Le combat spirituel dans le monde contemporain

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KALLISTOS WARE, Métropolite de Diocleia
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Bose, 12 septembre 2009
XVIIe Colloque œcuménique international
Conférence du métropolite KALLISTOS
Voici donc certains des éléments du combat spirituel dans le monde contemporain: d'une part, la descente aux enfers, le martyre, la kénose; de l'autre, la transfiguration, l'eucharistie, la prière du cœur

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XVIIe Colloque œcuménique international
de spiritualité orthodoxe
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Introduction

I count it an honour to have been invited to give the concluding address at this conference. This morning I shall attempt to do two things. First, bearing in mind that throughout this conference we have spoken repeatedly about “the passions”, I shall look more closely at this term, and try to specify, more precisely than has been done so far, what we mean by it. Secondly, I shall speak about the topic designated in my title, “The Spiritual Struggle in the Contemporary World”.

No new sins?

Over fifty years ago, a well-known spiritual guide in the Anglican tradition, Father Algy Robertson (of the Society of Saint Francis), who used to spend many hours each week hearing confessions, said to me, with a note of weariness in his voice: “What a pity there are no new sins!”. Contrary to the prevailing secular view, it is not holiness but sin that is dull and repetitive. Evil is basically uncreative and monstrous, whereas the saints display an inexhaustible variety and originality.

If sin is essentially repetitive, then it follows that the spiritual struggle – understood as unseen warfare against our evil thoughts and sinful passions – continues to be the same in the contemporary world as it always was in the past. The outward forms may alter, but the inner character remains unchanged. A book such as The Ladder of Divine Ascent by saint John Climacus can serve as a practical handbook in the twenty-first as much as in the seventh century. Today as in the past our adversary the devil, as roaring lion, goes about seeking who he may devour. Today as in the past Satan transforms himself into an angel of light. Today as in the past God calls us to that spirit of watchfulness summed-up by the ascetic fathers of the Christian East in the word nepsis: “Be sober, be vigilant”.

“Mortify” or “transfigure”?

Throughout our present colloquy, we have been referring constantly to the passions: but what precisely is meant by this term? It is unfortunate that the English word “passion”, normally used to translate pathos, is all together insufficient to convey the variety of senses present in the Greek term. Linked to the word paschein, “to suffer”, pathos means fundamentally a passive state, as contrasted with dynamis, an active power. It denotes something undergone by a person or object, an event or state that is experienced passively, thus sleep and death are termed pathos by Clement of Alexandria, and saint Gregory of Nazianzus describes the faces of the moon as path?. Applied to our inner life, pathos has thus the sense of a feeling or emotion suffered or undergone by a person.

Two different attitudes towards the passions can already be distinguished in Greek philosophy prior to the patristic period. First there is the view found in early stoicism, whereby pathos signifies a disordered and excessive impulse, horme pleonazousa in Zeno’s definition. It is pathological disturbance of the personality, a disease (morbus), as Cicero puts it. The wise man therefore aims at apatheia, freedom from the passions. Alongside this unfavourable view of the passions, however, there is also a more optimistic assessment, to be found in Plato and, in a more developed form, in Aristotle. Plato, in the Phaedrus, uses the analogy of the charioteer and the two horses. Here the soul is envisaged as a chariot, with reason (to logistikon) as the charioteer; two horses are yoked to the chariot, the one of noble breed, the other unruly or rebellious, denoting respectively the higher emotions of the “spirited” or “inclusive” part of the soul (to thymikon), and baser emotions of the “appetitive” part (to epithymitikon). Now the two-horse chariot needs horses if it is to move; without the vital energy that path? supply, the soul will lack forcefulness and the power to act. Moreover, if the two-horse chariot is to move in the right direction, it needs not one but both horses; reason, then, can not dispense with either the noble emotions or the baser passions, but it endeavours to keep them under control. So this analogy implies that the wise man should aim, not at the total suppression of the passions in any part of the soul, but at their maintenance in proper balance and harmony.

A similar view is advanced by Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics. In his opinion the path? include not only such things as desire and anger but also friendship, courage and joy. In themselves the passions are, he says, “neither virtues nor vices”, neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically evil, and we are neither commanded nor blamed because of them. They are neutral impulses, and everything depends – as metropolitan Filaret of Minsk pointed out in his address – upon the use to which they are put. Our objective, then, is not (as in stoicism) the total elimination of the passions, but rather the mean, to meson, that is to say a moderate and reasonable employment of them. The ideal is not apatheia but metropatheia (this latter term, however, is not actually used by Aristotle himself).

