

Draft of Eastern Christian Contemplation by R. Valantasis and D. Bleyle

1 Eastern Christian Contemplation

Introduction

When we begin to explore the Eastern Christian tradition of contemplation we enter a very different world. A saying from the Sayings of the Desert Masters shows how different that world:

Abba Lot received Abba Joseph and said to him: "Abba, according to my ability I perform my order of prayer a little, I fast a little, I pray, meditate, and practice stillness a little, and as best I can I cleanse my thoughts. What more, then, must I do? The old man arose and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became as ten lamps of fire, and he said to him, "If you wish, become entirely as fire."

"To become entirely as fire" describes the goal of Eastern Christian contemplation. Think for a minute about the implications of this. Becoming entirely as fire does not mean leaving the body aside, because the fire is seen in the body. Becoming "entirely as fire" does not mean leaving aside your normal day to day life; it happens in the course of your daily pattern of living. Becoming entirely as fire does not mean withdrawing from other people; it is revealed in the midst of your relationships. And becoming entirely as fire is not for special people; everyone is called to "become entirely as fire."

But how does a person "become entirely as fire?" How does a person begin to contemplate? This is where the Eastern Christian tradition shines. We begin to contemplate, to become entirely as fire, when we simply turn our minds to God. Very simple. We become entirely as fire when we train our minds to see God's presence everywhere around us, when we find God presence in the patterns of our thoughts and emotions, when we see God's divine presence in our relationships, when we learn to experience the physical world around us as totally alive in God's divine presence. Contemplation for Eastern Christians is a simple process of training the mind and the senses to experience God as completely present, when we learn to participate in God's divine energy planted in the physical universe. When we do this, slowly over time, we "become entirely as fire." Through contemplation, and all the practices that support it, the Christian "becomes entirely as fire," illuminated with divine light and luminous divine agents in the world.

The training of the mind and senses to perceive the divine energy that is ever-present and ever-active remakes the world as we know it. We enter a new world, one alive with God's presence, one no longer operating on the surface of things where God is not visible, a world where by participation we may "become

entirely as fire."

The contours of that world is made clear from a statement of St. Athanasios, the fourth-century Alexandrian theologian: "God became human so that humans may become God." That's an amazing statement: "God became human so that humans may become God." For Athanasios, as for all the Eastern Christian theologians, when Jesus took on the flesh of Mary, the Mother of God, God became a human being for the simple reason to open the way for humans to transform themselves by participating in the divine energy of God. When God became enfleshed in Jesus, God opened the door for contemplation for all human beings, indeed for all created and existent beings, so that they might "become all fire" through their union with God. The union of God and human in the incarnation of Jesus opened the way for the reunion of human and God through contemplation. This is indeed a new world – a world in which God becomes human and humans become God. And it is contemplation that makes this possible for every human being.

Entry into this new world comes through the mind and the senses. This union of human and God is achieved, according to the Eastern Christian tradition, through the training of the mind and the senses. God's presence, the divine energy, is present throughout creation. When the Good God created the universe including the material world, God declared it good. The goodness of the creation participated in God's goodness, and the creation revealed the divine energy of God in the material world. The Fall of Adam and Eve interrupted the ability of the mind to understand and the senses to perceive the divine presence of God. The incarnation of Jesus healed that interruption and opened the way again for the mind and the senses to participate in the goodness of God. The goal, then, for contemplation, is to retrain the mind to understand God's pervasive and persistent presence and the senses to perceive the divine energy present in the material world. In other words, the goal is to become divine, to participate in the divine presence, in order to live "entirely as fire" in the physical universe.

Another way of understanding Eastern Christian contemplation is that contemplation is a means of refining the body. Diadochos writes: XXXX. Our goal through contemplation is to remake the body so that the body in all its complex relationships becomes refined, transformed, remade so that it reflects and displays the fire of divine presence in the physical universe. We "become all fire" as our bodies become transparent to the divine energy present in all of God's creation. We "become God" as we refine the material and physical body to reveal the divine presence in it and in all the interconnections of the body in society and in the world. Contemplation refines the body by making the body transparent to God. But to understand this better, we look to the meaning of the word "contemplation" in Greek.

The meaning of contemplation in the Eastern Christian tradition:

What, then, is the meaning of the word "contemplation" in the Eastern Christian context? The Greek language is very rich in its associations. The Greek word for contemplation is θεωρία. In ancient Greek religion, a person was selected by the city to go to the great oracles to discover the divine purpose and direction of the city's life and to report the oracle's words to the city. Such a person was a θεωρός, one who is sent from the city state to consult the oracles on its behalf, one sent to see, to scope out the divine will. The root meaning of the verbal form of the word (θεωρέω) means to be a θεωρός. The verb relates to seeing: to be sent to consult an oracle, to go as a spectator, to contemplate or consider, to observe, to perceive, to speculate or theorize. As a noun it means viewing or beholding, perception, theory, and, when applied to the mind, contemplation. "Contemplation," then from ancient times meant a process of consulting an oracle, of discerning the divine mind and presence for a community of people.

In the classical world, the word itself relates to seeing something, to sight, to the gaze. The classical sense, however, relates not to the seeing with the physical eyes, but with a kind of seeing that relates to oracular events. It is the sight that comes from consulting an oracle, from seeing through divine eyes and scoping out the realities of situations with the mind's eye. At its basest level it means simply a spectator; the word never loses its literal meaning, but it always suggests much more mental activity. One sees a spectacle, something spectacular, only by derivation from its original meaning "to consult an oracle." What makes the spectacle is its revelatory quality. The root of the Greek word understands contemplation as something revelatory, oracular, related to the gods and their plan for human endeavor.

So in antiquity, contemplation meant simply consulting God, going to the places where God is known to be present, listening to what God has to say, and then bringing the words of God to the people. In its heart, contemplation relates to society. It is not something just for an individual's benefit, but for the success and promotion of the entire society.

In the Christian context, θεωρία continues the classical sense of the word. In its root, the Christians understood the root word to mean seeing, beholding, a seer, a spectator, sight or spectacle. But for Christians the word primarily referred to contemplation. But for the Eastern Christians who believe that God's divine energy is present in all creation, contemplation meant looking beneath the surface appearance of things to see, to know, to experience the divine presence embedded in the material world. The world we live in, is the oracle. The people who live in the material world are the oracle. The social relationships of the person are the oracle. We peer deep into the physical world to gaze upon the reality of God's divine energy in, through, and around us.

Contemplation is the purpose of living creatures. All created beings, everything that lives, was created in order to contemplate and glorify the Creator. The end of life, its goal and purpose, is to contemplate God as origin, sustainer, and end of all creation. This is the first and primary category through which to understand contemplation. NB those who went in to the desert to learn contemplation from the animals.

The ultimate goal of contemplation is to enable every person to "become all fire" by participating in the divine presence, or by union with God through the training of the mind and senses. Another way of saying this, which reflects the linguistic basis of *theoria*, is to say that everyone may connect with the Vision of God, everyone may participate in God, and everyone may be united to God in the course of their day-to-day living.

