

Suffering Captured by Christ Jesus

Humility as Divine Passion
and the Passive Condition of Man Saved by Christ
in the Interpretation of Phil. 3:12
by St. Basil the Great (*HHum* [20])
and St. John Chrysostomus
(*Hom. XI in Epist. ad Philipp. and Exp. in Ps. 143*)

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Abstract: *Phil. 3:12* is a relatively rarely commented text in Eastern patristic exegesis. If sometimes its interpretation is given very little space (Theodoret of Cyrus), very often he is simply overlooked, to the detriment of the verses before or after him, which are interpreted in an eminently ascetic key. Not so much an exegesis as a moral reflection about him offers St. Basil the Great in *Homily XX* on humility as a theological virtue and human condition restored in Christ. Unlike him, St. John Chrysostom offers an anthropological-epistemological interpretation of the text, which finally leads to a moral reflection on the passivity of this human condition restored by the Savior.

Keywords: humility, anthropology, epistemology, justification by faith, *vita passiva*, *Phil. 3:12*, theological virtues, human condition, nobility of man, St. Basil the Great, St. John Chrysostomus

Humility as a Theological Virtue in St. Basil's *HHum* [20]

ONE OF THE MOST READ and appreciated works of St. Basil the Great in the Protestant world is *Homily XX on Humility*¹ (*HHum* [20]²). Protestant

¹ St. Basil, *Homilia K'. Peri tapeinophrosynēs/ Homilia XX. De humilitate*, PG 31, 525–540.

² In what follows, we use the abbreviations consecrated in the vol. Paul Jonathan Fedwick, ed., *Basil of Caesarea: Christian Humanist, Ascetic. A Sixteen-Hundredth Anniversary Symposium* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1981), XIX–XXXVIII (*Abbreviations*), especially XXVII–XXVIII.

theologians believe that they can identify in the great Cappadocian Father's treatment on humility one of the essential leitmotifs of their theological thinking, respectively the theme of justification *sola fide*.

Indeed, St. Basil expressly refers to the justification by faith in HHum [20] §3, where quoting Philip. 3,9-11, he shows that man should not boast of his own justification, but to know that he is devoid of any true justification and that his real justification is accomplished only through faith in Christ (gr. *pistei de monē tē eis Christon dedikaiōmenon* / lat. *verum sola in Christum fide justificatum esse*)³. According to him, Paul sought justification in Christ, obtained from God on the basis of faith (gr. *zētein de tēn dia Christou, tēn ek Theou dikaiosynēn epi tē pistei* / lat. *quaerat vero eam, quae per Christum est, quae ex Deo est, justitiam in fide*): he sought it in the knowledge of Christ, in the power of His resurrection (*tēn dynamin tēs anastaseōs autou* / *virtutem resurrectionis ejus*), in the participation in His passions (*tēn koinōnian tōn pathēmātōn autou* / *communione afflictionum ipsius*), in the resemblance to His death, in order to reach the resurrection from the dead⁴.

But although St. Basil resorts to the Pauline theme of justification by faith, it should not be overlooked that the main theme of HHum [20] is neither justification nor faith, but humility. Both justification and faith (or simply: justification by faith in Christ) lead ultimately to *tapeinophrosynē* or *atyphia* as something deeper and more fundamental, that he designates at the beginning of his homily as being man's "biggest salvation" (gr. *megistē sōtēria autō*, lat. *maxima salus*), "healing of illness" (gr. *tēs nosou therapeia* / lat. *morbi que medela*), "way of return to the beginning" (gr. *pros to ex archēs epanodos* / lat. *reditus ad primum statum*)⁵. Now, the reason why humility is all these: salvation (*sōtēria* / *salus*), therapy (*therapeia*), medicine (*medela*), restauration (and recapitulation – *epanodos*) by returning (*reditus*) to the state of inception (*archē*; *primus status*), i.e. to the holy commendment (gr. *pros tēn hieran entolēn* / lat. *ad praeceptum sacrum*) of God has with the fact to do, that it places man in an intimate relationship with God as the Source of all and of grace, making himself available to Him. In this way, man's life energy no longer comes from the smallness of his being, but from the discreet infinity of divine (active) omnipotence.

