

Sermon on the Sunday before Nativity: “The Orient from on High”

When you study Church history, particularly early centuries of Church history, one of the truly amazing paradox's – or really, the great ironies (in the tragic sense of the word), is that it wasn't until God had come in the flesh to make God known that many (inside and outside the Church) became increasingly confused about God – and ultimately about Christ Himself.

Specifically about the nature of God. Through the Apostles experience with the light of God in Christ on Mt Tabor and the teaching of John the Theologian (particularly in the first chapter of his Gospel), they understood there was a difference between the energy or light of God and His Nature - or His Essence. St. Basil the Great elaborated on this reality with the simple statement that has been a cornerstone of Orthodox theology ever since: that is that, “All that God is in his Essence or Nature is communicated to us through His Energies.” Which we experience as light: specifically the uncreated light.

This understanding not only changed the world of God's followers by allowing them to know how it is we experience God in the world – in our lives. But it also, and this is what I want to emphasize today – helped them communicate the Nature of God, that is, His Essence, in a way they had not imagined before the coming of Christ.

The Jews had it burned in their consciences from Moses direct encounter with God (Exo. 33:20) where He told Moses: “No man can see me and live.” This is why Isaiah was so frightened at being brought before the throne of God and why the Apostle Peter was so frightened after he witnessed Jesus miraculously filling the nets with fish. They believed they'd die because they realized they were in the presence of God. Christ demonstrated, and the Apostles taught, that what they experienced was the Light and Energy of God coming from the Son of God that allowed them to see Him and not die. That they were protected from His Essence that no creature can live in the presence of – neither man nor angels.

And so, in understanding the light and energy of God – what we also refer to as Grace – we also are faced with the awesome unapproachability of God's Nature or Essence. And in coming into contact with this reality, instead of helping them understand Christ more, for many of the people of that time, and for a very long time, it actually confused them more.

As we approach the celebration of God being born of the virgin, of God becoming man, I'd like to consider why this posed such a huge stumbling block for so many – for so long. And I'd like to do that by considering the Church's teaching on the Essence or Nature of God as it has been revealed to her in the and teaching of Jesus Christ. And no one before or since has done that as thoroughly as of St. Dionysius the Areopagite - the disciple of the Apostle Paul.

Listen to what he says we can say positively, or know of the Nature or Essence of God – which he refers to as the “Cause of all”:

“WE say then that the Cause of all, which is above all, is neither without being, nor without life--nor without reason, nor without mind, nor is a body--nor has shape--nor form--nor quality, or quantity, or bulk--nor is in a place--nor is seen--nor has sensible contact--nor perceives, nor is perceived, by the senses--nor has disorder and confusion, as being vexed by earthly passions,--nor is powerless, as being subject to casualties of sense,--nor is in need of light;--neither is It, nor has It, change, or decay, or division, or deprivation, or flux,--or any other of the objects of sense.”

And he says regarding the things that we *can't* say of God: "That the pre-eminent Cause of every object of intelligible perception is none of the objects of intelligible perception." [In other words he is separated from creation not just by distance but by being so utterly different from it by nature. ...That is, God is not separated from us because He exists somewhere we can't go. He's separated from us by Who He is, by nature...St. Dionysius helps us understand this by his teaching on what we *can't* say about God. He says:

"ON the other hand, we say (of the Cause of all), that It is neither soul, nor mind, nor has imagination, or opinion, or reason, or conception; neither is expressed, nor conceived; neither is number, nor order, nor greatness, nor littleness; nor equality, nor inequality; nor similarity, nor dissimilarity; neither is standing, nor moving; nor at rest; neither has power, nor is power, nor light; neither lives, nor is life; neither is essence nor eternity, nor time; neither is Its touch intelligible, neither is It science, nor truth; nor kingdom, nor wisdom; neither one, nor oneness; neither Deity, nor Goodness; nor is It Spirit according to our understanding; nor Son-ship, nor Paternity; nor any other thing of those known to us, or to any other existing being; neither is It any of non-existing nor of existing things, nor do things existing know It, as It is; nor does It know existing things, qua existing (that is as we understand knowing); neither is there expression of It, nor name, nor knowledge; neither is It darkness, nor light; nor error, nor truth; neither is there any definition at all of It, nor any abstraction. But when making the predications (rational assumptions) and abstractions of things after It, we neither predicate, nor abstract from It; since the all-perfect and uniform Cause of all is both above every definition and the pre-eminence of Him, Who is absolutely freed from all, and beyond the whole, is also above every abstraction."

