space* required for this practice.

Within just a few sentences, we have begun to inquire into a few challenges for the person to engage psychologically with the gnomic will in mind: considerations for the divine will and the soul. On the spiritual guidance side of this equation, in the training of the will*,* done under the direction of a spiritual father, the adherent learns to train his/her *nous* to guide the soul into closer relation to the divine will and towards union with Him. This training may also positively affect his/her emotional health. However, as we can see, many obstacles may arise along the way. These

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[65] Ibid.

[66] *Logoi* is considered to be an expression or extension of the divine *Logos,* or Christ, the wisdom of the universe that manifests itself both in creation and the world. *Logoi* thus represents a person's participation in God's will as much as one can strive for this.

[67] 1 Cor 13.

include both moral resistance and psychological defenses. Each of these can *threaten to foreclose upon the space in the mind* where human and divine wills attempt to meet. There is a distinction here. Voluntary resistance, a corruption of the gnomic will, involves the passions. At the same time, involuntary resistance is a corruption of nature resulting in disorders such as psychological disorders. St Maximus made this distinction.[68]

A particularly difficult defense called the "false self" by Winnicott,[69] is an adaptive accommodation with one's caretaker when a child conforms to pathological behavior that does not seem to permit room for the child's normal psychosomatic responses. Conforming to the pathological situation resolves this disparity to maintain the relationship and avert abandonment. False compliance like this can extend into adulthood and *must not be confused with obedience*.

These considerations lead us to some important points. A spiritual father generally provides critical guidance for the spiritual path, or ladder, if we may borrow from St John Climacus, guiding with spiritual disciplines meant to be salvific. The psychotherapist/counselor engages in what is often a more open-ended exploration to promote psychological growth that includes more adaptive behavior and effective ways of managing emotional life and relationships. Emotional difficulties often limit (but can also be an asset to) the spiritual life; likewise, spiritual problems can generate emotional problems.

I propose that on the psychological side of this equation, there are some important intersections to consider which affect both domains. Although we are often drawn into discussions that involve categorizing healthy vs. non-healthy behaviors or having more pious orientations, etc., I propose that investigating certain personality dimensions that present themselves both in therapy clients/patients and for spiritual disciples can influence how we work together between these disciplines, but it can also affect the unique relationship with whomever we are helping. Further, considering gnomic willing, it is important to distinguish between spiritual resistance/disobedience and natural psychological dispositions to face the challenges related to both disciples and therapy clients.

Proposal: A Four-Dimensional Personality Model

To consider this challenge further, I propose a model that explores the interaction between two personality traits, Openness and Introspection, and their presumed opposites, Constrictive/Closed and Unreflective.

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[68] This point was highlighted by Fr Vasileios Thermos*, Modalities of Healing Culture vs. Spiritual Life.* October 6, 2023, Annual OCAMPR Conference, Mundelein, IL. In this presentation, Fr Thermos utilized the writings of St Maximus as seen in the reference above (St Maximos the Confessor, *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios*, 42.2, 241-2). To illustrate, Thermos writes in *Psychology in the Service of the Church* (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2017, 148), that St Maximus clarifies that nature was also corrupted after the Fall and that energy also participates in the corruption of nature, and therefore "does not lie exclusively with the intentions of the gnomic will."

[69] Donald W. Winnicott. "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self" in *The Maturational Process and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (New York, NY: International Universities Press Inc., 1965), 140-159.

Openness has been studied extensively through research on the Big Five personality test,[70]whereas Introspection, although it's a familiar trait, has been researched far less. It did draw the attention of psychology pioneers such as Wundt and Titchener in the late 19th century, who studied introspection in the context of consciousness, introspection, or a probing examination of one's own emotional and mental processes. Their research holds considerable value for sober reflection, or *nepsis,* which is the watchfulness of the heart and conflicts that are found in the *nous.*

The interaction between openness and introspection appears to have considerable promise. However, any study of these factors should include their presumed opposites, Constrictive and Unreflective.

For our discussion, I tentatively offer[71] the following descriptions and characterizations of these basic traits:

- Openness. Creative, trying new things, problem-solving, curiosity, imaginative, potentially naïve, or gullible.
- Closed. Very focused, defensive.
- Introspective. Thoughtful, serious, contemplative, pensive, meditative, ruminative.
- Unreflective. Action-oriented, often willing to take charge, flippant, impatient, impulsive, and less focused on inner meanings.

As mentioned, I do not wish to assign positive or negative values to these, but rather to help us explore their implications for the spiritual father/psychotherapist's role. Each may have assets and drawbacks and exhibit themselves to different degrees in these dimensions. To evaluate these factors together, let us group interactions into four combinations or types:

- Open/Introspective. Creative, innovative, curious, contemplative, non-conformist, confident, self-sufficient.
- Closed/Introspective. A narrow focus introspective quality may be painful/anxious.
- Open/Unreflective. Action-oriented, take charge, may lead well within structure, content, lack insight, blind spots, impulsive.
- Closed/Unreflective. Concrete, structure important, less insight, fearful, more vulnerable to being overwhelmed.

Perhaps one of the most challenging issues with these combinations is that some present themselves consistently while others may change from context to context, mood to mood, or over time. Thus, some of these combinations may be states, while others may be traits or both.

Having reviewed these categories, I would like to focus the rest of my discussion on how they can affect mental space. Mental space will be defined here as a dialectical process between subject and object, self and other, object and symbol, and, for our purposes, self and God.[72] The

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[70] Donald W. Fiske, "Consistency of the factorial structures of personality ratings from different sources," *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 44:3 (July 1949), 329–344.

[71] I am suggesting that these two terms be considered the opposite of openness and introspection. More validation studies (construct, criterion-related, and factor analyses) would have to confirm them or alternate terms to empirically represent their validity.

[72] This definition was developed by the author from the conception by Thomas Ogden in "On Potential Space," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 66:2 (1985), 129-41.

provision of mental space allows for learning, tolerance of dialogue, the ability to see from multiple perspectives, and so on. Multiple perspectives are not meant to imply moral relativism. Mental space here means simply more room for thought. Moral discriminations and choices are viewed as a separate function.

We might say that our great teacher, Jesus Christ, operated this way when He spoke in parables to widen our vision towards more mental space and when He said, to illustrate the point, "What you have done unto the least of these My brethren, you have done unto Me." By urging us to consider our daily treatment of fellow human beings as an expression of our relationship with Christ, much introspection, self-reflection, and self-observation (forms of mental space) might ensue. Thus, mental space is generated by attending to Christ's teaching. While it can be helpful to have the capacity to have mental space, it can also be quite helpful to realize when it is not possible. This capacity has been foreclosed upon and can be useful to determine when persons are negating the other. Thus, it seems implied in loving others (or missing love). Also, too much mental space can be overwhelming when a strict and clear orientation is helpful (e.g., closed or constricted)—thus, narrowing is helpful at other times.

Mental Space: Some Implications for Spiritual, Psychological Development

For brevity, I shall provide a few examples to illustrate their potential utility. For example, for the *Open/Introspective* type, there may be the risk of self-sufficiency and vulnerability to the passion of pride. This can result from having more resources for "figuring things out" and overlooking the needs of others. This can be a liability for the community, the individual, and the faith. The limitation may be vulnerable to *lacking relational space*. These individuals can be helped by helping them see the multitude of ways they need others. On the other hand, these individuals can be visionaries in their communities and are capable of quality relationships.

For *Closed/Introspective* presentations, the drawback can be not allowing in new information that can be helpful to growth. Often driven by a need for protection, such personalities experience a different kind of limitation—that of being aware of many things, but "cutting themselves off at the pass," in a manner of speaking. Since they narrow the scope of experience, I propose that they seem vulnerable to melancholy, despair, and emotional deprivation and can be robbed of the fulfillment that comes from enriching relationships. These may drain their energy by shutting down the potential rewards of *experiential space.* They can be quite aware of the meaning of their faith and can be psychologically insightful. Still, they need help to expand their awareness into areas that limit their ability to learn new perspectives. Things for them can feel already resolved, or "said and done." Ranging from self-righteous rigidity to the important "keepers of the flame" of tradition, they can also be insightful and humble.

The *Open/Unreflective* style may possess something closest to the qualities of the extrovert. Seeing new vistas and being willing to take charge, often confident and willing to act, these individuals tend to be more content and enjoy themselves when they can inspire and help. The vulnerability here can be the lack of foresight into the implications of their decisions. They want to care, and they mean to, but they can also miss that what is "good for the goose" is not always "good for the gander." They may miss that the one that needs "saving," so to speak, is themselves. As a result, they may sometimes, through premature actions, shut down *interior mental space.* They may be enriched by learning to understand psychological projection.

However, they should not be discouraged from their ways of helping but rather helped to see the meanings their strivings hold for themselves. Often, they are natural leaders, and learning more awareness can strengthen their growth and service.