Contemplation is different, however, for every created being. That is the joy of contemplation. God did not create the world as uniform, but as brimming with difference. There are many varieties of flowers, plants, rocks, water systems, and animals. And each person is different from every other person. So the revelation of God differs in each created and existent being. The material world's almost overwhelming diversity functions as a very complex and diverse oracle or the presence of God. In a sense, the more diverse the creation the more complex the understanding and experience of the divine energy in it.

So it is important to note, since each person is unique and different from every other person, there is no one single path or program of contemplation in the Christian East. There is no single system that applies to everyone, but each person must take up the contemplative life in accordance with the particular way that they are put together – their particular psychological and social state, their particular emotional structure, in their specific relationships and works. Since we are all very different from one another, each one of us must make our way according to the realities of our bodies, minds, relationships, and attitudes. We "become all fire" in the unique way we are put together. We "become God" in the distinct and unique ways that define who we are. As we train our minds and senses to perceive the divine energy in which all creation participates, that is, as we contemplate, we begin to participate in the divine energy, training ourselves to become more and more transparent to the divine energy, and revealing in our bodies the reality of the divine present, thereby becoming divine light in the world. This is the great vision of Eastern Christian contemplation, and contemplation is the goal of life for every existent being.

The degrees of contemplation

Since there is such a great diversity of persons in creation, the Eastern

Christian contemplative tradition has laid out three different degrees of contemplation to accommodate the distinctive patterns of contemplation to suit different life-circumstances. Again, these are not a system, but simply categories in which to understand how diverse people might contemplate in the context of the realities of their daily lives. Each of these three different degrees or states of contemplation depend upon the disposition of the person. In this sense, contemplation is different for each person, because each person must discover the way of contemplation that most suits the particular way a person is put together psychologically, socially, and politically. Each of us participates in God's divine energies differently. The degrees define more ways of understanding contemplation than defining a particular practice of contemplation.

The first degree or state of contemplation is that of asceticism, or the development of the virtues in the active life. Asceticism is the reformation of the body and its relationships to establish in the body the virtues, or powers, of God. In this degree, one begins to train the body and mind to live according to the divine energies. List the virtues. By developing these virtues in our bodily and social lives, we begin to manifest the divine presence in the material world of our daily existence. This is the foundation of contemplation and it is the easiest method of contemplation for people living the active life. By living virtuously, we manifest the love, justice, and reality of God in the details of our daily living.

The next degree is that of contemplation of God in nature, in the sensible world. This is frequently called natural contemplation. Here the contemplative begins to peer beneath the surface of things to find evidence of the divine energies as source, origin, and end of its existence. Beginning with plants, animals, rocks, and everything in the material world, the contemplative begins to see them as also participating in God, as exhibiting the divine energy, and as revealers of God who created them and who is their end. The mind begins to connect explicitly with the divine energies as they are found in the sensible world.

The third degree or state of contemplation is that of theology. Here the mind enters into the contemplation of God as revealed in the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Eastern Christian contemplatives acknowledge very forcefully that we cannot know God in God's essence, or as God knows God's own self. We can only know God in the divine energies that enable to participate in God. But we can know God as Creator and source of being, as generating new life, and as sanctifying presence. We can, that is, move beyond the sensible expressions of the divine energy into the contemplation of the divine energies in themselves. This is theology, not because it is abstract, but because it praises God directly in the divine energies, not through the agency of the sensible world. For Eastern Christians, as Evagrius said it, "A theologian is

one who prays truly, and one who prays truly is a theologian. This state or degree of contemplation enters into the deep prayer of participation in God.

These degrees of contemplation are not a ladder, or a system that leads from one to another. Everyone can participate in each one of them at different times in the day and during different periods of one's life. At some time we may capture the vision of the Trinity, and at another discover the divine energies in a beautiful flower, or feel the divine energy operating when we treat another person with love and charity. The degrees simply help us to categorize the way we are contemplating, rather than forming a progressive system from the lowest to the highest degree. The one contemplating theologically is not released from the obligations of ascetical contemplation, of manifesting the virtues in daily living. Nor is the natural contemplative released from contemplating God theologically or ascetically. All the degrees of contemplation work hand in hand with the others so effect the transformation of the person, to divinize, to make one's self and relationships "become entirely as fire."

These degrees of contemplation help us to engage in a deep and profound mystery of the divine energies operating in the material world. We call this a mystery because in the end we only see the traces of the divine presence in the world and in ourselves. We do not see God directly. The mystery is that we cannot know God in God's own self, by essence. We can only know God through God's divine energies present in the world. Contemplation leads us to realization of divine incomprehensibility, to the experience of our limitations as regards the knowledge of God. There is an element of humility here. We work diligently to contemplate God in nature, in the development of virtues, and in theological contemplation, but ultimately God and God's presence remain a mystery that is unfathomable and incomprehensible to us in our human condition. And so contemplation leads us to the consideration of this mystery and a way of living with the mystery that reveals God as best we can given our limitations.

And yet through encountering this mystery, contemplation leads us to union with Christ. Through contemplation and our participation in God through the virtues and through investigating the divine energy in sensible realities, we come to a fuller union with Christ who is the *Logos*, the mind of God incarnate in the world. Participation leads to that union. Our contemplative work leads to that union with the divine God-human who entered into our material and sensible world in order to open it to the knowledge of God.

Union, however, is not static. We do not achieve union with God once and for all, but we experience our union with Christ in a progressive way. Slowly over time, in small and incremental steps, we make progress in the training of the mind and the senses to perceive and know the divine energies. We slowly and gently develop our bodies through the practice of the virtues,

and we make progress toward being perfectly virtuous. In natural contemplation, we develop more and more a capacity to see the divine energy operating in the physical world. We progressively move to the point where we can see the divine energies operating in various plants, animals, rocks, seas, and, yes, even in other people whom we do not like. There is a cumulative and progressive element here. And we contemplate theologically, knowing that our knowledge of God is always partial and contingent, and yet still striving to know God. Perfection is an eternal progress toward a more and more alignment of the mind with the divine energy. Progress never ceases, and full union is never achieved, but at the same time the body and relationships of each person becomes more and more luminous; they become more and more "entirely as fire." As each summit of union is attained, more and more horizons open up, and we are led to new and different ways both to contemplate the divine energies and to experience the divine presence.

This progressive union with Christ makes us worthy of the same visions of God that our ancestors received. We are made capable through union with Christ to receive the same sorts of visions that the prophets of old received, to become empowered for the same majestic acts of divine power manifest in the apostles and martyrs, to become divine seers in our own age, pointing the way to others to experience and see the divine energies present in the material world, and finally to participate in God with the same power and vision of our spiritual forebears the saints.

The story that defines contemplation

Contemplation plunges us into a story of God's relationship to the world and to everything in creation. That story explains why contemplation is important for everyone and for everything.

The story begins in the creation. God is the creator, "the cause, beginning and end" of all beings" (as Maximos the Confessor writes). Even though each existent being is different, unique, distinct, God "makes them converge in each other by the singular force of their relationship to God as origin." This underscores the reality of the link of all existent beings with God. There is no separation, no distance from God, for the contemplative, because the contemplative sees that as the common origin of existence, God is everywhere, in all things, as origin and sustainer. The contemplative goal, then, is to see beyond the differences and the distinctions that define individual people and existent beings, and to see the common origin of all people and things in God. So the beginning of the story is that God created everything to be different, and yet participates in everything God created as both the One who sustains creation and draws all creation into reunion with God.