As such, humility means killing all of our own to make room for Christ to live in us. In this sense St. Basil quotes Philipians again, this time Phil. 2,13⁶: "for it is God who works in you (*Theos gar estin ho energōn en hymin*) both to will and to do (*kai to telein kai to energein*) for His good pleasure

³ PG 31, 529: "Autē gar dē hē teleia kai holoklēros kauchēsis en Theō, hote mēte epi dikaiosynē tis eparetai tē eautou, all'egnō men endeē onta heauton dikaiosynēs alēthous, pistei de monē tē eis Christon dedikaiōmenon" (lat. col. 530: "Haec est enim perfecta ac integra in Deo gloriatio, cum quis non ob suam justitiam extollitur, sed novit destitui se quidem vera justitia, verum sola in Christum fide justificatum esse").

⁴ PG 31, 529–530.

⁵ PG 31, 525–526.

⁶ PG 31, 531.

(*hyper tēs eudokias*)". Therefore, St. Basil understands humility as being directly dependent on the active (*energein*) and intentional (*telein*) presence of God in man through His grace. As such he conceives it in the manner in which St. Paul understands faith, hope and charity (love), that is, what will later be called 'the theological virtues' (1Cor. 13; 1Thes. 1:3; 5:8).

It is a way of saying that humility itself is a kind of theological virtue, which springs directly from God's grace. Actually, in order to be able to talk about the soteriological value of moral virtues, they must necessarily be placed in relation to God's grace, because, in the Pauline theological logic (Eph. 2:8-9)⁷, salvation (*sōtēria*) cannot come from one's own works (or: from the works of the law), but from grace (*chariti*) through faith (*dia pisteōs*).

This means that, in fact, the theological virtues are not limited to this number of three, but that they are definitely more, among which virtues such as humility can also be counted. From the same category can also be listed other virtues such as prayer (which, also according to St. Paul, is the Holy Spirit's crying out in the human heart⁸) or patience - in particular, the patience of the holy martyrs in enduring in a superhuman manner what normally a simple man cannot bear. St. Basil pays special attention to this true theological virtue of patience in his homilies dedicated to martyrs such as Julitta⁹, Barlaam¹⁰, Gordius¹¹ and especially to the forty martyrs of Sebasteia¹², the last three immediately preceding HHum [20].

Furthermore, the understanding in a Pauline key of the Christian teaching about virtues led some Church Fathers to put in relation to God's grace not only the three Pauline theological virtues or similar Christian virtues such as humility, prayer or patience, but even the main virtues of classical Greek philosophy. In this sense, St. Ambrose of Milan, taking an idea from the Jewish Neoplatonic philosopher Philo of Alexandria¹³,

⁷ Although *Ephesians* is an epistle considered by today's exegesis to be deuteropauline, Eph. 2, 8-9 formulates a fundamental theological idea of St. Paul, present in various forms in the entire Pauline corpus. See Eph. 2,8-9: "For by grace you have been saved (*tē gar chariti este sesōmenoi*) through faith (*dia pisteōs*), and not of yourselves (*kai touto ouk ex hymōn*); it is the gift of God (*Theou to dōron*), not of works (*ouk ex ergōn*), lest anyone should boast (*hina mē tis kauchēsētai*)".

⁸ Gal. 4,6: "And because you are sons, God has sent forth (*exapesteilen*) the Spirit of His Son (*to Pneuma tou Hyiou autou*) into your hearts (*eis tas kardias hēmōn*), crying out (*krazon*), 'Abba, Father'".

⁹ HIul [5], PG 31, 257–262.

¹⁰ HBar [17], PG 31, 483–489. Modern exegesis places this homily in the *Dubia* category. See Paul Jonathan Fedwick, ed., *Basil of Caesarea: Christian Humanist, Ascetic*, p. XXXI.

¹¹ HGord [18], PG 31, 489–508.

¹² HMart [19], PG 31, 508–525.