Those we observe as Closed/Unreflective orientations can seem the most concrete, fearful, grim, and rigid because of their apparent lack of mental space and resources to manage. They carefully manage with adherence to structure and can seem very legalistic, following the "letter of the law." We can see that they appear to close the door to and *constrict mental space.* When engaged in a community, they can be counted as the most reliable. They are vulnerable to having difficulties grasping symbolic meanings or the points of view of others. While they may easily be overwhelmed by complexity or ambiguity, it is helpful for them to have spiritual fathers or therapists whom they trust to point them towards growth, we might say, to help with carrying the mental and spiritual space for them, so to speak. The potential for complementary collaboration seems most relevant here—especially when mutual respect can be cultivated. A spiritual father with this characteristic style of relating may be an asset to less-disciplined individuals and communities that need a steady hand.

Conclusion &Future Research/Applications

Considering the gnomic will, this brief model introduces further complexity to our understanding of spiritual and psychological development and mental space. The effort to align human will to divine will seems to involve discernment at various levels of spiritual and psychological awareness on our way to a healthier dependence on each other and God. Considering their application, what might we gain from being mindful of these styles of relating? Can we be more helpful to each other and more realistic about our dispositions? Perhaps rather than our tendency to think of mental health as addressing behavior or problems at the fringes, could our mental health involve finding ways to help us think about our differences along the way to our common allegiances and faith? Our efforts may be enhanced through our growing awareness of "The one and the many" and the various parts of the Body of Christ, which operate differently but also unite to coordinate their efforts to serve the one body. Further, from the perspective in part from John 17:20-21, "for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us," and each person contributes his or her part to the whole. Thus, we all need each other in the Body of Christ.

This typology is the product of both observation and speculation. However, factor analytic studies have not validated these qualities and different types. Future research is needed to evaluate these and other related variables.

Encountering God Through Others:
St Gregory of Nyssa's Concept of Love and Community

Hieromonk Basil Gavrilovic, PhD

Abstract

The paper examines how Gregory of Nyssa perceived community in his soteriological system. According to the Cappadocian Father, catharsis, self-improvement, and charismas are not sufficient for encountering Christ; rather, communion and community are needed for the abovementioned gifts to resonate and thus bring salvation. Gregory based his findings on a personal level through his encounters with and following of teachers Basil and Macrina. Through their example the bishop of Nyssa also instructed monastic communities, teaching them the value of encountering each other as brothers and, moreover, bringing healing and life everlasting through Christ.

The human being is a relational creature made in the image of God. This indicates that human beings are fundamentally identified as *persons*, as emphasized in writings by authors such as the late Metropolitan John Zizioulas and Christian philosopher Christos Yannaras.[73] Furthermore, such a notion implies that the human being can truly exist only when in communion with God and others—his or her neighbor. The cross of co-existence is implemented and sought from the beginning of creation. Humans are brought into being to relate and express a *koinonia* – fellowship, communion with God, fellow human beings, and all surrounding creation. The principle of such communion is love "that never dies" (1 Cor 13:8-10). There are many Church fathers of post-antiquity who expressed the importance of fellowship, love, and attentiveness built on the foundation of human relationship with the Uncreated Creator and one's neighbor. In this paper I hope to present how—amongst these many teachers and fathers of the Church—St Gregory of Nyssa understood the irreplaceable virtue of love expressed in the ecclesial ambience as he presents it throughout his works.

St Gregory's style and thought is frequently compared to that of ancient and post-antiquity philosophers. This is especially evident in his treatment of anthropology. Thus, one can find studies that concern St Gregory's anthropology which solely indicate his connection to that of Platonism and Neoplatonism.[74] Conclusions from such a comparison appear to emphasize that

[73] Cf. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985); Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (London: T&T Clark, 2006); Zizioulas, *The Meaning of Being Human*, ed. Maxim Vasiljević (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2020); Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, trans. Norman Russell, (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007); Yannaras, *Relational Ontology*, trans. N. Russell, (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011).

[74] Harold F. Cherniss, *The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1930); Enrico Peroli, "Gregory of Nyssa and the Neoplatonic Doctrine of the Soul," *VC* 51:2 (May 1997): 117-139. Catharine P.

human perfection is seen solely through catharsis, movement, and communion with God. Such studies on Gregory are truly helpful and contribute to a better understanding of the Cappadocian's approach to asceticism and communion with God; however, some aspects seem to be overlooked: Is the community of the Church and human encounter within the Church important in the bishop of Nyssa's soteriological thought? How does one's encounter with others contribute to the ultimate encounter with God? Is the notion of purification and asceticism, which is attributed to St Gregory in numerous studies as chief components to his soteriology, enough for one's encounter with God, or is the surrounding community truly needed to establish communion with God?

I will endeavor to elucidate these inquiries with the aim and hope of broadening our understanding of St Gregory of Nyssa's exploration of the concepts of community and togetherness, as well as the importance of encountering each other and understanding the significance one holds for the other. Being created in the image of God, human beings are called to respect, cherish, and moreover, love one another.

The paper will engage with "ascetical" works of Gregory of Nyssa, in the hope of providing some of his conclusions which show that his soteriology is always viewed in an ecclesial-communal climate, which furthermore implies community. Purification, virtues, and even *charismas* are not sufficient if they are not shared in love with one's neighbor; only in community can they truly create an environment leading one to the Lord and His Kingdom. These themes will be explored through two contexts: 1. Gregory's experience of love through his family, especially demonstrated through his relationship with his sister Macrina and his brother Basil, which will also serve as his foundation and conclusions in his works regarding community; and 2. his instructions dedicated to those living in monastic communities.

Gregory's Encounter with Basil and Macrina

Gregory of Nyssa came from a noble and devout family. His brother St Basil the Great, his grandmother and his sister who shared the name Macrina, and his younger brother Peter all contributed to his upbringing. In such a milieu, St Gregory had many luminaries he could look up to. St Basil, in combination with Gregory's theological brilliance, had immense impact on the ever-emerging development within the Church—ranging from his emphasis on fellowship within cities to organizing monastic communities—which led to major breakthroughs in the structure and organization of the Church. St Gregory was ordained bishop by his brother, and throughout his writings the bishop of Nyssa referred to Basil as his teacher (*didaskalos*), transcending their biological relationship of brotherhood to become that of father and son.[75] In the concluding remarks of the *Funeral Oration* given two years following Basil's repose in 379, Gregory depicts the importance of imitating (μίμησις) and walking in the footsteps imprinted by the great bishop

Roth, "Platonic and Pauline Elements in the Ascent of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection," *VC* 46:1 (March 1992): 20-30; George Bebis, "Gregory of Nyssa's 'De Vita Moysis': A Philosophical and Theological Analysis," *GOTR* 12 (1967): 369-393

[75] Cf. *De hominis opificio*, PG 44:125B; *In Hexaemeron*, PG 44:64 A-B.

Basil, so much so, writes Gregory, "that remembering his life improves our mode of living."[76] He emphasizes that all are welcome to imitate and not simply adorn the teacher's life. What are the qualities that Gregory wants us to imitate? After comparing Basil to many scriptural characters—Abraham, Elijah, Moses, and Paul—he emphasizes the following: 1. Basil's holiness as exemplified through virtue and correct faith; 2. his contribution to the Church; and finally, 3. his existence in God. Basil, writes Gregory, is the vessel that brought the Church out of crisis:

> When people had fallen under the sway of such changes, a short time later God reveals the great Basil in the same way as Elijah with regard to Ahab; the priesthood had already collapsed but was taken up again as a light which illumined the faith through indwelling grace. Just as a torch shines at night for those wandering lost on the sea, so does the entire Church turn to the right way and becomes united with her leaders.[77]

For Gregory, the chief figure amongst these leaders is undoubtedly Basil, who not only proclaims the truth but also shows the truth by being helpful to and considerate of his flock. Hence, Gregory recollects Basil's love for his community in the following way:

> When the famine was severe in the city in which [Basil] happened to be present and the entire region was afflicted, he sold his possessions and exchanged money for food which was scarce. Having prepared a great amount of food and set a table, [Basil] took into consideration the people who came from everywhere during the time of famine; this included the young people of the city and the Jews who equally shared his generosity.[78]

The bishop of Nyssa indicates that for Basil, and for himself too, Christian love is open to all creation and all people; love, therefore, has no boundaries. In the oration dedicated to his brother's life, Gregory proposes that love is the greatest good. By means of 1 Cor.13, while comparing Basil to Paul, he highlights that "love is superior to prophecy and knowledge, firmer than faith, more durable than hope and always constant without which all our striving towards good would be meaningless."[79] Love is above all other good virtues and encompasses, or rather births, everything else that directs us to God and His Kingdom. Gregory said that Basil exemplified such love, and he commended Basil's example to those who hear it.

Great as he was, St Basil the Great was not the only *didaskalos* of Gregory. As we find in other texts, Gregory also honored, the eldest of his siblings, Macrina, with this title.[80] In one of the most touching of Gregory's writings, *On the Life of St Macrina*, he depicts a dialogue

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[76] Gregory of Nyssa, *In Basilium Fratrem*, GNO 10/1, 133.10: "τὸ διὰ τῆς μνήμης ἐκείνου τὸν βίον ἡμῖν γενέσθαι τῆς συνθείας βελτίονα."

[77] *Ibid*., 115-116, (trans. Richard McCambly, 16).

[78] *Ibid*., 124.15-20, (trans. McCambly, 20).

[79] *Ibid*., 118.5, (trans. McCambly, 17).