But the story takes a twist. Something happens to disrupt the creation

from understanding and participating in God. The unfolding of the revelation of God as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit takes the story to the next level. Here's the twist. The revelation of God as Trinity relates to the story of the Fall of human being. God the Father is the creator of all existent beings, of the cosmos, of the physical and spiritual world in which we live. Human beings, created to see and to know God directly with direct access, fell from that knowledge into a state in which the spiritual could no longer be seen in the physical realm. The Fall of Adam and Eve interrupted this communion with God so that all they could see was the apparent and visible world as an end in itself.

To rectify this human fall, this human blindness to and lack of apperception of the reality of God's presence in all material existence, God generated and sent his son, Jesus, to take on the flesh, to enter material existence in order to open the way again to see the spiritual in the physical realm. The Son is distinct from the Father, generated in order to bridge the gap between the Father and the creation, while remaining of the same substance of the Father. Fully God and fully human, the Son was generated by the Father to redeem the material world. What Jesus accomplished in his incarnation, when God became a human being and took on human flesh, was generic. The incarnation opened again the possibility of seeing God, the spiritual reality, in the physical realm. After the incarnation, materiality could no longer be a detriment to the knowledge of God.

This next phase of the story explains why Eastern Christians venerate the Virgin Mary so enthusiastically. In the developing story, the Mother of God, the Theotokos, actualized the inherent union between the physical and the spiritual, the divine and the human, to such an extent that her agreement to bear the Son of God reconciled and atoned humanity for the rest of time and history. This is an important point. When Mary said her yes to God, she was the first human to resolve the problem that Adam and Eve caused. In the Theotokos, the material world became united again to the spiritual, so that the way Adam and Eve communed with God in the beginning before the Fall was reestablished for all humans. In the Theotokos, the invisible God could once again become visible to the physical eye.

We need to spend a little more time in this part of the story to understand a little better how contemplation works for us humans. Theologically Jesus Christ "is recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ." This is the language of the Council of Chalcedon in 451. At this council, the role of the

Theotokos, the Mother of God, was to realize this union, not only for Jesus, but also for all created beings following her. The physical and the spiritual, the human and the divine, form two distinct and unconfused natures within both Jesus and all other humans. Contemplation effects in the contemplative the two natures, that is, as contemplatives we seek to manifest the dual natures becoming transparent to the divine energies in the mortal flesh in which we live, just as Jesus took on the two natures without confusion so we take on the two natures without confusion. We become divinized, or deified, without becoming God. At this point in the story, contemplatives make real what St. Athanasios affirmed when he said "God became human so that humans may become God." We understand the story to be not so much about God as about the goals of human existence in contemplation.

The story becomes much more complex as we hear about the work of the Holy Spirit. God did not create the world to be uniform. The story rests on the wonder of the great diversity in everything God created. But that diversity also needed to be somehow reunited to God. How could this be accomplished. Somehow the diversity in creation also needed to be sanctified and restored. So God sent the Holy Spirit to sanctify the particularities of each individual existent beings reality. The Spirit, like the Son, is an expression of God proceeding into the world from the Father, still of the same substance of God, and yet performing the divine will in a distinct fashion in the world. The work of the Son was generic, to bridge the gap between physical and spiritual. The work of the Spirit is specific and very particular, to sanctify the unique and distinct characteristics of each and every created being.

So we contemplate in order to become part of this story. We, too, like the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, wish to internalize and make the divine energy and presence of God a reality in our bodies and relationships through connecting with our own creation by the Father, redemption by the Son, and sanctification by the Holy Spirit. In other words, contemplation places us inside the story and makes us a character in it so that we too may participate in God. Contemplation makes us a part of the creation, redemption, and sanctification of the entire physical universe and an agent for the divinization of all creation. We enter the mystery of God by becoming a character in the divine story unfolding around and within us – story begun in the creation, continuing through the ages even in our own lives, and continuing until all things are restored again to God through union with God. The mystery is that we will never know the whole story, the full story, until everything has been restored and when, as St. Paul puts it, "God will be all in all."

The concept of divinization

Contemplation (*theoria*) is related to divinization, or deification (*theosis*).

Earlier we quoted Athanasios that "God became human so that humans may become God." This process of "becoming God" is called divinization. The Greek word is *theosis*. Divinization is the process of becoming God by manifesting the divine energies inherent in the person. This does not mean that we become God in God's essence, but that we become God through participation in the divine energies of God located in the material and physical world. What Abba Lot was saying to Abba Joseph, when he said "If you wish, become all fire," was simply "be divinized," "conform your life entirely to the divine energies of God and become a light to the world. That is precisely what divinization means, conformity with the divine energies, or union with God in daily activities and thoughts and reactions and relationships. Everything in human existence – every thought and reaction, every emotion, every task, every relationship – everything consciously participates in the divine energy which God has planted in creation. But this union with God, this participation in the divine energies, is not unusual, that is to say, something that happens to special people under particular circumstances. Rather it is the normative life of the Christian in every activity and relationship every day. Divinization is the norm, the basis, the breaking open of the material world to reveal the divine energy present in it, and as we conform ourselves and our relationships to this divine energy, we become more and more divinized.

The divinization of the particularity of each person

We have been presenting the central concepts essential for understanding Eastern Christian contemplation. You will never find a single pattern laid out in the tradition for everyone to follow. Eastern Christian contemplation, in that sense, is not a system, but a process geared to the specifics and particularities of each person's life. By thinking about the concepts we have presented above, each person must devise their own practices of contemplation suited to their personal make-up, position in life, work, relationships, and psychological make-up. One practices contemplation precisely in the embodied realities of our daily lives: in work, in leisure, with family and friends, in community, on the subway, in the office, at school. Wherever we are and however we live, we contemplate as we peer through the surface of living to see with our mind and senses the presence of the divine energies in, around, and through us.

Because Eastern Christian contemplation is not a set system that applies to everyone, the tradition advises strongly that each person find and relate to a spiritual guide, a person with deep and wide experience of the struggle to contemplate who can act as agent of transformation for the individual. In the tradition, texts have functioned as spiritual guides in the absence of an actual person, but the principle is the same: each of us must relate to others, to

another, and submit our process of divinization and contemplation to the discernment and scrutiny of others. We cannot do this alone. Not only must we become a part of a worshiping community and participate fully in the liturgical life of a congregation, but we must also find a capable and experienced guide to assist us in the way. This need for connection, interconnection with others, and submission to a spiritual guide arises precisely because there is no single and comprehensive program that fits the circumstances of every person's life. The individual nature of contemplation and divinization demands that we connect to others so that we do not delude ourselves or find ourselves in spiritual trouble.

In the end, however, contemplation relates to engagement with a profound mystery of a God fully present in the material and physical world. The mystery means that we work toward divinization through contemplation even understanding that we will never achieve a full knowledge of God. Contemplation, that is, requires a continual return to face the mystery, learning more and more, transforming ourselves and our relations more and more, and yet always in the face of a mystery that confounds both our minds and our work. In other words, there is a limit to our divinization, despite all the progress that we might make through a life-time, and that limit is the mystery of God-with-us, Jesus, the God-Human.