¹³ *Legum allegoriae* I, 19.63–27.87, in: Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis II, III (Legum Allegoria)*, in *Philo in ten volumes (and two supplementary volumes)*, with an English translation by F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker, (Cambridge, Massachusetts-London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd, 1981), 140-474 (here: 186-205). See also: Carl Joachim Classen, "Der platonisch-stoische Kanon der Kardinaltugenden bei Philon,

argues in his treatises *De paradiso*¹⁴ and *De officiis ministrorum*¹⁵ that the four rivers that flow from the garden of Eden are, in fact, the four virtues of the classical Greek culture called by him for the first time in the history “cardinal virtues”. But unlike Philo, St. Ambrose asserts that the common source of the four Edenic rivers which he identifies with the four cardinal virtues are Christ himself, the Savior and the Hypostatic Wisdom of God, and equally God the Father. He thus inaugurates, in a specific manner, but related to the approach of St. Basil from HHum [20], an entire aretiological tradition, received and amplified in the 14th century by the hesychast authors such as St. Callistus II., the Patriarch of Constantinople (1397)¹⁶, who still resorts to the gracious interpretation concerning the four Edenic rivers¹⁷.

Parousia vs. Aretē.

Humility as Passion of Divine Captivity in Phil. 3,12 according St. Basil’s HHum [20] §3-4

Actually St. Basil does not quote expressly Eph. 2,8-9 in HHum [20], but its main idea is present in the background of the entire homily. Instead, St. Basil continues his argumentation along the ideational thread of the Epistle to the Philippians, supported by references to texts with similar meaning from the two epistles to the Corinthians.

Thus, at the end of HHum [20] §3, he quotes 1Cor. 15:10¹⁸ to claim that, strictly speaking, not the personal efforts of the Apostle Paul, but the divine grace (*hē charis tou Theou*) present in him bore fruit in his apostolic activity

Clemens Alexandrinus und Origenes,” in *Aretai und Virtutes: Untersuchungen zu den Wertvorstellungen der Griechen und Römer*, ed. Adolf Martin Ritter (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 107-138; Roberto Radice, “Philo and Stoic Ethics. Reflections on the Idea of Freedom,” in *Philo of Alexandria and Post-Aristotelian Philosophy*, ed. Francesca Alesse (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008), 141-168.

¹⁴ *De paradiso* II,13-14; English ed.: Saint Ambrose, *Hexaameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel*, trans. John J. Savage (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1961), 294-296.

¹⁵ *De officiis ministrorum* I,25-50; II,1-14; see *Sancti Ambrosii Mediolanensis de officiis*, cura et studio M Testard, in: *Ambrosii Mediolanensis opera* V [=CCL 15], (Turnhout, 2000).

¹⁶ *Tou Agiōtatos kai Aoidymou Kallistou Patriarchou ta elliponta kephalaia oti ho eirēmenos paradeisos eikōn tou anthrōpou*, in der griechischen *Philokalia*, 3rd Edition, Vol. 4 (Athēnai, 1961), 299-367, here: §15; §17, 18. Romanian translation by Dumitru Stăniloae, in *Filocalia*, Bd. 8, 2. Auflage (București: Humanitas, 2002), 220-348.

¹⁷ See Picu Ocoleanu, “Începuturile divine ale virtuții. Virtuțile cardinale ca virtuți teologice secunde în cap. §15 din Capetele despre rugăciune (care au lipsit) ale Sf. Calist Patriarhul (sec. XIV),” in *Credință și viață bisericească – repere existențiale. Studii și evocări întru cinstirea părintelui prof. univ. dr. Constantin Pătuleanu la împlinirea vârstei de 60 de ani*, (București: Cuvântul Vieții, 2022).

¹⁸ 1Cor. 15,10: “... I worked harder than any of them – though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me (*ouk egō de hē charis tou Theou [hē] syn emoi*)”.

and resorts further to the Deutero-Pauline discourse from 2Cor. 1:9-10¹⁹, which rearticulates this idea, stating that we should consider ourselves condemned to death for not trusting in ourselves (*mē pepoithotes ōmen eph'heautois*), but in God.