[80] Cf. *De anima et resurrectione*, GNO, 3/3, 1 : " ἀδελφὴ καὶ διδάσκαλος."

between himself and Macrina at her deathbed.[81] Gregory's portrayal in this *vita* indicates his encounter with one who has given herself wholeheartedly to Christ. St Macrina is regarded not only as Gregory's teacher, but Basil's as well. Moreover, the goal of the script is also to inspire readers of this manuscript to imitate the one called the "bride of Christ," as Gregory depicts his older sister.[82] From this text, I would like to point to Macrina's love for others. First, her household becomes a monastic commune, which included slaves who were regarded as equal to the rest of the household.[83] Second, he indicates throughout the text that she took care of others, including her elderly mother Emily and her students who wept as she breathed her last breath. Macrina is also said to have healed the sick with her prayers: all these examples portray the importance of love for neighbors, as commended by the Lord Jesus Christ.[84] Finally, her virtues crowned with love serve as an inspiration for how all human beings should live and to what they should aspire.

Gregory's reflection on the lives of his sister and brother allows one to conclude that he is not merely, as one would assume, a "mystic philosopher," but rather that he is a Christian inspired by his encounters with these people of God who taught him what the Church represents: community, amongst whose members love is centered and headed by Christ. To love God is to participate with others, to think of the entire creation as a gift bestowed by God. Moreover, only by being "wounded with love" (Cant. 5:8)[85] as Gregory depicts in his commentary on *Song of Songs* can one truly find his or her existential definition. However, for one to be "wounded by love," purification, virtues, and life through the mystagogy of the Church is needed. Gregory showed respect for his brother, not only by following in his footsteps as an ascetic and bishop, but also by striving to finish texts that were left undone by Basil due to his early passing. The ascetic writings, dedicated to abbots and monastic communities, were composed to enrich their life. I now move to some of these writings focusing on the importance of love and community.

Encounter with Ascetic Communities – Asceticism in Communion and Love

St Gregory of Nyssa is recognized as an assertive advocate for monasticism.[86] He models his conclusions on the foundation built by his *teachers*, who also lived and exemplified the

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[81] Cf. *Life of St. Macrina* in *Ascetical Writings*, trans. Virginia W. Callahan (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1967), 163-191.

[82] *Ibid*, 179.

[83] Gregory is the first Father who spoke against slavery, indicating its illogical standing: because all human beings are created in the image of God, it is precisely because of bearing God's image that a human being cannot be owned. I find that he was taught this by Macrina's example; see his remarks in his work *In Ecclesiasten*, GNO 5, 336.

[84] Concluding his *Life of St. Macrina*, Gregory depicts his sister as a healer, substantiating his previous statement in which he describes his sister as one who "never turned away anyone who asked for something." cf. St Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of St. Macrina* in *Ascetical Writings*, trans. Callahan, 178, 188-190.

[85] See Gregory of Nyssa's commentary on *Song of Songs*, especially *Oratio* XIII, cf. *In Canticum canticorum*, GNO, VI, 371-399.

[86] Gregory's works such as *De virginitate*, *Vita Sanctae Macrinae*, *De professione Christiana ad Harmonium*, etc. are a testimony to this statement. See Gregory's collection of ascetic writings in English trans. in Gregory of Nyssa, *Ascetical Works*, trans. Callahan.

importance of virginity and asceticism as that which preludes, but also reflects, eschatological existence. Gregory was an active spokesman to those who were interested in a life within monastic institutions initially organized by his brother Basil the Great. Hence, Gregory's first monumental work, *On Virginity*, was written in response to Basil's request and was dedicated to a monastic commune in Cappadocia. In the present paper, however, among the many aspects that are explored in Gregory's works dedicated to asceticism and soteriology, I would like to focus on two: the importance of community (Church and Christian encounters amongst each other), and love, which is the foundation of every virtue and which will survive in the *eschata*.

The substance of Christian existence is found in the Liturgy, the body of Christ. Within the body of the Church, human beings, whether monastic or not, are called to participate in the Head of that same Church. Thus, within the Church, human beings not only encounter the Alpha and Omega—Christ—but also those who are created in His image, the brothers and sisters gathered in the same Church. Gregory's guidance indicates that all who belong to the body of Christ are in need of self-denial to overcome their individualistic inclinations. Hence, he writes in his work *On the Christian Mode of Life*:

One must deny his own soul. Denying one's own soul is not seeking one's own will, but rather making one's will the established word of God and using this as a good pilot which guides the common fulfillment of brotherhood harmoniously to the shore of the will of God.[87]

Such harmony between the brotherhood Gregory is alluding to can only be reached if there is harmony within each ascetic. The human person requires Christ, who is therapy and medicine to all creation, and thus a "life of angels" is established in the life within the existing world.[88] Moreover, this notion is proposed to all Christians, as Gregory writes: "Let each (virgin-monk) persuade himself that he is not only inferior to the brother at his side, but to all human beings."[89] Through humility and other corresponding virtues, the human being is elevated—and elevates his/her surroundings. Of course, this is not by his/her own power but, rather by the Holy Spirit and the mystical body of the Church. The Church is composed of the body and the Head, and Christians are the body; however, simply being a Christian is not sufficient because action is needed, as Gregory explains in his work *On Perfection*:

> Learning that Christ is the "head of the Church," let this be considered before all else, that every head is of the same nature and the same essence as the body subordinate to it, and there is a unity of the individual parts with the whole, accomplishing by their common respiration a complete sympathy of all the parts. Therefore, if any part is divorced from the body, it is also altogether alienated from the head…. In order for the body, therefore, to remain whole in its nature, it is fitting for the separate parts to be in communion with the head…. And if we know that the head is incorruptible, then, the members also must be incorruptible.[90]

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[87] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Christian Mode of Life*, 145 (trans. Callahan).
[88] Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 51 (trans. Callahan).
[89] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Christian Mode of Life,* 147 (trans. Callahan).
[90] Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*, 111-112 (trans. Callahan).

Incorruptibility requires action from the members of the Body, which is the Church. Gregory indicates that it is through love, virtues, and a life of *mimesis*—imitation of Christ, and thus μετουσία—of sharing in, or participating in God, that incorruption is attained.[91] In other words, in the experience of communion and participation in Christ Himself, within the Church, but also with other persons of the Body, incorruption is made a reality as a gift. Through Christ and His Church a recapitulation of all creation takes place. Participation implies love, *agape*, which opens the human being to God and others.

Agape, therefore, is the source and fulfillment of every good, including all that is defined as ἀρετή—virtues. The bishop of Nyssa is clear in the way he sets love on the highest pedestal, higher than any other virtue or charisma. Thus, he emphasizes:

> Even if someone receives the other gifts which the Spirit furnishes (I mean the tongues of angels and prophecy and knowledge and the grace of healing), but has never been entirely cleansed of the troubling passions within him through the charity of the Spirit, and has not received the final remedy of salvation in his soul, he is still in danger of failing if he does not keep charity (ἀγάπην) steadfast and firm among his virtues.[92]

Love towards God and human beings is that which substantiates existence, recreating human possibility. Through the power of love, all virtues will follow, as Gregory depicts, saying, "When the love of God is present among you, the other virtues will necessarily follow along with it: love of one's brother, gentleness, honesty, sufficiency, earnestness in prayer, and simplicity in virtue."[93] Consequently, love is something to be shared; it cannot exist confined in the solitary self where it becomes alter-love, which is a plunge into individualistic existence from its true potential, i.e. in becoming a person. To become a person, imaged in God, love for God and neighbor is essential. An openness of heart and mind and an openness of arms is what Gregory of Nyssa proposes to his readers. Thus, a person becomes "inflamed towards a love of the good and enkindling the soul with desire, as it is said: 'He who eats of me will hunger still, he who drinks of me will thirst for more.' And elsewhere: 'You put gladness into my heart.' And the Lord has said: 'The kingdom of God is in the midst of you.'"[94] Hence, the Kingdom and that which equates to it, i.e. love, is lived and foretasted within the ecclesial atmosphere, where, as God's creation, human beings evermore thirst and hunger for the coming Kingdom shared amongst the faithful. St Gregory's ascetical writings allude to the Church and community. It is within the ecclesial experience of love that one entirely looks upon "the resurrection and future blessings" and thus accepts every insult and scourging, persecution and suffering as a blessing in the grace of the

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[91] Cf. David L. Balás. Methousia Theou: Man's Participation in God's Perfections According to St. Gregory of Nyssa. Studia Anselmiana 55. (Rome: Herder and Herder, 1966).

[92] Gregory of Nyssa, *De instituto Christiano*, GNO 8/1, 60.10. (trans. Callahan, 141).

[93] *Ibid*., 149 (trans. Callahan).

[94] The term "within you," as detected by Metropolitan John Zizioulas, is a poor translation, i.e., it is common to understand 'within you' as within one's heart. However, as Metropolitan Zizioulas testifies it should be rendered as "in the midst of you" rather than "within you." Cf. John Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future: Towards an Eschatological Ontology* (Los Angeles: St. Sebastian Press, 2023), 18, f. 36.