2 Knowing God in Unknowing

We begin our contemplative practice by looking at the process of investigating the material world to discover the mystery of the divine energy flowing in it. In this practice, we begin to understand the human capacity to know God and at the same time the human limitations to that knowledge of God. In the Eastern Christian tradition this is the process called kataphatic and apophatic knowledge of God that leads to union with God.

Let's begin with something simple. A basic question. What makes a particular flower beautiful? When you pick up a flower and investigate all the elements of a flower, the question becomes a very complex one. Is the beauty in the colors of the flower that seem so perfectly to harmonize in it? Is the beauty in the shape of the petal of the flower, or in the way the petals coordinate to shape a whole? Is the beauty in the way the petals relate to the stamen that reproduce the flower with the help of birds and bees? In what does the beauty of the flower consist? And, then, how do we understand the concept of beauty itself and relate that to this particular flower that we have in our hand? And finally, how do we begin to understand the relationship of this particular flower to the divine energy that caused it to come into being?

The process of investigating the natural world to locate the divine energy in it is a process of creating categories and studying them. This is the kataphatic way of knowing. Kataphasis is the Greek word meaning "according to the categories of expression." We build up categories and connect those categories to the reality of God's presence within them.

Vladimir Lossky, a twentieth-century Russian Orthodox theologian, writes of kataphasis: "God condescends towards us in the 'energies' in which God is manifested; we mount towards God in the 'unions' in which God remains incomprehensible by nature." Lossky calls these investigations of the divine energy in the material world "theophanies, or manifestations of God in creation." The material and physical world create for us theophanies, revelations, manifestations of God in the material world, because everything in creation participates in the divine energy and has the capacity to reveal God to us. This revelatory and theophanic property results from the fact that God condescended through the material world so that humans might ascend through the material world to God.

God's condescension was through all of creation beginning in the most spiritual realms of angels and bodiless beings, through embodied spirit in the form of human beings, in animals and plants, and ending in pure earth, rock, and dirt. We follow the creation in God's condescension, investigating each element of creation to find the presence of the divine energy in it. By doing so we build up categories for ourselves, using especially the Scriptures as a means of defining who God is by God's evidence in the material world. So God

is the Rock of our salvation, the burning fire of the bush on Mt. Sinai, the vine, the Tree of Life, the Rose of Sharon, the Thunder, the Lightning, the Light, the cloud of darkness. All these material images reveal the divine energies of God and show us the way to experience the material world as a theophany of God.

Lossky writes of this process: "In contemplating any object we analyze its property: it is this which enables us to form concepts. But this analysis can in no case exhaust the content of the object of perception. There will always remain an 'irrational residue,' which escapes analysis and cannot be expressed in concepts; it is the unknowable depth of things, that which constitutes their true, indefinable essence. In regard to the Names which we apply to God, these reveal his energies which descend towards us yet do not draw us closer to God's essence, which is inaccessible."

Here Lossky leads us toward the apophatic practice of knowing God. In the kataphatic, we use the natural tendency of the mind to analyze and categorize material objects in order to begin to perceive the divine energy flowing through it and in it. This is natural. It is also in a sense very scientific. But that way of knowing has its limits. We may analyze and categorize the conceptions of material things, but ultimately we cannot know their essence. We cannot know anything fully merely through our conceptualizing. So a further practice must be engaged. We recognized our categories and affirm them, and then we practice a process of negation, of speaking against it. This negation is called apophasis.

So when we look at our flower and explore the way it reveals beauty and the beauty of God, we say, "but this is our human category of beauty, our human category of understanding God." God's essence so is so far distant from our human category of beauty that we cannot name God as Beauty, because that limits God to our human categories. So God is, in fact, by apophasis, Not-Beauty. We negate each category that we have created because the reality of God simply confounds our categories.

Our negation of the categories, our apophasis, ought to begin with the elements of creation furthest from God's essence in such things as rocks, fire, stones, and water. Lossky writes: "On the lower steps, especially, these images are fashioned from the material objects least calculated to lead spirits inexperienced in contemplation into error. It is, indeed, more difficult to identify God with stone or with fire than with intelligence, unity, being or goodness. What seemed evident at the beginning of the ascent – 'God is not stone, God is not fire' – is less and less so as we attain to the heights of contemplation, impelled by that same apophatic spirit which now causes us to say: 'God is not being, God is not the Good.' At each step of this ascent as one comes upon loftier images or ideas, it is necessary to guard against making them a concept, 'an idol of God.' Then one can contemplate the divine beauty itself: God, in so far as God manifests God's Self in creation. Speculation

gradually gives place to contemplation, knowledge to experience; for, in casting off the concepts which shackle the spirit, the apophatic disposition reveals boundless horizons of contemplation at each step of positive theology."

The apophatic practice reveals the limits of our ability to understand God in human categories, even categories derived from Scripture, and at the same time strips away categories for an immediate experience of union with God whose essence is unknowable. As we strip away and negate our humanly devised categories, we present ourselves at the threshold of a direct and immediate experience of God outside the limitations of human rationality and analysis. By recognizing that our human descriptions of God as rock, fire, wood, tree, good, bountiful, provider, spiritual, and even holy are our own constructions, we free the mind to experience God beyond these categories, leaving the categories behind to have, as Dionysios calls it, a naked experience of God, an experience of God outside human limits and contingency.

This is the union with God in unknowing that results from the vigorous and energetic positive process of creating categories and then negating them in the face of the incomprehensible mystery of God. But the process requires both steps that precede union: we must investigate the material world as a theophany and study the way everything in creation reveals God, and then we must recognize that our knowledge so speculatively created does not really define or help us to know a God who far surpasses the mind's capacity to understand. Then in that unknowing, we may stand face to face with the incomprehensible God.

Through this process of kataphasis, apophasis, and union the soul is impelled to continual progress, to longing more and more for union with the incomprehensible and mysterious God. Lossky writes: "This is not a more perfect or esoteric teaching hidden from the profane; nor is it a gnostic separation between those who are spiritual, psychic or carnal, but a school of contemplation wherein each receives his share in the experience of the Christian mystery lived by the Church. This contemplation of the hidden treasures of the divine wisdom can be practiced in varying degrees, with greater or lesser intensity: whether it be a lifting up of the spirit towards God and away from creatures, which allows God's splendor to become visible; whether it be a meditation on the Holy Scriptures in which God hides himself, as it were behind a screen, beneath the words which express the revelation; whether it be through the dogmas of the Church or through her liturgical life; whether, finally, it be through ecstasy that we penetrate to the divine mystery, this experience of God will always be the fruit of that apophatic attitude. . . ."

So we end with the multiple ways in which the mind may ascend to God through a process of creating categories and analysis, and then through a negation of those categories as incapable of expressing the incomprehensibility of God who in essence is unknowable, and finally through union with the

mystery of God who condescends in creation so that we might ascend to God's incomprehensibility. Lossky writes further: "Unknowability does not mean agnosticism or refusal to know God. Nevertheless, this knowledge will only be attained in the way that leads not to knowledge but to union – to deification. Thus theology will never be abstract, working through concepts, but contemplative: raising the mind to those realities which pass all understanding."