With §4 the core of St. Basil's argumentation concerning the virtue of humility is reached. It opens with a new quote from 1 Cor., this time 1 Cor. 4:7, through which St. Basil emphasizes the passive meaning of our relationship with God. All that we have and all the good that we do is, in fact, not made by us, but received. The entire understanding of this relationship is now overturned and placed in its correct order, not from man to God, but vice versa, from God to man: "You did not come to know (*egnōs*) God through your own justice (*dia dikaiosynēs*); but God looked upon you of His own goodness (*alla Theos dia chrēstotēta egnō*)"²⁰.

To highlight this reversal in the paradigm of the authentic relationship between man and God, St. Basil quotes Gal. 4:9: "But now after you have known God (*gnontes Theon*), or rather are known by God (*gnōsthentes hypo Theou*)...". In this manner St. Paul described the passive specificity of the state of sonship (*hyiothesia* – Gal. 4:5) of man in relationship with God in Jesus Christ that constitutes the opposite of the (hyper)active state of slavery (*douleia*) of man fallen into the sin.

The son is known by his parent before he actually consciously knows this one. He learns to speak from him and discovers his environment through him. Moreover, he learns love from the parent, because the son feels his love and responds with love to this love. Filled with the spirit of love, he calls out to his parent, calling him "Father" (Gal. 4:6). He is not a slave (*doulos*), but an heir (*klēronomos* – Gal. 4:7). Being son implies therefore a certain passivity: the child *receives* its being from the parents, *inherits* the traits of his parents, *feels* their presence and absence of them, *learns* from them etc.

To outline this passivity even more clearly St. Basil changes the register of the Pauline discourse, passing from Gal. 4 to Phil. 3, respectively from the topic of divine filiation to that of being taken into holy captivity by Christ Jesus. In this sense, he contrasts *aretē* (*virtus*) and *parousia* (*adventum*), i.e. the self-sufficiency of virtue as purely human work and the personal coming of Christ as receiving of the communion with Him:

You have not apprehended (gr. *kateilēphas* / lat. *apprehendisti*)
Christ because of your virtue (gr. *dia tēs aretēs* / lat. *per virtutem*);
but it is Christ Who through His Coming (gr. *dia tēs parousias* /

¹⁹ 2Cor. 1,9–10: "Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death (*to apokrima tou thanatou*) so that we would rely not on ourselves (*hina mē pepoithotes ōmen eph'heautois*) but on God who raises the dead (*all' epi tō Teō tō egeironti tous nekrous*). He who rescued us (*errysato hēmas*) from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us (*rhysetai*); on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us (*rhysetai*) again".

²⁰ PG 31, 532. Transl. into the Lat. – col. 531: "Non tu Deum cognovisti per tuam iustitiam; sed Deus cognovits te propter suam bonitatem".

lat. *per suum adventum*) has apprehended (gr. *kateilēphe* / lat. *apprehendit*) you²¹.

The statement of St. Basil is based in this case on Phil. 3:12: "I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus"²². The complete verse (KJV) reads: "Not as though I had already attained (*ēdē elabon*), either were already perfect (*ēdē teteleiōmai*): but I follow after (*diōkō*), if that I may apprehend (*katalabō*) that for which also I am apprehended (*katelēmphthēn*) of Christ Jesus." The core of Phil. 3:12 is the passive indicative aorist form of the verb *katalambanō* (1st, sing.), respectively *katelēmphthēn*, which has been translated into English in several ways, given its semantic nuance that is actually so difficult to render. If the classical translation KJV opt for the passive form of Vb. "to apprehend" ("I am apprehended of Christ Jesus"), many English translations use "to take hold (of)" / "to lay hold (on)" in passive, regarding the person of the apostle in relation to Christ: "Christ Jesus took hold of me" (NIV); "I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus" (CBS); "Christ Jesus took hold of me for" (NIRV); "I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus" (ASV). In other variants, the verb in passive is replaced by an active verb like "to make (his own)", "to reach out", "to win" or "to possess", with Christ as the subject acting on the speaker: "Christ Jesus has made me his own" (ESV); "Christ (...) reached out for me" (MSG); "Jesus Christ has already won for me" (GW); "Christ Jesus first possessed me". (NLT). In Latin, *katalabō* and *katelēmphthēn* are translated by "comprehendam" and "comprehensus sum"²³, semantically close to Eng. "to apprehend" used in the KJV.