Holy Spirit, "taking away the perception of the present *pathos* (παθήματα) because of the hope of the future things to come (τῶν μελλόντων ἐλπίδι)."[95] Hence, all pain and suffering is healed in the eschatological reorientation, in the Spirit, that brings the Kingdom, elevating the human nature to that which is expected in the Kingdom.[96]

Conclusion

The importance of encountering others in love brings forth therapeutic circumstances; however, only in the encounter with Christ and the Holy Spirit can human co-existence have true value. Christ is the Therapist and therapy, the One who brings his followers to everlasting existence in His own existence. Empowered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, the community becomes the body of Christ, enduring the difficulties of the death-bound world, looking towards the future truth of existence. Christ frees human creation from these constraints and opens one's world to the anticipated New Creation, New Jerusalem, in the *eschata*. This is what inspires the human being to exist as an image of God, imitating Christ in His words and deeds, partaking in Him, and thus becoming in His likeness. To aspire to such an existence, St Gregory invites his readers to go through the fire of asceticism, for asceticism is not reserved for one's inner self, but is open to all, freeing one's body and soul from the love for vices and, instead, focusing one's love on that which is eternal. For Gregory of Nyssa, there is a strong emphasis on synergy between the Christian person and God, the created and Uncreated. No human power, worldly medicine, or therapy is sufficient to free one from the limitations of death and sorrow; only in Christ is this possible. Hence, human free will and choices are authentic only if they align with that which is commanded by Christ. Loving God and neighbor—being the greatest commandments—truly opens human beings to a new reality in which one can encounter the God-man Christ. We thus encounter others in a new perspective, as those who are created in His image, loving the other in and through Christ, giving the other hope for the coming Kingdom. Only as the Body of Christ, as the Church, can this hope exist. The Church is the hope of the coming Kingdom, one that heals and brings all those within to a new mode of existence.

The abovementioned conclusions that sprout from Gregory's works serve as a testimony of his encounter with his teachers, Macrina and Basil. It was within the environment created by his sister and brother that Gregory became a witness to Christ and instructor of life in Him. This is an environment that taught him, and teaches his readers, that no person—because he or she is an image of God—can be a slave nor be enslaved; that love is the pinnacle and that which images and prevails in the coming Kingdom; that community is important—so much so that as human beings, all are accountable for each other and to Christ, who brings the Kingdom and love amongst His creation and who calls the faithful to encounter Him now and in His coming Kingdom.

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[95] De Insitituto Christiano, GNO 8/1, 86-87.

[96] In *De oration Dominica*, the Holy Spirit is identified with the Kingdom (τὸ δὲ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον βασιλεία ἐστιν). The communion with the Holy Spirit elevates the human being towards the Kingdom of God. In other words, where the Holy Spirit is present the Kingdom of God emerges. Cf. *De oration Dominica* 3, GNO VII/2, 40.

Sacred Hospitality:
The dia-Logos of Love
Fr. Stephen Muse, PhD

Preamble

One evening at supper during the initial COVID lockdown, as Claudia and I were remembering events from our 40 years together, tears began to run quietly down our faces. We continued sharing memories and reflections, pausing at times in shared stillness, waiting for other intimations to float up from the silence and enter the space of presence that had been created between us. The poignancy of it was such that at one point I said, "I think we are attending each other's funeral before we have died." She smiled through the tears and managed to quietly say, "I think we are."

Face-to-face presence at the altar of the heart—aware of our mortality, with gratitude and in wonder before the sheer *givenness* of life, without pressure or the need to make anything happen, shared together without judgment or complaint, with one who is irreplaceable—is the territory of healing encounters. Although they unfold differently within a variety of boundaries, they all share the same basic ingredients.

Theological Foundations

St. John the Theologian defines the eucharistic reciprocity of the healing encounter very simply. "God *is* love and we love who have *first been* loved."[97] This love is the Uncut cornerstone upon which the entire Body of Christ is knit together. Christ's apophatic presence, however imperfectly realized, at the altar of the heart of a 40-year marriage, with an ordinary person who knows me better and has forgiven me more than anyone on the planet, is transformative. As St. Paul observes, God's Grace is the active agent which proves "sufficient for us, for God's strength (δύναμις) is revealed most perfectly in our helplessness (ἀσθενείᾳ)" (2 Cor 12:9). By contrast, any form of power and control over the other, substituting what I think I already know, in place of naked presence before the unknown, eclipses the encounter.

All I have to offer you is my poverty

When the rich young ruler asked Jesus about what he needed for eternal life, beyond what he thought he had acquired by his own merit, it is said that Jesus looked at him and loved him. He told the young ruler to continue what he was doing and he would live. When the man persisted that he was in search of still greater depth, Jesus offered him a word: Let go of all you have acquired through these accomplishments, and put everything you are and have at the disposal of the commonwealth. Then, sheared of all self-esteem, "come and follow Me." This was an invitation to an eternity of healing encounters at the altar of the heart.

[97] cf. 1 Jn. 4:10.

This action of dispossession of the known and comfortable is involved in some way in every face-to-face encounter that moves into the liminal space of freedom to be noticed and to notice and not knowing any particular automatic agenda about what to do. Essayist Walker Percy asks,

> Why is it that the look of another person looking at you is different from everything else in the Cosmos? That is to say, looking at lions or tigers or Saturn or the Ring Nebula or at an owl or at another person from the side is one thing, but finding yourself looking in the eyes of another person looking at you is something else. And why is it that one can look at a lion or a planet or an owl or at someone's finger as long as one pleases, but looking into the eyes of another person is, if prolonged past a second, a perilous affair?[98]

Because the look is the most intimate encounter with a living icon and ultimately of Christ at the depth, this look moves into the unconscious places of all our wounds: our unconfessed sins, our unworthiness, the memory of our injuries and the fear of the intensity of our unfulfilled longings. Everything is there, and when we begin to listen and give voice to this, the spontaneous arising of affect confirms the truth of being witnessed. This vulnerability causes anxiety to the conscious island of the "self." This "unfelt known," as Christopher Bollas calls it, stored in our neuropeptide systems and coming to us through non-verbal intuitive means, is a simultaneous encounter with the deeply familiar and the unknown. We sense this may occur as soon as we are present to one who is present to us in the ways we have described.

Once when I visited a monastery, one of the monks had come to discuss something with me. Unexpectedly, the Elder suddenly came into the residence where I was staying. The monk told me later that this almost never happens. We greeted each other briefly, as I had not seen him in some years, and the monk then asked him, "Is it blessed, Elder?" He gave his blessing and left. When I turned back to the monk, I wept and said, "All I have to offer you is my poverty." In that moment I realized deeply once again how puny and arrogant before Christ is any presumption of privilege, however subtle, based on knowledge, training, position, or experiences that suggests otherwise. All self-esteem (*kenodoxia*) diminishes the healing encounter by substituting something I do or offer to a person without the mutual vulnerability of relationship that is given in and received through Christ—*dia-Logos* is the essence of the *koinonia* of the Church. For, as Christ tells His disciples, "Cut off from Me you can *do* nothing" (Jn 15:5).

Healing encounters are possible to the extent that we do not reduce people to the procrustean beds of diagnosis or trap them in unconscious passionate enactments which serve our personal or professional needs. Healing always occurs through right glorifying (*orthodoxia*) self-offering presence in response to the eternal divine Self-offering. This is in contrast to the monologue of *kenodoxia* (empty glory) which directs, consumes, performs, and extracts from the other the narcissistic supplies needed to sustain the idol of self-love. No one but Christ is free of this. That is why spiritual fathers and mothers as well as confessors and attentive, experienced supervisors and mentors are so vital for supporting the lifetime formation and growth of

[98] Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*.

psychosomatic unity anchored in the deep heart of persons who are on the path of becoming a healing presence through continual repentance.

Transformative healing encounters occur where the vertical axis of divine energies crosses the horizontal axis of our embodied life at the altar of the heart. This encounter unfolds existentially in historical (*chronos*) time, "wherever two or more are gathered in My Name," as Christ put it. The opportune (*kairos*) event is ontological and may occur at any given moment. Christ says, "I am the door. If any person enters in [through Me] he shall be saved," (Jn 10:9) and "I am the Way, the truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (Jn 14:6).

The ancient Greek inventor Archimedes is said to have boasted, "Give me a fixed point and a lever long enough, and I can move the world." When considering healing encounters, St Gregory the Theologian's theological observation of the Incarnation is the necessary fixed point. "Whatever has not been assumed cannot be healed." Compassionate, shared vulnerability with the other's life is essential to the healing encounter.

The lever is the combined action of the uncreated divine energies of the Holy Trinity and the created energies of human persons working together synergistically in the call and response which transforms and "moves the world." Humanity cannot be spiritually healed or developmentally completed independent of God by any form of psychological technique or humanly derived science. Neither does God transform someone magically, through Communion or otherwise, without that person's existential assent and participation.

The healing encounter unfolds across the theanthropic bridge of the Person of Christ who unites all persons in His Person. He is the "one offered and the one received" so that in the reciprocity of every encounter, the guest becomes the host. I have summarized the three dimensions of this synergy in what I call the dia-Logos prayer, a prayer of invocation, as well as a thanksgiving for the healing encounter which is beyond my ability to bring about.