Returning now to the flower with which we began this meditation, we continue to investigate what makes it beautiful by looking at each constituent part and by seeing the unity of the parts as they cohere; and we continue to try to connect the parts and their union to the concept of beauty; and we continue to study how this particular unity of beautiful elements connects with the divine energy that has made it so beautiful. But we recognize that the investigation cannot express the unfathomable reality of either the flower's or God's essence, and stripping away the concepts we are left with an experience of union with God in the presence of a beautiful element of creation, a divine element that confounds our categories and brings us to the ineffable mystery of God.

Practice: It is not a common practice of most people to stand in the presence of a mystery. Investigate three or four created beings (a flower, a tree, an animal, or another person) and mark how each one of them reveals God to you, noting in your mind the distinctive way each one reflects the Creator. Then move beyond the categories, stripping them away, until you experience a transcendent union with them as expressions of the divine presence. Do this each day for a week, moving gradually beyond the categories as best you can to a sense of union with God.

3 Getting Started: Experiencing cosmology

In our last session, we presented the material world as a theophany, a site for seeing God as part of a method of contemplating God through a process of creating categories and then negating them to bring us to an experience of union with God. The theophanic world provides the foundation for the practice of contemplation.

The revelatory or theophanic function relates to a particular story about the creation of the world. This story tells us how the world was created, how human beings came to be both as material and spiritual beings, and what it is that we human beings must do in order to contemplate as a part of creation. In other words, this story not only tells us how the world and humans came to be, but it also tells us how the creation and human beings connect to God as well as how we are to contemplate God as creatures.

Where each element in creation fits into the story of the creation of the world defines how each element and person must contemplate. All creation, from the angels down to the dust of the earth, is called to contemplate the Creator according to their capacity and abilities. But some of creation is given a choice, a free will, to choose to contemplate. So we begin with the story of creation to move toward understanding specifically how human beings are called to contemplate from their position in the cosmos.

The cosmology, based on the creation stories in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, defines the relationship between the spiritual world and the material world. The cosmology tells us what our contemplative practice aims to accomplish, namely the participation in God who is the Creator of the universe. To understand the relationship of the material world to the spiritual world is the starting point for meditation and contemplation.

Genesis, the first book of the Israelite Scriptures, which Christians call the Old Testament, has two different accounts of the creation of the world and human beings. The first creation story (Genesis 1:1–2:3) relates the creation of the world through the creation of light, the sky, the firmament of the earth and the fruits of the earth, the sun and the moon, animal life, the creation of human beings in God's image and likeness, ending with God's rest on the seventh day. In this first story, God creates the human being, both male and female, in God's image and likeness, and he blessed them and gave them dominion over all the plants and animals that God had created.

The second creation story (Genesis 2:4b–3:24) focuses on the creation of Adam and Eve, the first human beings from the dust of the ground into which God breathed the breath of life. This second story talks about the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, the seduction of Adam and Eve by the serpent, and their expulsion from Paradise. This second story relates the fall of human

beings, both male and female, from their original intimate communion with God in the Paradise that God had created for them.

The early Eastern Christian theologians reflected on these two creation stories as two different creations of the human being. They considered the first story, the creation of the spiritual universe and the spiritual human being. For them the second story related the creation of the material world and the physical and material human being. These early Christian theologians envisioned two stages in the creation of human being: first a spiritual creation in which God breathed spirit into the person, and a second in which the person was given a body to house the spiritual person.

To understand how this cosmological system works, we turn to Gregory Nazianzen, a fourth-century Eastern Christian theologian. In a homily, Gregory explains that God, as Goodness itself, created the spiritual world to provide ways for created beings to participate in God's goodness: "Yet it was not sufficient for goodness to be moved only in contemplation of itself, but it was necessary that the good be poured forth and given paths to travel so that there would be more recipients of its benevolent activity, for this was the summit of goodness." Gregory argues that the good God poured forth God's goodness in creation.

The first creation according to Gregory was the creation of the spiritual world: "Therefore, it first thought of the angelic and heavenly powers, and the thought was action, accomplished by the Word and perfected by the Spirit. And thus were created the second splendors, the servants of the first Splendor, which are either intelligent spirits, or a kind of immaterial or bodiless fire, or some other nature as close to this as possible. I would like to say that they are unmoved toward evil and have only the movement toward the good, since they are around God and are the first to be illumined by God; for things here below are illumined second." In the spiritual world, the first creation, God created the bodiless beings, the spiritual beings that inhabit the universe, and gave the spiritual beings a capacity for choice in their contemplation and praise for God. Although most of these spiritual beings participated in God through praise and contemplation, some chose the opposite, that is, to oppose the union and participation with God.

Gregory maintains that God then poured forth God's goodness into the creation of the material and sensible world: "And since the first world was beautiful to him, he thought a second material and visible world, that which is composed of heaven and earth and the system and composite of realities existing between them. It is praiseworthy because of the good disposition of each thing, but more praiseworthy because of the good connectedness and harmony of the whole, as each thing is well adapted to another and all to all, into the full realization of one world." The material and physical world was composed as an harmonious whole with a propensity for participation in God.

And this material world was a combination of both material and spiritual elements.

In this system, the human being holds an important place and plays an important role. Gregory continues: "So then wishing to manifest this, the Creator Word also makes one living creature out of both [creations], I mean invisible and visible natures, that is, the human being. And having taken the body from the matter already created, he breathed in breath from himself, which is surely the intelligent soul and the image of God of which Scripture speaks. The human being is a kind of second world, great in smallness, placed on the earth, another angel, a composite worshiper, a beholder of the visible creation, an initiate into the intelligible, king of things on earth, subject to what is above, earthly and heavenly, transitory and immortal, visible and intelligible, a mean between greatness and lowliness. He is at once spirit and flesh, spirit on account of grace, flesh on account of pride. . . . He is a living creature trained here and transferred elsewhere, and, to perfect the mystery, deified through inclination toward God."

Human being was conceived then as a composite spiritual and material person, unified as one physical person with a spiritual identity in the image and likeness of God. God also endowed the human being, as the spiritual beings, with free choice, that is the capacity either to participate with God or to refuse to participate.

The composite nature of the human being sets forth the goal of human existence. Here cosmology meets contemplative practice. Humans are given both the image and the likeness to God. The image of God is given human being in the spiritual creation, but human being must choose to manifest the likeness of God in life in the material world. The goal of human existence is to manifest in the material body the spiritual image given it in creation by becoming like God, that is, by being divinized, conformed to God's presence in physical and material existence.

St. Basil the Great, a major Eastern Christian theologian of the fourth century, describes the human situation in this way: God's "plan had two parts according to the image and according to the likeness. The creative work was one. . . . By our creation we have the first and by our free choice we build the second. In our initial structure co-originate and exists our coming into being according to the image of God. By free choice we are conformed to that which is according to the likeness of God. And this is what is according to free choice: the power exists in us but we bring it about by our activity."