Humility is therefore a state of being taken into possession, of being taken into captivity, but in a *divine* possession and captivity. It is a paradoxical formulation concerning the paradoxical state that is humility: the more humble we are, the more we give up our own initiative and the more we allow ourselves to be captured by Christ, the freer and more active we become in the race for obtaining the prize of divine justification.

Besides, St. Paul sends this epistle (according to some interpreters it could even be three short epistles combined into one) to his "favorite"²⁴ community in such a state of captivity, which makes him not only understand from his own experience the nature of humility as being taken into captivity/possession, but also the act of the Son of God emptying Himself of glory (Phil. 2:5-11), becoming flesh and humbling Himself and

²¹ PG 31, 532.

²² Greek: "Ouch hoti ēdē elabon ē ēdē teteleiōmai, diōkō de ei kai katalabō eph' hō kai katelēmphthēn hypo Christou Iēsou".

²³ *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*: "Non quod jam acceperim, aut jam perfectus sim; sequor autem, si quomodo comprehendam, in quo et comprehensus sum a Christo Jesu".

²⁴ See especially Rudolf Pesch, *Paulus und seine Lieblingsgemeinde. Drei Briefe an die Heiligen von Philippi – neu gesehen* (Freiburg u.a.: Herder Verlag, 1985).

becoming “obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). Finding in this epistle the perfect paradigm of humility, St. Basil places at the center of his reflection on this theological virtue from *Homily XX* the text of Phil. 3:12.

Hunted by Christ Jesus. The Interpretation of Phil. 3,12 by St. John Chrysostomus (*Hom. XI in Epist. ad Philipp.*), Theodoret of Cyrus (*Interpr. Epist. ad Philipp.*) and Theophilact of Ochrid (*Comm. in Epist. ad Philipp.*)

Phil. 3:12 is a relatively rarely interpreted text in Eastern patristic exegesis. From *Philipp.* was received, in general, the hymn of kenosis (chapter 2:5-11), and from chapter 3 the verses before or after v.12, but not so much this one.

For example, Theodoret of Cyrus dedicated only three or four lines of his Commentary to the Philippians²⁵ to this verse:

First, taking me, he caught me (gr. *katalabōn esagēneusen* / lat. *retibus illigavit* – literally: ‘he tied me up with nets’) in the race. For I was fleeing from Him (gr. *epheugon gar auton* / lat. *fugiebam enim illum*) and far away (*kai lian apestrephomēn* / lat. *valde aversabar*) from Him; But he caught me (gr. *katelabe* / lat. *apprehendit*) while I was running (gr. *pheugonta* / lat. *fugientem*). Therefore, I also follow (gr. *diōkō* / lat. *persequor*), wanting to catch Him (gr. *katalabein auton ephiemenos* / lat. *cupiens eum apprehendere*), so that I do not lose my salvation (gr. *ina mē diamartō tēs sōtērias* / lat. *ne a salute excidam*)²⁶.

The interpretation of Theodoret of Cyrus associates the Pauline imagery in this verse with the field of hunting: like a prey, sinful man flees from the Master, but He hunts him, capturing him, however, not to kill him, but to save him. Or, resorting to a leit-motif of Pauline theology, it could be said: to kill the old man in him and resurrect him to a new life, making him a new man in Christ (see Rom. 6:6; Coloss. 3:9; see also Eph. 4:22).

St. John Chrysostomus resorts to a similar interpretation, this time inspired by sports life in its Roman sense, i.e. linked to the bloody battles in the arena, in his much wider interpretation of Phil. 3:12 (than the one of Theodoret) from his *Homily XI to the Epistle to the Philippians*²⁷. In fact, St. John Chrysostomus (349-407) also associates Pauline imagery with hunting, but with hunting in the arena, organized as a sporting spectacle. Probably

²⁵ *Interpretatio epistolae ad Philippenses*, PG 82, 557–590, as part of *Commentarius in omnes sancti Pauli Epistolas*, PG 82, 31–878.