> Lord, love the other through me.
> Let me love the other through You
> And be loved by You through the other.

Life and Truth are more than words

After her fall down the rabbit hole, Alice discovered a character in Wonderland called Humpty Dumpty who spoke to her in a rather scornful tone, "*When I use a word*, *it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less*." In the best sense, the demand to "understand the words I use, exactly as I do and in no other way!" can be seen as a fervent desire to make ourselves known.

On the other hand, unless Humpty Dumpty has an equally fervent desire to comprehend and value the words of others, we may recognize in his insistence the image of the post-modern world of identity politics. Here an ideological wave of narcissistic, subjective identification with verbal formulations that are aligned with totalitarian ideologies is counterbalanced by an equally rigid, anxiety-driven, authoritarian ideological attachment to traditional forms. Counterbalancing each other in this polarized way, both extremes stridently refuse the dia-Logos of loving encounter at the altar of the heart, which necessarily involves the vulnerability of repentance, ascetical forbearance, mercy, wonder, and compassionate unknowing beyond words as a

prerequisite for any kind of transformative encounter. Rabbi Abraham Heschel observes that "Wonder or radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of what is,"[99] and I would add, also, that continual repentance in Christ is a prerequisite.

It is vitally important point to recognize that Humpty Dumpty himself does not fully comprehend the depth of reality from which his own words arise. None of us do. Words are at best temporary metaphors used to translate the nonverbal noetic reality of our embodied existence and existential encounters. We always know more than we are able to verbalize. We think and feel more than we comprehend, and at all times and in all places, we encounter more than we can be aware of and experience. We need one encounter with one another to discover who we are. Healing encounters that prove transformative are in essence spiritual encounters, not yet fully comprehended and articulated. St Sophrony writes:

> The human tongue has no words with which duly to express the life of the spirit—what is logically incomprehensible and inexpressible must be comprehended experientially. God is made known by faith and living communion, whereas human speech with all its relativity and fluidity opens the way to endless misunderstanding and objections.[100]

St Sophrony said it took him decades to formulate dogmatically the encounters he had with the Uncreated divine Light which he experienced beyond words and natural realities.

We should not quickly dismiss or react to another person's words but look beyond them to the hidden person seeking to be (and who is also fearful of) being known. St Sophrony reminds that words are incapable of accurately conveying one's inner state to another because without a shared common experience, "there cannot be understanding because behind our every word lies our whole being."[101] At the same time it is our whole being through which Grace operates beyond our consciousness that brings about healing encounters through our willingness to love our enemies.

The oft-quoted observation of American psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan, founder of Interpersonal psychotherapy, reminds us how comprehension of differences among us is made possible because "We are all more simply human than otherwise."[102] American psychoanalyst Thomas Malone (1976) considered his most significant discovery in thirty years of psychotherapy practice: "Before you can help anyone be different, you have to accept them as they are…without any insistence that they have to be different for you to love them."[103] We may add to this [a variation on] Jesus' words: "As you have done [or not] unto one another you have done unto Me" (Mt 25:40). This is theological bedrock. Every encounter is a potential encounter with Christ.

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[99] Quoted in Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World,* Vol I (London: Perspectiva Press, 2021), 1207.

[100] Sophrony, *St Silouan the Athonite*, p 187.

[101] *St Silouan the Athonite*, 208.

[102] Harry Stack Sullivan, *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry*, (Washington, DC: William Alanson White Psychiatric Foundation, 1947), 7.

[103] Quoted in Field, N. 'O tell me the truth about love'. In D. Mann (Ed.), Erotic transference and countertransference: Clinical practice in psychotherapy (New York: Routledge,1999), 91–101, 95.

Love, Humility, and Prayer

Evagrius Ponticus writes, "The meek [person] does not refrain from love, even if [she] must suffer the worst."[104] When the Syro-Phoenician woman was face-to-face with Christ pleading for Him to heal her daughter and He made a racial slur referring to her as a little dog in front of the disciples, questioning why He should help her, she did not immediately cancel Him, indignantly responding to His words as a summary indictment sufficient to cast Him into the category of a prejudicial Neanderthal. Nor did she turn her face away in crippling shame. Instead, St Gregory Palamas notes, she replied with emphatic self-condemnation and humility of repentance, "*Truth, Lord* (Mt. 15:27),"[105] demonstrating the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in her heart. Meekness, humility, contrition, and love opened her to a healing encounter and made her an example of faith for all Israel.

Elder Haralambos Dionysiatis, a disciple of St Joseph the Hesychast, writes that when the woman

> was pleading with Christ over her child, she was saying out loud, "Lord have mercy on me," but with all her soul. That is prayer of the heart. My child, when the mind is absorbed in God, even if you pray aloud, the prayer is called prayer of the heart. It comes from the depths of the heart. Heart and mind are united with God.[106]

In this way, she was tested and revealed by the Lord as one who could not be insulted by words because her vulnerability and motivation were pure and undefiled, enabling her to look beyond them.

Failure to look beyond the surface of words prevents authentic encounter and is ultimately a rejection of Christ. This is the core human suffering, depicted in Genesis as turning the face away and blaming the other, which gives rise to murderous passions, addictions, and interminable conflict. Rabbi Martin Buber characterizes the subtlest voice in the Garden as the primordial invitation to monologue:

> The mark of contemporary man is that he really does not listen…. I know people who are absorbed in "social activity" and have never spoken from being to being with a fellow human being…. Love without dialogue, without real outgoing to the other, reaching to the other, and companying with the other, love remaining with itself—this is called Lucifer.[107]

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[104] Evagrius Ponticus, cited in Bunge, Gabriel, *Dragon's Wine and Angel's Bread* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. 2012), 82.

[105] Ibid., 339.

[106] Monk Joseph. *Abbot Haralambos Dionysiatis, The Teacher of Noetic Prayer,* Athens, Greece: H. Monastery of Dionysiou, 214.

[107] Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1993), 24.

The Russian philosopher of language, Mikhail Bakhtin, summarizes the results of the damage of monologue in a way that captures the tragedy of the shame-induced aversion of the face from the altar of the heart:

> Without faith that we will be understood somehow, sometime, by somebody, we would not speak at all. Or if we did, it would be babble. And babble, as Dostoevsky shows in his short story, "Bobok," is the language of the dead.[108]

Symptom reduction is possible to some extent with a technical method. This is already happening with various apps and guided therapy treatments you do by yourself. Movies depict people falling in love with Chatbots and robots. But healing encounters are part of a hypostatic, sacred hospitality which is ontological in so far as it is a function of dia-Logos. The person of Christ is the grounds for the possibility of encounters that bring about healing and sanctification. There cannot be such a healing encounter without the possibility of being deeply heard and responding in freedom to a person outside our objectified narcissistic defenses and exile.

Imagine an AI robot designed to do perfect therapy. It says all the right words, follows the empirically verified theories and techniques exactly. Its voice, tone and gestures are accurate and warm, reproducing the most empathic human voice tone and inflections, so that it is empirically undetectable from a living person. Yet you remain forever invisible to it except as an object.

According to Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, the very act of observation impacts what is being observed: at the moment of observation, the speed and position of the electron as a particle is no longer what it actually is in the living process but is an imperfect static representation. The same is true of all images we form of any objectified "self" or "other," whether by way of diagnosis or judgment or self-identification. They are all *kenodoxia*. The true life of each person is "hid with Christ in God" (Col 3:3), beyond observation. Neither I nor you are fully observable by ourselves or each other as objectifications. We begin to know ourselves through encounters which prove healing and formative, precisely because they privilege the unknowing of love and sustained wonder of communion and the temporary use of words as metaphors like notes of a melody. We experience manifestations of the energy of a person existentially, but their essence remains unknowable except for a series of symbolic representations, like footprints left in the sand.

For this reason, healing encounters inevitably involve continual disruption of what we know and who we think we are, the objects of our knowledge, leading to an enlarging of the heart that occurs when encountering Christ anew through each person.

Not a diagnosis

One encounter I will always remember was with a woman who had been sexually abused as a child. I had worked with victims of sexual abuse for eight or ten years at that time in my practice and published an early paper on this in pastoral psychology. In our first meeting I had used the word "textbook case" in regard to the symptoms she was describing to me. She graciously told me at the next session that the most damaging aspect of her wounds was that of

[108] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. by Vern W. McGee (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1986), xviii.

not being seen and that she could not work with someone who might do the same thing to her: to treat and diagnose her rather than actually encounter her. She used her voice both to ask for what she needed and to protect herself by making visible my unrecognized potential objectification of her.

Psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion wisely recognized, "The psychoanalyst should aim at achieving a state of mind so that at every session he feels he has not seen the patient before. If he feels he has, he is treating the wrong patient."[109] Others have observed the same. Martin Buber identifies an even more important dimension: "It is much easier to impose oneself on the patient than it is to use the whole force of one's soul to leave the patient to himself and not touch him. The real master responds to uniqueness."[110]

To afford such freedom to the other while simultaneously extending an equally sustained loving interest and wonder in another is not humanly possible. Christ alone leaves us this free and loves us completely while not interfering with us. And thankfully Christ is at work invisibly in this way in all encounters, whether we know it or not. In our pride, narcissism, and self-love, we are always interfering in some way. We are in this way both for Christ and against Him depending on many factors at work. In any given moment. Fr Nikolaos Loudovikos, elaborating on St Maximos the Confessor's theological vision, captures the two directions of human freedom that are inherent to Eucharistic reciprocity of our approach to Christ with one another when he suggests,

> Eucharistic participation in Christ is the foundation of a freely willed movement towards God, and is the present realization of the personal choice…of that dialogical reciprocity that saves and perfects nature. Its denial is the kindling of a ("contrary to nature") self-loving necrosis within the abundance of life itself…. We have, then, either freedom as a dialogical love that liberates nature in a eucharistic relationship, or freedom without love—or rather, without dialogue—which imprisons nature in a malicious self-will and self-activity.[111]

In spite of our affinity for developing theories and attempting to diagnose, predict and control outcomes, 75 years of psychotherapy research confirm that therapeutic change is largely independent of specific procedures and theoretical orientation.[112] The medical model accounts for less than one percent of change. Even in the practice of medicine, compassionate personal relationship has been shown to be as significant a variable in symptom relief as antidepressant medicine.[113]

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[109] Cited by David Wallin in *Attachment in Psychotherapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 2007), 329.

[110] Cited by Martin Friedman in *Dialogue and the human image* (California: Sage, 1992), 112.

[111] Nikolaos Loudovikos, "Hell and Heaven, Nature and Person. Christos Yannaras, D. Stăniloae and Maximus the Confessor," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 5:1 (2014), 31.

[112] B.L. Duncan, S.D. Miller, B.E. Wampold & M.A. Hubble (eds), *The heart and soul of change: Delivering what works in therapy*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association Press, 2009).

[113] Treatment of Depression Collaborative Research Program of the NIMH in 1985 was a large study conducted on antidepressant medication and psychotherapy effectiveness. Twenty years later a cold-case analysis of the data including the variable of the psychiatrists who prescribed the medication showed a significant new finding. The

Healing encounters depend more on non-specific common factors such as the person of the therapist and the qualities of the therapeutic alliance, with the exception of one factor. Neurobiological advances and meta-analysis of psychotherapy research reveal a specific process associated with profound change in psychotherapy: "facilitation of an emotional experience that was previously blocked, combined with conscious reflection on the emotional meanings that have emerged."[114]

Fr. Dumitru Staniloae points to the essential component of the healing encounter that goes beyond diagnosis and application of technique according to a theory. "Unless I am loved I am incomprehensible." The healing journey is about an encounter of love at the altar of the heart. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has identified the approach to this primary yearning. "I can only prove to the Other that he exists…by loving him, a solution introduced by the Christian *kerygma*."[115]

Not a little doll

A young woman came to see me whose stepfather had begun molesting her when she was ten years old. The first time he violated her was in the swimming pool. She protested that it hurt and he responded, "But it feels good to me." This reveals clearly the evil of narcissistic monologue. The reality of the other's person is eclipsed so she can be used for consumption by the other.

Years of abuse and eclipse of this girl's reality in encounters with her stepfather led to a deep dissociative fragmentation within herself as a survival mechanism. After initial meetings in which she showed no emotion whatsoever and a paucity of speech which elicited many impressions in me, I asked her what kinds of "tests" I needed to pass to earn her trust. She responded immediately by asking, "What is that up there on the corner of your shelf?" I got the faceless wooden doll down and placed it in her hands. "I like these," she said with a slight smile as she moved the arms and legs around in various positions. "You can talk to them and say whatever you want and they don't talk back."

I responded quietly, "Yes, that's true, but that is what happened to you. You were your stepfather's little faceless doll, and he did whatever he wanted to you without acknowledging your voice."

What she said next, and the way she said it, surprised me. With the first expression of emotion I had seen since we began meeting, she said with genuine delight to me, 40 years her

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person of the psychiatrist was significant in the effectiveness of the antidepressant. Researchers concluded: "The most effective psychiatrists augment the neurochemical effects of the drug. The person of the psychiatrist makes a difference in the response to antidepressant medications." Trzeciak, Stephen & Mazzarellis, Anthony, *Compassionomics; The Revolutionary Scientific Evidence that Caring Makes a Difference*, (Chicago, Il: Huron Consulting Services, LLC, 2019), 100.

[114] Bruce Ecker, "Nonspecific common factors theory meets memory reconsolidation: A game-changing encounter?," *The Neuropsychotherapist* 2 (July-Sept 2013), 135; cf. Ecker, Bruce, Ticic, Robin & Hulley, Laurel. *Unlocking the emotional brain: Eliminating symptoms at their roots using memory reconsolidation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).

[115] Cited by Vasileios Thermos in *Thirst For Love and Truth*: *Encounters of Orthodox Theology and Psychological Science* (Montreal, Canada: Alexander Press, 2010), 51.

senior, “I am so proud of you. You got it!” I was painfully aware that I did not want to recreate this invisibility in the therapy process with her.

I asked, “What else have you noticed? I bet you have observed a lot during the times we have met that you haven’t spoken of.” She came alive and shared some of her observations. Then pointed to a Russian nesting doll I had on my shelf, decorated with icons of Christ and the Holy Theotokos. “What’s that?” she asked. I placed it in her hands and she began taking each of the dolls apart.

“How many are there?”

“Find out,” I said. As she took them apart and got down to the smallest figure, which was Christ, I suggested, “Slowly, slowly, layer by layer as you feel safe and are able, tell your truth as you can bear it. At the very bottom of your heartbreak, in the place of your greatest pain and helplessness, you will find Christ making all things new.”

This is evident in the sacrament of Confession and in eucharistic Communion. Hope in Christ engendered by the Holy Spirit permits us to speak from the heart in response to the most painful depths of shame and grief hidden from our consciousness.

A nine-hour confession

Some 30 or so years ago I read the account of Alexander Ogorodnikov, who began his life as an atheist and intellectual dissident in Soviet Russia. He was imprisoned and forced to live in excrement piped into his cell from the prison sewage. When he finally was released, he eventually found his way to the Pskov Cave monastery where he described a nine-hour life confession with Fr. John Krestiankin, the abbot of the monastery, a holy elder of some renown. He said that during the entire nine hours that he poured out his life, the elder wept as he listened. When it was over, Ogorodnikov emerged into the light of day feeling as though he were not walking on the earth and that he wanted to shout to the sky in his liberation. In this way, he said, he found Orthodoxy.

What made this a healing encounter? Dia-Logos. To be listened to deeply from the heart by the elder whose heart had matured in Christ to a place where he could bear witness. This is a very special kind of presence. Psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist suggests that “resting in a state of *not* doing and *not* knowing *permits* us to be agents of revelation.”[116] The agent of revelation is Christ, not us, and this is evident in the sacrament of Confession. It is ultimately hope in Christ engendered by the Holy Spirit that permits us to speak from the heart in response to this depth. The psychosomatic unity that occurs in this reciprocity brings the heart to tears and sighs too deep for words because Christ is invisibly active in it touching us so that Spirit and flesh meet.

St Gregory Palamas describes the spiritual mystery of dia-Logos that exists at the altar of the heart in the sacrament of Confession:

> If it happens that the priest is more perfect in virtue and sends up more ardent prayers, grace passes through him to the one receiving the sacrament, but if the latter is more worthy and prays with greater zeal, God who wants to have mercy—

[116] Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World, Vol I* (London: Perspectiva Press, 2021), 766.

> O how inexpressible is his kindness!—He does not refuse to give grace through him to the person performing the rite; which is obviously what happened in the case of John [the Baptist], as he testified, saying "Of his fullness have we all received" (Jn 1.16).[117]

Psychosomatic unity promotes healing encounters

Healing encounters involve psychosomatic unity, which is characterized by sustained vulnerability and presence—without dissociation from the intensity of affect that is part of the memory and meaning which is conveyed to the body beyond words—when the heart listens and speaks in this way. By comparison, most of the time we are not recollected and fully present. We are spaced-out, dissociated, distracted, "in our heads" or mindlessly reactive, complacently detached from or collapsed into our bodies without awareness. St Theophan the Recluse suggests that in all these ways we are asleep. The *nous* is not actively drawn within the body as the fathers of the Philokalia advise. Rather, we live identified with internal and external objects activating dissociative reactivity and automaticity in a kind of chain of separate islands. Even St Paul laments the fragmentation he has become acutely aware of in himself. "The good that I would do, I do not and the evil I would not do that I keep on doing" (Rom 7:19).

St Mark the Ascetic testifies to the importance of psychosomatic unity as a primary indicator of being. "When our mind and flesh are not in union, our state deteriorates."[118] We move too fast and pass along the surface of things. St Makarios of Egypt points to the need for establishing a different rhythm: "Understanding cannot enter you unless you practice stillness."[119] Stillness invites unity and integration that opens to depth. Hesychia and psychosomatic presence from the heart are not techniques to employ but a relationship with Christ to cultivate over a lifetime.

Healing encounters are encounters of continual forgiveness

But of course, love is not so easy. God is love. We are not. Therefore, every encounter with an "other" necessitates an ascetical forbearance, which involves tolerating what is evoked in us by the differences we encounter, along with the threat that the otherness poses for us. We must be willing to notice and endure this evocation as well as look beyond it to the unknown of the other "behind," as it were, our projections and the feared evocations within us that their presence evokes.