Which of these two understandings of passion is adopted in patristic theology? There is in fact no unanimity among the fathers. In the first place, an important group of writers follows the negative stoic usage. Clement of Alexandria repeats Zeno’s definition of pathos as pleonazousa horme, an “excessive impulse”, “disobedient to reason”, and “contrary to nature”. Passions are “diseases”, and the truly good person has no passions. Nemesius of Emesa likewise follows the stoic view. Evagrius of Pontus associates the passions closely with the demons; the aim of the spiritual combatant is therefore apatheia, but Evagrius gives this a positive content, associating it closely with love. In the Macarian homilies, the passions are almost always understood in a pejorative sense.
Yet in the second place there are fathers who, while basically hostile in their estimate of the passions, yet allow for a positive use of them. Saint Gregory of Nyssa considers that pathos was not originally part of human nature, but “was subsequently introduced into man after the first creation”, and so it does not form part of the definition of the soul. The passions have a character that is “bestial” (ktenodes), rendering us akin to the irrational animals. But, coming closer to the Aristotelian standpoint, Gregory adds that the passions can be put to good use: evil lies, not in the path? as such, but in the free choice (proairesis) of the person making use of them.

Saint John Climacus agrees on the whole with saint Gregory of Nyssa. Sometimes he speaks in negative terms, equating pathos with vice or evil (kakia), and insists that pathos was “not originally part of human nature”: “God is not the creator of the passions”, he says. They belong to human being specifically in their

fallen condition, and are to be considered “unholy”. No one should attempt to be a theologian unless he has attained apatheia. But he admits that the passions can be put to good use. The impulse underlying each passion is not in itself evil; it is we who, through our exercise of free choice, that “have taken our natural impulses and turned them into passions”. It is noteworthy that Climacus does not condemn eros, the sexual urge, as intrinsically sinful, but regards it as something that can be directed towards God.

In the third place, however, there are other writers that go yet further than this, and seem to allow that the passions may not only be put to good use, but are also part of our original nature, as created by God. This is particularly the case with abba Isaias (d. c. 491). In his second Logos he takes things that are usually regarded as passions such as desire (epithymia), envy or jealousy (z?los), anger, hatred and pride, and he maintains that they are all of them fundamentally kata physin, “in accordance with nature”, and can all of them be put to good use. Thus the desire that by nature should be directed towards God, we have misdirected towards “all kinds of impurity”. The zeal or jealousy that should lead us to pursue holiness – “strive jealousy for the good gifts”, says saint Paul (1Cor 12:31) – we have corrupted so that it leads us to envy each other. The anger and hatred that should be directed against the devil and all his works, we have misdirected towards our neighbour. Even pride can be put to good use: there is a good self-esteem that enables us to resist destructive self-pity and depression. So, for abba Isaias, such things as anger and pride – which Evagrius would regard as “demons” or as specifically evil thoughts – are on the contrary a natural part of our personhood as created by God. Desire or anger is not in itself sinful; what matters is the way in which it is used, either kata physin or para physin. It is unlikely that Isaias has been directly influenced by Plato or Aristotle, whom probably he had never read, but it may be drawing on the Coptic tradition, as found for example in the letters attributed to saint Antony the Great.

A positive approach to the passions can also be found in later writers. When saint Dionysius the Areopagite describes Hierotheos as “not only learning about but suffering divine things” (ou monon mathon alla kai pathon ta theia), he is surely implying that mystical experience is in some sense a pathos. Saint Maximos the Confessor although tending to endorse saint Gregory of Nyssa’s view that the passions only entered human nature subsequent to the first creation, refers nevertheless (as father Andrew Louth had noted) to “the blessed passion of holy love” (makarion pathos tes theias agapes); and he is not afraid of speak of union with God in erotic terms. The passions, insists, can be “praiseworthy” as well as “reprehensible”. According to saint Gregory Palamas, the aim of the Christian life is not the mortification (nekrosis) of the passions but their transposition or redirection (metathesis).

There is, then, sufficient evidence that the Greek fathers have been influenced not only by the negative stoic approach but also (directly or indirectly) by the more positive Aristotelian assessment. Those fathers who adopt a positive or, at least neutral, view of the passions, are in a minority; but it is a significant minority nonetheless. It could of course be argued that the point at issue is primarily semantic, a question of how we choose to employ the word “passion”. But do not the different usages of the word have much deeper implications? Words possess great symbolic power, and the manner in which they are employed as a decisive influence over the way that we conceive reality. So it is with the word pathos. Are we to follow the negative usage of the stoics, or the open-handed usage of Aristotle? This can have a far-reaching effect on the pastoral counsel that we give to others – and to ourselves. Do we say “mortify” or do we say “transfigured”? Do we say “eradicate” or “educate”? Do we say “eliminate” or “redirect”? There is an enormous difference here.