According to the tradition, human beings were gifted by God with God's image, and they were challenged by God to manifest their likeness to God in the concrete choices of daily living. St. Basil continues: "And in giving us the power to become like God, he let us be artisans of the likeness to God, so that the reward for the work would be ours." In our physical nature, the one

created from the dust of the earth, we are to manifest creatively and distinctively the image of God so that through our likeness to God, God's presence may be made visible and concrete.

Standing at the center of the chain of creation, at the point at which the purely spiritual meets the purely physical, human beings have a very particular path of contemplation. Endowed with the capacity for intellectual activity and connected at once to both the spiritual and physical realms of creation, the human being contemplates by looking to creation to discover the way that the divine energy is present in each element of creation. So we move now from the story of creation to the contemplative practice associated with it.

For the particular contemplative practice associated with this cosmology, we turn to Maximos the Confessor. Maximos identifies the heart of the contemplative practice as a process of seeing God in all creation, a concept we met in the kataphatic tradition. But there is a particular point of reference that Maximos fills out. The contemplative sees and experiences God as the "cause, beginning, and end of all beings." He writes: "For God who made and brought into existence all things by his infinite power, contains, gathers, and limits them and in his Providence binds both intelligible and sensible beings to himself and to one another. Maintaining about himself as cause, beginning, and end all beings which are by nature distant from one another, he makes them converge in each other by the singular force of their relationship to him as origin." By looking at the unique qualities of each created thing, the contemplative searches for that point of convergence where God's divine energy may be perceived and studied in the point of union of all things in God. In other words, we move from the distinctiveness and uniqueness of each thing to the place where we can perceive and experience the commonality of all things in God. Looking beneath the surface of difference, we see each creature as united and participating in God. This is the reason that the cosmology is so central to contemplation, the process of ascending, as Lossky put it, the path of God's condescension, or as Maximos explains it: "God, full beyond all fullness, brought creatures into being not because he had need of anything, but so that they might participate in him in proportion to their capacity and that he himself might rejoice in his works, through seeing them joyful and ever filled to overflowing with his inexhaustible gifts" (Maximos, *Love III*, # 46 Phil. II, p. 90).

It is through tracing the manner in which everything participates in God that the human person contemplates. Contemplation, then, is a process of training the mind to look beneath the surface of the physical creation to see the point of the union of all creation in God. This practice founds contemplation. At every point in the contemplative life, we are to return to this investigation of the common origin of all creation and every creature in the providence of the Creator.

Invoking the apophatic tradition, Maximos provides a summary: "We do

not know God from his essence. We know him rather from the grandeur of his creation and from his providential care for all creatures. For through these, as though they were mirrors, we may attain insight into his infinite goodness, wisdom, and power" (Maximos Love I, 96, Phil p. 64).

Practice: The next contemplative practice is to meditate on the material world including human beings, animals, plants, earth, air, water in order to see and to experience the God who caused them to come into being, who is both their beginning and their end. Try to see the convergence of all things and of all people in God who is their source.

4 Demons and the Reformation of the Self

Even in the face of a God who is ultimately unknowable, the Eastern Christian tradition remains very positive about the capacity of the human being to strive successfully for union with God, for divinization. This very positive framing of the contemplative life means that there is, as St. Paul put it, "nothing that can separate us from the love of God." Everything in creation and in our selves works for the ultimate divinization of all creation, the union of all things and all people in God.

This positive outlook applies as well to our human struggles to cooperate and to participate in God. The problems we face as those who strive for union with God become an opportunity to transform ourselves, our relationships with others, and the universe in which we live. Facing problems head-on is an important factor in this. In the Eastern Christian tradition this process of facing our internal and social problems directly relates to the struggle with our demons. Demons are those propensities and patterns that thwart our efforts to be conformed to God's divine presence. This session deals with the struggle with our demons and the joys of the reformation of the self through struggle with demons.

Where do demons come from and what do they do? In the cosmology of creation, the demons were bodiless spirits created as angels, but who through pride and willfulness rebelled against God's plan of salvation for all creation. Recall what Gregory of Nazianzen said of the creation of the bodiless spirits: "I would like to say that they [the angels] are unmoved toward evil and have only the movement toward the good, since they are around God and are the first to be illumined by God; for things here below are illumined second. Yet I am persuaded to consider and say that they are not immovable but only difficult to move on account of the one who is called Lucifer [i.e., Light-Bearer] because of his splendor but both became and is called darkness because of his pride, and the rebellious powers under him, who are fashioners of evil through their flight from the good and who incite evil in us." Even though God created all things to be good, God also bestowed upon creatures the free will to choose the good. Lucifer and the demons did not choose the good, but rather chose to thwart the divine plan. They lead humans toward a similar propensity to choose evil and to rebel against God.

Demons are patterns of thought and behavior that lead humans away from union with God, from the good that marks God's intention for all creation. Anything that thwarts a person's union with God is understood to be the work of demons. The Eastern Christian tradition, however, maintains that demons particular to a person's state of mind and inclinations surround the person, and that there is also a Guardian Angel that attends to each person to guide them toward the Good, and toward union with God's divine energy. The crux

of relationships to the demons or of the guidance of the Guardian Angel is the choices that people make in their daily lives. In other words, human choice, human free will, determines if the person will cooperate with the divine plan of salvation or rebel against it, and determines whether a person follows the direction of the demons and submits to their temptations and patterns of behavior, or whether the person follows the guidance of the Guardian Angel to reform the self and cooperate with the divine plan and energy. Human make those choices continually through the course of a day. And those choices are central to contemplation.

Evagrius of Pontus is the master theologian of the struggle with the demons. His work permeates the Eastern Christian contemplative tradition, and it is his guidance on struggling with demons that we present. Evagrius explains how demons work: "All thoughts inspired by the demons produce within us conceptions of sensory objects; and in this way the intellect, with such conceptions imprinted on it, bears the forms of these objects within itself. So, by recognizing the object presented to it, the intellect knows which demon is approaching. For example, if the face of a person who has done me harm or insulted me appears in my mind, I recognize the demon of rancor approaching. If there is a suggestion of material things or of esteem, again it will be clear which demon is troubling me. In the same way with other thoughts, we can infer from the object appearing in the mind which demon is close at hand, suggesting that object to us. I do not say that all thoughts of such things come from the demons; for when the intellect is activated by humans it is its nature to bring forth the images of past events. But all thoughts producing anger or desire in a way that is contrary to nature is caused by demons." [Evagrius, *Texts on Discrimination*, # 2, p. 38-39.]

The heart of the struggle with our personal demons is the naming of the demon and discerning which demons provide the most difficult. In Evagrius's example, he lists the memory of someone who has hurt or insulted us tells us that we are struggling with the demon of rancor or anger. We analyze our reactions to memories and to situations in order to learn where the struggle must take place. The intellect must know which demon against which the person is struggling. So the first step is simply to recognize what the attacking demon is.

In antiquity these primary demons were listed as: anger, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, gluttony, and listlessness or despair. These were the catalogued demons of ancient times, and many, if not all, of them continue to plague us in our own times. We, too, can trace many of our problems to anger, or greed, or lust, or envy, or despair, just to name a few. The accurate identification of the demon, by the careful reading of the emotional and intellectual state of the person, is the essential first step in facing down the demons, and opening the way to transformation. Our demons may be

different, but nonetheless they operate in the same way as the ancient catalogue. Through careful attention to yourself, name the demons that thwart your efforts towards divinization and union with God.