Thomas Ogden offers an astute observation of our avoidance of the surprises authentic encounters will entail for us and our tendency to protect and avoid the dismantling of our emotional comfort zones and our ideological biases when he observes:

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[117] Christopher Veniamin, *The Homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas* (Waverly, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2022), 498.

[118] Text from G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (trans. and eds.) *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. I (Faber & Faber, London & Boston: 1979), 46. pp. 129.

[119] from "The First Syriac Epistle", Appendix B, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian* (Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011), 160.

> To a large extent the danger posed by the first meeting arises from the prospect of a fresh encounter with one's own inner world and the internal world of another person. It is always dangerous business to stir up the depths of the unconscious mind. This anxiety is regularly misrecognized by therapists early in practice. It is treated as if it were a fear that the patient will leave treatment; in fact, the therapist is afraid that the patient will stay.[120]

If we refuse the other, we are refusing Christ who offers through the other something unique to the world. Ascetical forbearance and continual repentance are needed for healing encounters because each genuine encounter rearranges the content of the heart to include the reality of the other person. This is a life-long struggle and formation that leads to growth and healing of the healer.

Love is creative and always new. It is hypostatic, personal, and always a gift. I often tell my patients, "You pay for my time, but love and care that come from relationship with you are free." Like Zeno's paradox, a relationship that never passes beyond quid pro quo utilitarian exchanges and attempts to orchestrate and predict an end result can never arrive at the deeper transformation of authentic encounters. Love does not respond to forced entry of any kind. The greatest example of this is Christ's total self-offering on the Cross. The humility, love and mercy of God and Christ's willingness to accept the blame of our projections on to Him of what we can't tolerate admitting or seeing in ourselves is what cauterizes the wound. His suffering unto death and prayer to the Father to forgive us, along with the reality of His subsequent resurrection, are what heal and revive us.

Empathy as total apprehension

What Henry David Thoreau advised in order to study nature is congruent with Jesus' invitation to the rich young ruler to do the same with all his riches.

> To conceive of [nature] with a total apprehension I must for the thousandth time approach it as something totally strange. If you would make acquaintance with ferns you must forget your botany.[121]

A woman with severe dissociative compartmentalization complained that she might be left frozen and she would collapse in mute silence for a day or more, unable to move off the couch when triggered by things her husband would do or say. Other than these moments that paralyzed her, she seemed perfectly fine—adventurous, daring, personable, and well-liked. The only noticeable symptom in our dialogues in the room was the absence of all strong spontaneous affect. She professed to being completely puzzled by a total incomprehension of "how to feel."

After some months, at a certain point in a session I shifted how I was listening to her, letting myself be affected by her in totality. Something came to mind gently in the background—an image of one of my own greatest terrors—of being trapped in a pipe upside down 40 feet

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[120] Thomas H. Ogden. "Comments on Transference and Countertransference in the Initial Analytic Meeting." *Psychoanalytic Inquiry.* 12 (1992): 224-247.

[121] Henry David Thoreau, cited by Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter of Things,* 1209.

below the ground, as happened to a little girl (who was eventually rescued) that I had read about in the newspaper many years ago. Whenever I imaginatively put myself in the little girl's situation, at some point I have to stop because anxiety rises so intensely in me from being trapped. I fear I would lose my mind in such a restricted situation, unable to communicate with anyone or move in my body, buried alive in darkness upside down 40 feet below the surface in the pipe, immobile, totally alone, yet still conscious.

I asked her if I was understanding what she was trying to convey to me by disclosing the anxiety I experience when I think of that little girl trapped in that pipe years ago. She gasped, opened the notebook she always brings to therapy, and showed me a picture she had drawn of the girl a few days earlier to illustrate how she feels. She even had clippings of the newspaper account from years earlier and had written all over the drawing in a very detailed way. At the top of the pipe was God saying "It's okay." Her friends were all around her offering things about her they love and appreciate, but trapped in the pipe and fearing falling into it again made it such that she was unable to hear any of these things. She titled the drawing "The woman at the well" because rationally she knows God is there and hopes in her rescue, but she acknowledged it still doesn't free her from the pipe. I suggested to her that the Cross is the presence of God in humanity's experience of God's absence, that Christ was in the pipe with her at the bottom of the well of the grief, shame and isolation she fears will annihilate her.

Somehow the connection between us, the girl in the pipe, and the helplessness of Christ on the Cross, opened a small door. She now had a "witness" of her greatest vulnerability and fear. The vulnerability of including anyone in that place of terror and vulnerability, she disclosed, is the greatest risk for her because it is associated with potential rejection leading to total abandonment unto annihilation. After months of not being able to make eye contact—as part of dissociative avoidance of her affect—her feelings began to show up in the room while she actually looked at me when she spoke, which was a major breakthrough.

Face-to-face encounter with presence at the altar of the heart opens the door to unconscious places where all our wounds are: our unconfessed sins, our shame and unworthiness, the memory of our injuries and the fear of the intensity of our unfulfilled longings. That's where we are wounded and where we wound others. It is also the place where we are forgiven and where we forgive others and are healed.

Practically speaking, as Dr. Candace Pert has suggested on the basis of her research into neuropeptides, the body and its complex network of interactive bioenergetic forms *is* the unconscious.[122] Everything that moves the heart is either received or rejected throughout the body. When we begin to listen and speak from the "unfelt known," as Christopher Bollas calls it, we access the information stored in state-specific form in our neuropeptide systems. The spontaneous arising of affect and its accompanying fears causes anxiety to the conscious island of the objectified self at the same time that part of the soul is crying with relief to finally come out of exile. It is an encounter with the deeply familiar and the unknown at the same time, Jacob at the Jabbok river. We sense a wounding may occur as soon as we are present to one who is present to us in the ways we have described.

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[122] Cf. Candace Pert, Molecules of Emotion: The Science behind Mind-Body Medicine (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

The dia-Logos involves God's activity outside the control of caregiver and patient in hidden ways that surprises both, confirming that every dialogue is a trialogue.

In the play space of presence and loving openness to the other as well as attending inwardly, I have noticed that metaphors and pictures arise in response to listening, and sometimes, a still small voice—one that does not insist at all, but offers. It has a slightly different quality than other thoughts.

Once in a dialogue with a patient, this thought was present, and I gave voice to it almost as an afterthought: "And be sure the little caboose hears what I'm saying." She gasped with surprise and said, "'Little Caboose' is the name I was called when I was a little girl." I have never before or since used that name in that way.

Another time, there was a Special Forces soldier who was part of a supervision group I was conducting. He was a fine man with courage and care for the other soldiers, but he had the most difficult time laying aside the protective armoring he had acquired and allowing himself to be cared for. At the end of our work together we were discussing names, and I suggested that if I were to give him a name, it would be "He who walks alone." This affected him emotionally, because, he explained, he had grown up on an Indian reservation and this is the name they had given him.

On another occasion, one of my supervisees suddenly did a detour in our discussion, and with no connection whatsoever to our discussion, named a lake in the Midwest that was not apropos to anything. It was an unusual name, and he had no idea that this word would be received by me as a word from God to warn me about a sin that I was wrestling with. I didn't say anything, but I received it as a kind and gentle word from God to wake me up before I fell into something destructive; it is a reminder that God speaks to us through all sorts of means—if we are paying attention.

A woman was suffering because of her anxiety over touching people, which was interfering with her life and work. At the end of a session after we had worked together for a while and she was relocating to another area, I anointed her hands with oil from the tomb of St John Kronstadt. She wrote to me later, sharing a poem she said had emerged after that event. She had asked herself "Why anoint my hands like that?" She said that her hands had felt like they were on fire, and all the fear she had of touching had vanished. She was deeply grateful.

In my book *Being Bread*, there is a story called "Shark Tooth Grace" about this happening to me on a walk at the beach. I came upon a little boy delightedly calling his daddy to announce he'd found a shark's tooth. I was joyful for the scene and continued walking, only to discover I had begun to look for shark teeth. As I noticed this, I stopped and asked myself why my joy in that little boy and his father wasn't enough for me. I let go and walked another 30 minutes, being present to sea and sand and light, and at a point I realized when I was scouring the beach for a shark's tooth of my own, I had felt the same stress and focus that I been feeling in my work that was tiring me. l had the thought that I needed to return to working in the same carefree and grateful open way as when I was walking the shoreline. At the instant of that thought, a shark tooth virtually leapt into my vision without strain and I laughed gratefully to myself that God was confirming this thought.

One of my clients had informed me that his wife had lost her diamond wedding ring two and a half years earlier. He said he had begun reading *Being Bread* and for some reason had given

her the chapter on “Shark Tooth Grace” to read. As it turned out, that very day he was gardening in the flower bed, and there in the dirt where he was digging, the sparkle of her diamond wedding ring was looking up at him. He was amazed, as was I, and both of us wondered at the sweet replication of the story in his life, and then as it were, once more in my own, by way of his gifting me with the telling of his encounter. This proved to be a great blessing and unifier with him and his wife as well as a renewal of faith in God’s presence, which becomes foundational in supporting us in other losses and struggles in our lives.