So far as our spiritual struggle in the contemporary world is concerned, I am firmly convinced that we shall be far more effective if we say “transfigure” rather than “destroy”. The contemporary world in which we dwell is, at any rate in western Europe, a heavily secularized world, alienated from the Church. If we are to win back that world for Christ, if we are ourselves to preserve our Christian identity in this alienated environment, then we shall do well to present our Christian message in affirmative rather than condemnatory terms. We need to light a candle rather than to curse the darkness.

Three sombre themes

Turning now to the second part of my address, I would like to single out six aspects of the spiritual struggle in the contemporary world. My list is not systematic, and it makes no claim to be exhaustive. I shall speak in terms of both darkness and light. Three of my chosen aspects have at first sight a sombre character, three evince a more luminous spirit; but all six are in the last resort not negative but eminently positive.

(1) Descent in hell.

Hell, may be regarded as the absence of God, the place where God is not (it is true that, viewed in a more subtle perspective, hell is not empty of God, for – as saint Isaac the Syrian insists – God's love is everywhere). It is not surprising that Christians in the twentieth century, dwelling in a world marked by the sense of God's absence, should have therefore interpreted their vocation as descensus ad inferos. Paul Evdokimov develops this idea in connection with the sacrament of baptism, which forms indeed the foundation of the Christian's spiritual struggle (as brother Enzo insisted in his opening address). "Speaking of the ceremony of immersion at baptism", observes Evdokimov, "saint John Chrysostom remarks: «The action of descending into the water and then rising out of it again symbolizes the descent of Christ into hell and his return from hell once more». To undergo baptism, then, means not only to die and to rise with Christ: it means also that we descend into hell, that we bear the stigmata of Christ the priest, his sacerdotal care, his apostolic anguish for the destiny of those who chose hell". Evdokimov's line of thought has much in common with the ideas of Hans Urs von Balthasar. But it must not be forgotten, as archbishop Hilarion Alfeev has demonstrated in a recent book, that Christ's descent into hell is above all an act of victory.

An Orthodox saint of the twentieth century who particularly emphasized descent into hell is saint Silouan the Athonite. "Keep thy mind in hell, and despair not", it teaches, adding that this is the way to acquire humility. His disciple father Sophrony insists, "he was referring to a real experience of hell". In his meditations, saint Silouan recalls the cobbler in Alexandria, whom saint Antony visited, and who used to say: "Everyone will be saved – I alone shall perish". Silouan applies this words to himself: "Soon shall I die and take up my abode in the dark prison of hell. And I alone shall burn there".
Yet it would be a mistake to interpret Silouan's standpoint in purely negative and gloomy terms. Full weight should be given to both parts of his statement: not only does he say, "Keep thy mind in hell", but he adds at once, "and despair not". Elsewhere he maintains that belief in one's own damnation is a temptation from the evil one. There are, he says, two thoughts that come from the enemy: "You are a saint" and "you will not be saved". Silouan was profoundly influenced by saint Isaac the Syrian's teachings about the invincible character of divine love. "If love is not present", he states, "everything is difficult". Conversely, if love is present, everything is possible.
Christ's descent into hell and his triumphant resurrection from the dead form one undivided event, a single and unified action.

(2) Martyrdom.

The particular form which descent into hell has taken during the twentieth century in the spiritual struggle of Orthodox Christians has been the experience of persecution and martyrdom. Truly for the Christian East the past century has been for excellence a century of martyrdom. Let it be remembered, moreover, that although communism has fallen in Russia and eastern Europe, there are still many places in the world where Christians – Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike – continue to undergo persecution (think of Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, China, …). In the words of a Russian priest of the emigration, father Alexander Elchadimov, who died in 1934, "the world is crooked and God straightens it. That is why Christ suffered (and still suffers), as well as all the martyrs, confessors, and saints – and we who love Christ cannot but suffer as well". Saint Silouan points out, martyrdom can be inner as well as outer: "Praying for people", he says, "means shedding blood". At the same time, as in his apophthegm, "Keep thy soul in hell, and despair not", he insists on the concurrence of darkness and light, of despair and hope. Thus the suffering of martyrs is also a source of joy: as it puts it, "extreme suffering is a line to extreme bliss".

