

Sunday of St. Gregory Palamas

“I know my sheep, and am known by my own...” –John 10:15

Today the Church sets aside this Sunday – the second Sunday in Great Lent – to commemorate the life and work of St. Gregory Palamas, the beloved hierarch of Thessalonica and great defender of Orthodox dogma and spirituality.

St. Gregory was from an educated and prosperous family near Constantinople of the 14th century. His father was a senator in Constantinople and after he died, the care of the very young, and clearly gifted Gregory was undertaken by the emperor himself. As such he received probably the finest education available in the world at that time. It is said his knowledge of the philosophers was superior to any of the professional philosophers of his day. ...And yet his contribution, in a real way, was to save the Church *from* philosophy.

That is, save the path of the Father’s understanding and experience of the purification of hearts and the illumination of the soul and mind – preparing the struggler for the experience of deification – or theosis: the vision of God. Now in fairness to ancient philosophy, none of it was created, or embraced by the ancients as something that simply occupied the mind. It was something that was experienced. And if it couldn’t be experienced it wasn’t true.

However by the time of St. Gregory in the early and mid 1300’s, especially in the West, philosophy had degraded from a way to live to simply a way to think. And yes, also as a basis for morality, but a morality that justified itself either as simply being that which ‘worked’ or that which was logically consistent – rather than the Orthodox understanding of morality based on God. And specifically, based on the person of Jesus Christ.

But Christianity (Apostolic, Orthodox Christianity) is more than a moral code. And this is the problem we had, and have, with the philosophical, mentally oriented West. The dominate Western experience of God was basically limited to morality or a spirituality that really didn’t experience God outside the mental process...which is to say, *not* experience Him in the way the Church teaches the Prophets and Apostles and the God-bearing men and women of all ages in the Church have experienced him.

This Western view of God as inexperience-able ironically was championed by a Greek from Southern Italy. Barlaam of Calabria was schooled in Western philosophy but also had some understanding of the Fathers – especially Dionysius the Aeropogite who is the Church’s main teacher on the unknowability and inaccessibility of God by anything other than God. In other words, the created can not directly experience the creator – period.

Now the East believed this too in regards to God’s nature or essence. But the same Fathers that helped us know and experience God as one in three persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (our patron St. Basil among them), affirmed that God is His *essence* is

unknowable and inexperience-able; yet they also taught that God's nature is communicated to us (and experienced) in His *energy* (grace, or light).

Barlaam came to Greece wanting to be a bridge between the East and West, clearly believing with his knowledge of Western philosophy and Eastern theology he could help bring them back together (they had been apart by this time for almost 300 years). The East was very impressed by him. He was a profoundly charismatic teacher and speaker and was in demand at the Constantinopolitan court. In order to give him a deeper experience of the Eastern Church it was recommended he spend time with the Hesychasts.

The Hesychasts were monastics who, through the teaching of people like St.'s Maximus the Confessor and St. John of the Ladder (who we will commemorate in two weeks), used the sacramental and ascetic life of monasticism in the Church through the Jesus Prayer (Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me a sinner), to achieve stillness of soul. That as they purified their hearts of the passions and replaced them with the virtues and the stillness of the Jesus prayer they experienced purification and eventually illumination – and to those whom God granted it – theosis, the vision of God.

And this experience wasn't just in their minds but was something they saw and felt and embraced, and were embraced by. And this experience was always the same: it was an experience of light. And not just light, but the uncreated light of Mount Tabor.

Now as they explained this process and experience to Barlaam he did what can only be today described as “flipped out!” He was completely scandalized. See God?! No man can see God! (I John 4:12). He was certain they were delusional because it was believed by all of them, not only on Mt. Athos but in all the monasteries and among many of the faithful lay men and women who practiced hesychasm. Because in Orthodoxy there is, and always has been, one spirituality just as there is one worship and one belief. And so Barlaam saw his opportunity to reconcile the East to the West by destroying this silly belief and practice. (He's the one that coined the term 'navel-gazer,' in making fun of the Hesychasts).

God, he reminded them, cannot and is not being experienced by these people. They are at best seeing a created light (either in their minds or with their physical eyes), and are delusional; or, at worst, if they are seeing a real light, it may even be demonic! There is no 'energy' of God, he charged, it is either His nature or it simply isn't Him.

It was at this point St. Gregory, as both a leading Hesychast and the leader of the Hesychasts of Mt. Athos, enters the arena. Through his use of Scripture he demonstrated inarguably the 'revelation' the prophets experienced was the uncreated Light of God, as did the Apostles on Mt. Tabor and Pentecost. Through his intimate knowledge of the Fathers he showed with equal force the uncreated Light was not just what they *taught* – it was what they had experienced.

And this experience – his experience, was his strongest argument. You see, Barlaam stood among them as one who argued theology as a philosophy. Or you could say from a philosophical perspective. But St. Gregory really didn't argue at all. He simply tried to help him understand – and the many others who were skeptical – *what he had experienced*. He did not speak as a philosopher, he spoke as a God-bearing Father who taught from personal knowledge and experience. He spoke as a theologian.

Personal knowledge and experience of the uncreated. Recognizing God in His uncreated light – and being recognized by Him. “I know my sheep and am known by them.” How today does Christ know His sheep, and how is He known by them? The West has no answer for this but in the Orthodox Church we understand (and many still experience) being known by Him and knowing him – experiencing Him – in the uncreated light of divinity.

The councils (there were two that went on for the better part of a decade) realized as they considered this, that this understanding of God's essence and His energy was so important that like the other great dogmas that define Apostolic Christianity, to reject this teaching is to reject the Church and to be in schism. You can't be Orthodox and reject St. Gregory's teaching.

Barlaam went back to Italy where he would be rewarded in his efforts to bring the East to their senses with a bishopric in the Roman Catholic Church. This 'scholastic' view of God he tempted the Orthodox with succeeded as fully in the West as it had failed in the East. And for the last 700 years while the West has fought one external battle and external enemy after another, the East has for the most part fought just one battle – the *internal* battle.

The battle the Apostle Paul refers to as “the Good fight” (1 Tim. 4:7). We fight sin that arises from the chief passion of self-love and the fear that is borne by unbelief – *our* sin and *our* unbelief – to purify *our* hearts and *our* minds that we may see and be seen, that we may know Jesus Christ and be known by Him in the uncreated energy, light and grace of God.

...*“I know my sheep, and am known by my*