Naming the demons is the first step. The investigation of the way that the demons operates is the second step. Evagrius analyzes the way in which strings of thoughts, which he calls *logismoi*, operate in the person striving for divinization: "Sometimes thoughts are cut off, and sometimes they do the cutting off. Evil thoughts cut off good thoughts, and in turn are cut off by good thoughts. So the Holy Spirit notes to which thought we give priority and condemns or approves us accordingly. What I mean is something like this: the thought occurs to me to give hospitality and it is for the Lord's sake; but when the tempter attacks, this thought is cut off and in its place he suggests giving hospitality for the sake of display. Again, the thought comes to me to give hospitality so as to appear hospitable in the eyes of others. But this thought in its turn is cut off when a better thought comes, which leads me to practice this virtue for the Lord's sake and not so as to gain esteem from others." [Evagrius, *Discrimination*, # 6, p. 42]

When we struggle with the demons, we must investigate the thoughts that surround our actions and reactions. We must, as in Evagrius's example of hospitality, analyze the reasons for our actions and reactions. We learn from this analysis the strings of thoughts that inform the way we live and the way we react. In the process of analyzing the strings of thoughts, however, we also at the same time begin to reform the way we act and react. In other words, the analysis itself begins the process of reformation of the self, setting it anew on the path toward divinization and conformity to the divine energy of God.

As the master of dealing with demons, Evagrius provides a specific system for analyzing the strings of thoughts that impede our efforts toward union with God. It is a stunning system. Listen carefully to how Evagrius teaches us how to deal with these demonic thoughts: "When one of the enemy approaches you and wounds you, and you wish to turn his sword back into his own heart, then do as follows: analyze in yourself the sinful thought that has wounded you, what it is, what it consists of, and what in it especially afflicts the intellect. Suppose, for instance, that a thought full of avarice is suggested to you. Distinguish between the component elements: the intellect which has accepted the thought, the intellection of gold, gold itself, and the passion of avarice. Then ask: in which of these does the sin consist? Is it the intellect? But how then can the intellect be the image of God? Is it the intellection of gold? But what sensible person would every say that? Then is gold itself the sin? In that case, why was it created? It follows, then, that the cause of the sin is the fourth element, which is neither an objective reality, nor the intellection of something real, but is a certain noxious pleasure, which, once it is freely chosen, compels the intellect to misuse what God has created. It is

this pleasure that the Law of God commands us to cut off. Now as you investigate the thought in this way and analyze it into its components, it will be destroyed; and the demon will take to flight once your mind is raised to a higher level by this spiritual knowledge." [Evagrius, *Descrimination*, #20, pp. 49-50]

What is brilliant about this system is the ruthless honesty about our actions and reactions. The honest rests on giving what thwarts us the dignity of thorough investigation. The demons, that is, deserve our attention and vigorous analysis because they are guiding us toward our final goal of union of the whole person with God. So we give the demons their due, not expelling them, but analyzing and engaging thoroughly with them. So Evagrius lays out three steps: analyze the thought that thwarts your union with God, break it up into its component parts and reflect on those, then ask, in which of these parts is the true sin, the true element that thwarts your union with God. It is both intentionally and deliberately engaging of the sin, or the demon, or the thwarting patterns, so that by giving them their due attention, according to Evagrius, we destroy their psychological and spiritual hold on us and their power to thwart our union with God.

Slowly over time, and as each demon that impedes our progress to God is faced directly and diligently, the self begins to be transformed. Anger no longer thwarts our efforts to love and relate to others. The dissipation of anger, however, comes not by dismissing it, but by engagement and analysis until it no longer effects our behaviors. The same applies to greed, lust, pride, listlessness, and the other demons we face. One by one, by facing the troubling demons, we move closer and closer to a full union with God.

There is an irony here, which you may have already guessed: without confronting the demons there is no progress toward divinization. Stated positively, we can say, the demons are our spiritual guides. The demons point out to us where we need to work, the fault lines of our striving toward divinization. By engaging with them we progress more and more, ever so slowly, toward the divinization and union with God that is our heart's desire. So, as we would say, "demons are our friends" – demons guide our way through the maze of things that thwart our efforts so that as we engage with them we may indeed be transformed and renewed, the self being reformed to live united to God.

Practice: At the close of the day take stock of the experiences and situations that thwarted your desire for union with God. Name them. Analyze them as Evagrius taught, and then let them rest. Do such an examination each evening for a week, and then catalogue the most pressing demons that confront you as a person.

5 Watchfulness and Hesychasm

There is in Eastern Christianity a concept promoted by St. Gregory of Nyssa that perfection consists of eternal progress toward God. This means that although we strive diligently to be perfect, and to be divinized, we will never really achieve it. What marks progress is the continual practice of moving forward, and that continual progress defines perfection. At each moment that we begin to make progress in our divinization, new horizons always open up to us as well as new images of what thwarts us, new demons.

Such a framing of the spiritual life requires watchfulness. We who strive can never let up our defenses or relax our efforts. Even though we have struggled with our demons, analyzing them and dispelling their control over us, we continue to watch and observe ourselves for the telltale residual effects of the demons. This need for watchfulness in the context of eternal progress is the theme for this presentation. Together with watchfulness we take up the question of the goal of watchfulness, finding rest.

Two key themes of Eastern Christian contemplation are watchfulness (Greek: *nipsis*) and stillness (Greek: *hesychia*). Watchfulness or *nipsis* is the instrument; stillness or *hesychia* is the goal. We rely for this presentation on the teaching of Hesychios the Priest, who taught in the eighth or ninth century, although we are not sure. His work is in the *Philokalia*.

Nipsis: Hesychios describes *nipsis* in this way: "Watchfulness is a continual fixing and halting of thought at the entrance to the heart. In this way predatory and murderous thoughts are marked down as they approach and what they say and do is noted; and we can see in what specious and delusive form the demons are trying to deceive the intellect. If we are conscientious in this, we gain much experience and knowledge of spiritual warfare." [On Watchfulness, # 6, p. 163]

Here we find Hesychios elaborating more fully on Evagrius's teaching. The contemplative must be vigilant at all times, so that a body of knowledge about the workings of the demons emerge. Watchfulness, that is, aims to make the way of the contemplative mature, studied, and thorough. Since the conflict with the demons never ends, and in fact, since the manner and methods of the demons seem to shift and change with our advancement toward God, becoming more subtle and deceptive in their invasions, the contemplative must continue to watch for the subtlety and the nuances of demonic attack. The shifting and changing dynamic of those patterns that thwart our divinization, demand a vigilance and watchfulness in attending to our interior life, our actions and reactions.