One martyr whose spiritual struggle has particularly captured the Orthodox imagination, in the last sixty year, is saint Maria Skobtsova, who died in the gas chamber of Ravensbrück on 13th March 1945, possibly taking the place of another prisoner. If this was indeed the case, then it indicates how the martyr – like the Christ himself, the protomartyr – fulfils a vicarious role, dying on behalf of others, dying that others may live. The martyr fulfils, in an ultimate and final way, saint Paul's injunction, "bear one another's burdens" (Gal 6:2). This, indeed, was a theme, that mother Maria stressed in her own writings. In an anthology of saints' lives that she compiled, she records a story about saint Ioannikios the Great and a possessed girl: "He placed his hand on the suffering patient's head and said calmly: «By the power of the living God, I, his unworthy servant Ioannikios, take upon myself your sin, if you have sinned … because my shoulders are stronger than your shoulders; because I want to accept your trial for the sake of love». The girl was cured; Ioannikios entered into her agony and came closer to death before emerging, victorious, from his contest with the power of evil".
This, then, is a all-important aspect of the spiritual struggle: to endure martyrdom, visibly or inwardly to shed one's blood for the sake of others.

(3) Kenosis.

Closely linked with the two elements of which we have been speaking, descent into hell and martyrdom, is a third, kenosis or self-emptying. The one who engage in the spiritual struggle identify himself with the humiliated Christ (here I recall a remarkable book, written seventy years ago by a Russian author, Nadegda Gorodetsky, The Humiliated Christ in Modern Russian Thought; it is still well worth reading). Before her imprisonment, saint Maria Skobtsova displayed this kenotic spirit in a striking way, displaying a costly solidarity with the destitute, the outcast, with all those marginalized by society, and – when the second world war came – with the Jews. "The bodies of our fellow human beings", she wrote, "must be treated with more care than our own. Christian love teaches us not only to give our brethren spiritual gifts, but material gifts as well. Even our last shirt, our last piece pf bread must be given to them. Personal almsgiving and the most wide-ranging social work are equally justifiable and necessary".
A saint from the Greek tradition who has displayed this kenotic spirit is a notable degree is Nektarios of Pentapolis, who died in 1920. Stories abound concerning his humility. As a young bishop in Alexandria, when unjustly attacked by others, he refuses to retaliate or defend himself against slander. When he was director of the Rizareion theological school in Athens, the cleaner fell hill; to prevent the man's post being given to someone else saint Nektarios rose day by day in the early hours of the morning and himself swept the passages and cleaned the lavatories, until the man was ready to return to work. In his later years visitors who met him working in garden of the monastery that he had founded mistook him for a workman, never guessing that he was bishop. In these and many other ways saint Nektarios obeyed Paul's words: "Let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus … He empted himself" (Phil 2:6).

Light in the darkness

Describing the spiritual struggle, saint Paul underlines its antinomic character: "… In honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute … dying, and see – we are alive … sorrowful, yet always rejoicing … having nothing and yet possessing everything" (2Cor 6:8-10). Let us now balance these three sombre elements in the spiritual struggle with three more joyful elements that are of particular importance in the contemporary world.

(1) Transfiguration.

Earlier, when analyzing the different ways in which the warfare against the passions can be understood, I suggested that it is, at this present juncture, wiser to say to ourselves, not "mortify" or "eradicate", but rather "transfigure". Indeed, the mystery of the Transfiguration as a particular value for us at this present time. Our spiritual struggle has certainly to involve renunciation, ascetic effort, sweat, blood and tears, inner and perhaps also outer martyrdom; but all of this we lose its true value unless it is eliminated by the uncreated

light of Tabor. In this connection, it is certainly no coincidence that the most influential saint in the life and experience of twentieth-century Orthodoxy has been Seraphim of Sarov, who is precisely a saint of the Transfiguration. When I first visited Greece, fifty-five years ago, saint Seraphim was virtually unknown. Now, wherever I go on Hellenic soil, I see his icon in churches and in homes; and in monasteries I frequently meet monks and nuns who have been named “Seraphim” and “Seraphima” in his honour. All this is entirely as it should be, for he is indeed a saint for our time.

At the same time let us not sentimentalize the saint of Sarov, or oversimplify his spiritual struggle. We are right to recall how he wore white clothing, not the customary monastic black; how he called his visitors “my joy”, and greeted them throughout the year with the paschal salutation: “Christ is risen”; how is face shone with glory in the presence of his disciple Nicolas Motovilov. But let us not forget the demonic souls that he had to endure, as he prayed on the rock beside his hermitage and heard the flames of hell crackling around him; let us not forget the physical pain he suffered after being crippled by the attack of the three robbers in the forest; let us not forget the misunderstanding that he had to endure from his own abbot, and the slander that pursued him up to his death. Truly, he understood what saint Paul had in view when he said: “Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing”. In the spiritual struggle, transfiguration and cross-bearing are inseparable.