In other words, the Nature, or Essence of God is not only beyond knowing, It is beyond unknowing. But you may be thinking, wait a minute, what about our study of the Creed? Of the Trinity? Are you saying that what we know about the nature of God doesn't matter? No, that's not what I'm saying - nor is it what St. Dionysius is saying. What he's saying is that we can not grasp with our minds the unknowable - That He is beyond unknowing! It is only through His Grace or His Energies that we can experience Him. And we experience His Grace two ways: in what we do by keeping His commandments, and by prayer - which to the Fathers of the Church was the same thing as theology. (That which Western Christianity has made an academic study).

Keeping his commandments needs no explanation, it is simply how we live our lives in the world. However what theology is, is one of the huge differences between the East and the Western Christians. Theology is that place where our minds descend into our hearts in prayer where that which we believe with our mind becomes an experience, an encounter within our souls.

This is why for instance to study the nature of God apart from obedience to His commandments and apart from prayer, disconnected from our hearts, is not only unproductive but can even be dangerous. You cannot get there through your mind - this is what St. Dionysius is saying. By giving us these truths to ponder he's helping us move beyond reason and the intellect, but NOT out of ourselves. We use it to get to the point I've talked about several times in the last few weeks - the point of Peter understanding he's walking on the water, realizing it cannot be and yet it is. And all he can do as he sinks, because his reason is unable to accept that which is beyond reason, is call out to Christ: Lord have mercy on me!

When we contemplate the mystery of God becoming man, like the mystery of the Persons of God as Trinity, if we do so outside of obedience to the commandments and the prayers of the Church we will sink into the ocean of our reason weighted down with the intellect's inability to process the impossible. This is why the Father's say not to even contemplate the Trinity for longer than a few minutes – most people will be hurt by it.

And yet within the protection and guidance of the Church we can by Grace experience the reality of the encounter with the 'Cause of all' in theology. This is not only the basis for St. Dionysius' teaching but also for the Creed and the great teaching about the Trinity. A classic example of which is our own St. Basil's teaching what I refer to as the impossible math of God's Nature. That is, that $1 + 1 + 1 = 1!$ It can not be and yet it is!

But what does this have to do with Christmas? God becoming man, the incarnation as the Church refers to it – it is the greatest impossibility man is capable of conceiving – and in fact, it is beyond conceiving. We only understand it in symbolic form the way we do other aspects of the Nature of God. From our understanding and perspective, it is beyond knowing, beyond unknowing.

Nothing has ever nor will ever come close. The mysteries of the cosmos with its infinitesimally large numbers and distances we hear about from astronomers, and of the infinitesimally small numbers we hear from quantum physicists, are all contained in the very large and very small jars of creation. Likewise, the great minds of science compared to Dionysius and Basil are, frankly, infantile.

In the Church when you contemplate the impossible reality of the Incarnation, the feeling you should have is one of repentance. You feel what Peter felt as he was sinking: help me lord! Have mercy on me! It cannot be and yet it is! You have to use all of yourself (mind, heart, will) to experience this as well.

If you engage your intellect without your heart (without prayer, particularly in the Church services), you will end in confusion at best and delusion at worst. If you engage your heart (even attending the services prayerfully) without your intellect, you will lose the sense that this is a historic reality – that it actually happened – and it will simply be a religious feeling. And if you engage your heart in the services of the Church and engage your mind but do not keep the commandments (do not engage your will) you will end where you began: in the pride and the self-love that leads to hypocrisy and eventually to idolatry.

We don't often associate Nativity, (Christmas), with repentance because we're thinking of manger scenes and wise men, and we're feeling the warmth of the celebration of gifts and great food. But if we think instead as Dionysius it will be so much more than those things. It will be a contact, an experience of the hand that pulls us to safety from the deep, it will be salvation.