Hesychios describes the importance of continual vigilance in this way: "The more closely attentive you are to your mind, the greater the longing with which you will pray to Jesus; and the more carelessly you examine your mind,

the further you will separate yourself from him. Just as close attentiveness brilliantly illumines the mind, so the lapse from watchfulness and from the sweet invocation of Jesus will darken it completely. All this happens naturally, not in any other way; and you will experience it if you test it out in practice. For there is no virtue – least of all this blessed light-generating activity – which cannot be learnt from experience." [#90] Here we see the importance of our choices. We may choose to be vigilant, which will bring us closer to the divinization we desire, or we may choose not to be vigilant, which draws us away and thwarts our efforts towards divinization. The choice is ours, but the only way forward, the only way to make progress, is through vigilance.

And this vigilance requires a careful scrutiny not only of what is wrong or impeding our efforts, but also an evaluation and attention to what is good and sustaining of our efforts toward divinization. Hesychios writes: "Let your model for stillness of heart be the person who holds a mirror into which he looks. Then you will see both good and evil imprinted on your heart." [#48] We must attend not only to the hindrances, but also to those elements within us that aid our progress. Watchfulness attends as much to what is working well within us, as to that which is not.

As we attend to the positive aspects of our progress, we begin to see God, to have a vision of God. Our experience leads us to such spiritual knowledge that we may begin to have a glimpse of the Mystery of God in our midst. Hesychios explains the way this works: "Be watchful as you travel each day the narrow but joyous and exhilarating road of the mind, keeping your attention humbly in your heart, reproaching yourself, ready to rebuke your enemies, thinking of your death and invoking Jesus Christ. You will then attain a vision of the Holy of Holies and be illumined by Christ with deep mysteries. For in Christ 'the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' are hidden, and in him 'the fullness of the godhead dwells bodily.' In the presence of Christ you will feel the Holy Spirit spring up in your soul. It is the Spirit who initiates human's intellect, so that it can see with 'unveiled face.' For 'no one can say "Lord Jesus" except in the Holy Spirit.' In other words, it is the Spirit who mystically confirms Christ's presence in us." [#29] The way of watchfulness is a journey that leads to the Vision of God, but it is not an easy journey. Watchfulness requires attention, self-reproach and examination, rebuke of the demons, thinking of one's own death, and a continual invocation of the Name of Jesus. Watchfulness is a difficult and very satisfying road that leads to the Vision of God. Hesychios summarizes this process succinctly: "For the guarding of the intellect is a watchtower commanding a view over our whole spiritual life." [76]

The irony of watchfulness, with all its intentional activity and analysis, is that it leads to rest or quiet. This will need some explaining. We normally assume that rest or quiet is an inactive state, like sleeping or taking a nap.

Hesychia means rest, stillness, silence, quiet, and peace. *Hesychia*, then, is a stilling of the inner dialogue and conversation, a quieting of the mind, a time of rest in the midst of intense labor, a peaceful time that brings the warring elements to silence and retreat. These all describe a time, or a frame of mind, in which the spiritual warfare and the fighting of the demons finds a time of equilibrium, stability, and rest in the divine presence. *Hesychia* is the goal, or the end-result, of watchfulness and spiritual vigilance.

But this rest and quiet is the result of intense effort and work. Hesychios describes the relationship of watchfulness to stillness: "Continuity of attention produces inner stability; inner stability produces a natural intensification of watchfulness; and this intensification gradually and in due measure gives contemplative insight into spiritual warfare. This in its turn is succeeded in persistence in the Jesus Prayer and by the state that Jesus confers, in which the intellect, free from all images, enjoys complete quietude." [#7] Progress toward rest comes from vigilance, which produces an inner stability, which in turn produces spiritual knowledge, which with the aid of the Jesus prayer produces inner peace. Vigilance and watchfulness, over time, create the kind of stability that stills and quiets the soul in its progress toward divinization.

Hesychia is compared to a state of equilibrium achieved particularly through the continual invocation of the Name of Jesus: "A certain God-given equilibrium is produced in our intellect through the constant remembrance and invocation of our Lord Jesus Christ, provided that we do not neglect this constant spiritual entreaty or our close watchfulness and diligence. Indeed, our true task is always the same and is always accomplished in the same way: to call upon our Lord Jesus Christ with a burning heart so that his holy Name intercedes for us. In virtue as in vice, constancy is the mother of habit; once acquired, it rules us like nature." [#97] Through spiritual warfare and the continual invocation of the Holy Name, the contemplative comes to a point where spiritual knowledge brings the warfare to a state of peace.

Another way of thinking about stillness in relationship to spiritual warfare is to consider again the cosmology that we discussed earlier in these sessions. There is a hierarchy of being extending downward from God, through the bodiless spiritual beings, to human being, and ever downward to animals, plants, and the purely material world. This is, as Lossky put it, God's condescension. Our ascent as humans is upward from our position in the hierarchy of being toward that of the angels. As we approach the status of the angels we begin to experience the peace and stillness of those beings who are in continual and perpetual contemplation of God.

Hesychios describes *hesychia*, stillness, as the state of becoming such an angel of God: "Just as the angels do not concern themselves with property or money, so those who have purified the soul's vision and who have attained the

state of holiness are not troubled by the evil ploys of the demons. And just as the richness that comes from moving closer to God is evident in the angels, so love and intense longing for God is evident in those who have become angelic and gaze upward toward the divine. Moreover, because the taste of the divine and the ecstasy of desire make their longing ever more intense and insatiable as they ascend, they do not stop until they reach the Seraphim; nor do they rest from their watchfulness of intellect and intense longing of their aspiration until they have become angels in Christ Jesus our Lord." [201]

Watchfulness never ends. The yearning and desire to ascend more and more to God, to be divinized, propels us more and more into the watchfulness and attentiveness that knows no ending in our mortal lives. But just as watchfulness is a constant, so is the goal and incremental achievement of rest, quiet, silence, and peace.

Hesychios talks about the invocation of the Name of Jesus as the primary instrument for watchfulness and stillness. The Jesus prayer is the jewel of Eastern Christian contemplation and the foundation for contemplative prayer. The prayer is this: Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me. Through constant use of this prayer, the mind becomes focused on the memory of God, on remembering God. The prayer focuses the mind and attention on the presence of Jesus, on the divine energy that flows through all creation, and on the work of the Spirit to turn the mind in every activity to the presence of God. While fighting one's demons, a person invokes the Name of Jesus in this prayer. While imaging the cosmos and the creation, a person prays the Name of Jesus to connect with the divine presence in all creation. In the face of the mystery of God and God's ultimate unknowability, we pray the Jesus prayer to ground our existence in the mystery. The Jesus Prayer in this way is the constant return of the mind to God, the focus of the mind on the incarnate God-Human, Jesus who reminds us in his Name and in his being of the union of the spiritual and material worlds.

A contemplative prays this prayer at regular intervals during the day. In the morning upon awaking, during one's work through the day, at noonday, in the evening, and before sleeping in the night. The monks even arise in the night to pray it before going to the Night Vigil. As one builds this prayer into the routine of the day, the prayer focuses the mind and puts the person in the presence of God. That is its intent. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me."

Practice: Pray the Jesus Prayer in regular intervals through the day. Pray it fifty times in the morning upon awaking, at noonday before lunch, in the evening before dinner, and before going to bed. After a few weeks of praying the Jesus Prayer in this way, then begin to pray it whenever you find yourself confronted with one of your demons, or when you realize you have not

remembered God for a few minutes. Expand the use of the prayer as you can.