Longing for Communion

A woman who is extremely accomplished in many areas bears a wound of invisibility from early in her life. She has had many painful betrayals along the way in her attempts to find healthy relationships that can sustain her longing but remain well-boundaried in the midst of the tumult of her accompanying passions, grief, and wounds. She asks me to pray aloud at the beginning of each session because Christ is genuine and real for her as the primary context for her longed-for encounters and is the primary reference for whatever will occur between us.

One time in a session we entered a sustained silence of presence and palpable stillness together which intensified for fifteen minutes or so without interruption. It turned out to be one of the most meaningful and important encounters, which connected for her what she was reading about in *St Silouan the Athonite*. This gave further hope and invited courage for her to bear without reactivity the hell of the fear, shame, and cynical raging despair that arises in her at times when she is alone and not clothed in the identity forged out of her many accomplishments and adventures. Her exiled pain and unfulfilled longing arising in this dissociated place can result in intense self-directed loathing and the threat of annihilation and suicidal destructive rage.

Some months later at a moment of silence and attention to her, she disclosed with vulnerability and some wonder, that when she is at the threshold of connection that she longs for, she doesn’t know what to say or do. There have been occasions when, instead of staying with her in such a moment and helping her wonder and go deeper into what she is encountering, I have instead “waxed eloquent.” Although she says she enjoys those moments and acknowledges benefitting from them, after one such session, she later realized she was angry with me that I did not invite her to go deeper into exploring her experience of not knowing how to respond. For her to risk the rejection she feared by exercising her personal agency to ask for what she needs from a trusted, supportive other proved to be valuable—not only for her, but for me, to self-examine my own motivations for speaking. Our discussions arising from our capacity for mismeetings have deepened the trust between us and contributed to psychic integration, emotional self-regulation, and a deeper experiential appreciation for the ascetical forbearance and faith that can bear to “Keep your mind in hell and despair not.”

Theological postscript

I believe all transformative healing encounters are responses to the One who *is* love and eternally bears witness to this in our lives in ways that are both manifest and hidden. Even though we often fail to love as we are loved, and continue to be divided within ourselves and with each other to our last breath, our hope is that we may again and again in peace, offer ourselves and one

another unto Christ our God, the only Lover of Humankind, Physician of our souls and bodies. He cares for us enough to offer His Life for ours, while remaining Himself. He is distributed to all, but never divided; ever eaten yet never consumed, meeting us in the places of shame we most fear, and sanctifying all He touches. Glory to God.

Book Review

The Dramatic Journey of Faith:
Orthodox Religious Conversion in America
By Fr. Vasileios Thermos
Reviewed by Steven-John M. Harris, PhD

Fr. Vasileios Thermos has again presented us with a work to help and edify us for years to come. Some books come with all the academic authority and persuasion, and others are meant to offer helpful perspectives intended for everyone, such as we see with pop psychology. This title could be a textbook on the psychology of religion or a popular work introducing important ideas meant to inspire. Happily, this book is neither because it accomplishes so much more. It is well-researched, providing both probing, self-reported data of its population and categorizing the findings into extensive, meaningful, and practical means for clergy and parishioners alike. The author weaves together his research findings and in-depth knowledge of Orthodox theology with his grounding in personality, psychology, and sociology research.

This comprehensive research project, undertaken at the encouragement of His Grace Bishop Maxim Vasiljevic, evolved from 41 questionnaires and 109 interviews of converts conducted over a month in the summer of 2023. The subjects were drawn from thirteen parishes and two monasteries in the Western United States. Their "spiritual adventures," willingly shared, were meticulously documented and formed into case studies for use in the work.

Further, many books like this relay important theological constructs while saying little about the role of the human subject, while others do just the latter; they become self-help books with psychology, with minimal relation to theology. Fr. Thermos balances theology and psychology effectively in his work *The Dramatic Journey of Faith* without sacrificing either. I am most impressed because his penetrating analysis of critical elements of conversion to the Orthodox Church is not just a matter of curious interest. Fr. Thermos reports and interprets the findings about *why and how converts join the church* and *the pastoral response; each plays a critical role in the quality, not the quantity,* of faith development.

This study, which informs this short but dense volume, examines persons who change denominations, researches the lives of former atheists and New Age believers, as well as individuals who grew up with trauma and suffered from mental disorders, and compares these and other converts quite deftly with cradle Orthodox at essential junctures in this work. Fr. Thermos demonstrates and amplifies the costs of not assessing each convert's background, motives, and expectations. Next, he examines the kinds of responses they experience from their clergy and parish, which may result in positive or negative outcomes.

This work is a must-read for every hierarch, clergy, and spiritual father. It recognizes the importance of those roles and aims to inform clergy about a long-neglected feature in Orthodox parishes: the subjective life of the parishioner. Christ stands at the door and knocks, but who answers? This book equips clergy with the knowledge of how parishioners look at their faith as cradle Orthodox, convert, and their relationships with each other, and provides clergy with the

understanding of how to serve their parishioners better. On this note, I reflected on my own experiences and benefitted from evaluating my faith journey—I urge the reader to do the same.

Fr. Thermos beautifully reports his findings within the framework of Church history and its *eschata,* providing valuable insights into the church's mission. He also provides pastoral guidance on the all-important process of repentance. He wisely concludes late in the work that conversion is the work of a lifetime, because one is always repenting: it is not just a matter of finding the correct theology and religious stance, because both of those can become defensive.

To help achieve these goals, he illustrates a significantly broad range of developments in psychological development and how each of these experiences interacts with the kind of religious experience and its trajectory.

He reminds us that many converts disappear frequently, for various reasons, and that for too long, the church has seemed to blame or ignore the new convert. Fr. Thermos helps us see there is a far more complicated dynamic between convert, clergy, and parish than we might think.

Far from being an indictment of the church or clergy, Fr. Thermos successfully weaves his discussion of the subjective variables of converts as they interact with the theology of the community of believers, the Holy Trinity, repentance, and theosis into the overall eschatological vision of the Church in creation. At the same time, he does not retreat from illustrating and warning us of the dangers of rigid fundamentalism, authoritarianism, shallow involvement in the parish, and of failing to address social forces such as LGBTQ and other matters that converts bring. Fr. Thermos strikingly remarks that while theology is critical, *mere doctrinal teaching remains meaningless to the degree it is not in tune with each one's subjectivity"* (p. 49). He challenges us to consider our *praxis* and how it affects the individual. While the Church's teachings are immutable, Fr. Thermos seems to be saying that a postmodern world brings a wide variety of sensibilities that require great care in learning about them and helping converts understand divine truths. He reminds us of Fr. Alexander Schmemann's poignant reminder that the Church needs to change to stay the same.

To illustrate the importance of understanding the background of the convert, he conveys the well-researched notion that for abused children, their troubled relationships inform the ways they perceive God. Their attachment patterns may inhibit accepting love, grace, and forgiveness. Also, he illustrates how "Regression can be disguised as a conversion" (p. 65). Religion, we learn, can be an escape, a regression, or a defense against healthy emotional and spiritual growth rather than engagement in relationships, including with God.

When he addresses personality and character traits, we are shown how inevitable traits will play out in the life of the parish, and he cites Studzinski, "Conversion requires a person to discern what is to be left behind and what is to be welcomed."[123] In his sophisticated but precise analysis, Fr. Thermos shows how some individuals recreate the same maladaptive patterns in their new faith while others defensively inflict their defenses and difficulties on others and themselves to their detriment. We witness the paranoid or borderline personality disorder who attempts to instill fanaticism into the parish's life. Referring to disturbed relationship patterns, he

[123] Raymond Studzinski, *Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 1069.

writes, “Establishing a healthy personal relationship with Christ presupposes correcting inner representations about God and, in turn, shapes better the personality” (p. 127), and not just embracing a new doctrine. To this point, he illustrates that true doctrines take hold in individuals who can learn to embrace them more authentically. He balances this with the cherished truth cited by Nissiotis, “The individual choice of Man is only really individual if it is made in the sense of an answer to the call of God.”[124]

Rather boldly, he asks a question that seems to permeate this work, “To what [has] the convert actually converted?” (p. 73). Fr. Thermos does not retreat from the position of psychology’s importance to pastoral care. It is clear from this writing that Fr. Thermos is not advocating an alternative approach to religion; instead, he is reporting how clergy can assist converts to practice their faith more meaningfully by understanding some of the basics of human personality. Beautifully comparing conversion to marriage and all that this commitment entails, he relates the Scripture, “My beloved is mine, and I am His” (Song 2:16) (p. 88).

It isn't easy to sum up the extensive material covered in this 180-page work. Considering the few details I have outlined here, Fr. Thermos has dramatically expanded our idea of the many facets that are going on in the dynamism of the *synergeia,* the work of the parishioner with God, with the assistance of their priest, God’s representative, and the whole of the Body of Christ. The initial glimpse into this synergetic dynamic may be seen and shepherded along in the early conversion process. This gift to us all can enhance us. Thermos’s detailed study and analyses should be a companion for many Orthodox for years to come.

[124] Nikos Nissiotis, “Conversion and the Church,” *The Ecumenical Review* 19:3 (1967), 264.