(2) Eucharist.

Earlier it was said that baptism forms the foundation of the Christian’s spiritual struggle. But baptism is not to be divided from holy communion; and so the Eucharist also plays a foundational role in our spiritual combat. In the earlier patristic period, many ascetic writers such as saint John Climacus or saint Isaac the Syrian make little or no reference to the Eucharist. But in our spiritual struggle today the Eucharistic aspect needs to be made explicit and placed in the forefront. Significantly, this is exactly what was done by a great priest-celebrant at the outset of the twentieth century, saint John of Kronstadt. “The Eucharist is a continual miracle”, he used to say; and he entered to the full into this “continual miracle” by officiating daily at the divine liturgy. The intensity of his Eucharistic celebration astonished his contemporaries: saint Silouan, for example, speaks of “the force of his prayer”, and adds, “his whole being [was] a flame of love”. He insisted that all present at the service should receive communion with him. Under his influence and that of others, the reception of communion has indeed become more frequent in the Orthodox Church of the twentieth century; yet there are still many places where the faithful approach the sacrament only three or four times a year. This is surely regrettable. In the contemporary world our spiritual struggle needs to be, in the fullest possible way, a Eucharistic struggle.
At the central point in the divine liturgy, immediately before the epiclesis of the Holy Spirit, the deacon elevates the holy gifts, as the priest says: “Offering Thee thine own from what is thine own, in all things and for all things (ta za ek ton zon soi prospherontes, kata panta kai dia panta). This brings us to an aspect of the divine liturgy of especial relevance to our spiritual struggle in the contemporary world: and this is the cosmic dimension of the Eucharist. It is significant that in the Eucharist we offer the gifts not just “for all human beings” (dia pantas) but “for all things” (dia panta). The Eucharistic oblation embraces in its scope not merely humankind but the entire realm of nature. It is all-embracing. So the Eucharist places upon us an ecological responsibility. It commits us to protect and love not only our fellow humans but all living things: and not only that, but to protect and love the grass, the trees, the rocks, the water and the air. Celebrating the Eucharist with full awareness, we look upon the whole world as a sacrament.

Our spiritual struggle, then, is not simply anthropocentric. We are saved not from but with the world; and so we struggle to sanctify and to offer back to God, not our own selves alone, but the whole of creation. This ecological outreach in our spiritual struggle has been particularly emphasized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the last two decades. Patriarch Dimitrios and his successor, the present patriarch Bartholomew have established 1 September, the commencement of the ecclesiastical year, as a “day for the protection of the environment”, to be observed (so it is hoped) not only by Orthodox but by other Christians as well. “Let us consider ourselves”, said patriarch Dimitrios” in his Christmas message for 1988, “each one according to his or her position, to be personally responsible for the world, entrusted into our hands by God. Whatever the Son of God has assumed and made his body by his incarnation should not perish. But it should become a Eucharistic offering to the Creator, a life-giving bread, partaken in justice and love with others, a hymn of

peace for all creatures of God". In the words of saint Silouan, "the heart that has learnt to love has pity for all creation". This cosmic tenderness, as dom André Louf reminded us, is a leitmotiv in saint Isaac.

(3) Prayer of the heart.

However important the Eucharistic and liturgical aspect of the spiritual struggle is, at the same time the struggle for inner prayer needs to be given full emphasis. In the spiritual struggle of the twentieth century, inner prayer has meant, for the Orthodox, pre-eminently but by no means exclusively, the Jesus prayer. The importance of the invocation of the holy name has come to be appreciated, during the last hundred years, through the influence above all of two books: The Way of a Pilgrim and the Philokalia. Both have enjoyed an altogether unexpected success in the West. Probably the Jesus prayer is being practiced today by more people than ever in the past. Ours is not only a secular age!

Such, then, are some elements of the spiritual struggle in the contemporary world: on the one side, descent into hell, martyrdom, kenosis; on the other, transfiguration, Eucharist, prayer of the heart. The two triads are not to be opposed but combined together, as saint John Climacus does (and here I recall the talk of father Ioustinos) when he coins the word charmolype, "joy-sorrow", and speaks of charopoion penthos, "sorrow that creats joy". The two complementary aspects of the spiritual struggle are well summed up in two short sayings of saint Seraphim of Sarov, that I try to keep constantly in mind: "Where there is no sorrow, there is no salvation"; "The Holy Spirit fills with joy whatever he touches".

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