²⁶ PG 82, 581 (lat. 582).

²⁷ *Homiliae XV in Epistolam ad Philippenses*, PG 62, 177–299.

for him such images were much more familiar than for Theodoret of Cyrus (393–457), who lives later and is active as a bishop in a smaller city on the eastern border of the empire. The fact is that the image of Christ the Hunter, who hunts Paul despite the latter’s efforts to flee from Him, echoes throughout the ages being resumed in the later patristic literature even much later, for example in 11th century in the exegesis of Theophylact of Ochrid, in a form closer to Theodoret’s cynegetic version²⁸.

In his interpretation, St. John Chrysostomus insists that St. Paul does not use in Phil. 3:12 the verb “to run” (*trechō*), but the verb “to pursue” (*diōkō*), which indicates the apostle’s utmost concern for reaching his goal, which is the prize (*to brabeion*) of resurrection²⁹. Later, the already mentioned Theophylact of Ochrid will interpret this desire of St. Paul after the resurrection in Phil. 3:12 as an expression of his humility, piety (*eulabeia*)³⁰ and caution (*cautela*)³¹ because ultimately we will all be resurrected. At the same time, however, Theophylact shows that the Apostle must have understood by the resurrection he was looking for the “glorious resurrection (*exanastasin tēn endoxon*)”³², or, as it is said in John 5:29, the “resurrection of life (*anastasis zoēs*)” opposed to the “resurrection of damnation (*anastasis kriseōs*)”.

But this race of the apostle to capture Christ is occasioned by his previous capture by Him, Who in his turn pursued the apostle with great effort and captured him, notwithstanding man’s great error and aversion to Him:

Then to show that the thing is of debt, he said, “For which also I was apprehended by Christ Jesus”. I was, he said, of the number of the lost, I gasped for breath, I was nigh dead, God apprehended me (*katelabe me o Theos*). For He pursued us (*hēmas edīoke*), when we fled from Him (*pheugontas auton*), with all speed. So that he points out all those things; for the words, “I was apprehended (*katelēmphthēn*)” show the earnestness (*tēn spoudēn*) of Him who wishes to apprehend (*katalabein*) us, and our great aversion to Him (*hēmōn tēn apostrophēn tēn pollēn*), our wandering, our flight from Him³³.

²⁸ *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Philippenses*, PG. 124, 1139–1205, here: 1185: “...I was caught by Christ, that is: I was one of the lost and condemned (gr. *tōn apollymenōn hēmēn, tōn apegnōsmenōn* / lat. *ex pereuntibus et condemnatis*), but He hunted me (gr. *katediōxe me ho Christos* / lat. *persecutus est me Christus*) even when I was running away from Him (gr. *pheugonta ap’autou* / lat. *fugientem ab eo*)...”

²⁹ PG 62, 267–268: “And He said not, I run, but ‘I pursue’ (*kai ouk eipe Trechō, alla Diōkō*). For you know with what eagerness a man pursues. He sees no one (*ouden ora*), he thrusts aside with great violence (*meta pollēs tēs rhymēs*) all who would interrupt his pursuit. He collects together his mind (*dianoian*), and sight (*homma*), and strength (*ischyn*), and soul (*psychēn*), and body (*sōma*), looking to nothing else (*pros heteron ouden orōn*) than the prize (*pros de to brabeion monon*)”.

³⁰ PG. 124, 1185.

³¹ PG. 124, 1186.

³² PG. 124, 1185

³³ PG 62, 268.

It is not, of course, a flight in the topographical sense of the word, but a moral flight from God: “The sinner then flies (*ho toinyn hamartōlos pheugei*)”³⁴.
But, although

He saw us in such great guilt, he did not reject us (*ouk ebdelyxato*);
was not wroth (*ouk edyscheranen*), turned not away (*ouk apestraphē*),
hated us not (*ouk emisēse*), for He was a Master,
and could not hate His own creation (*kai to idion plasma ouk an emisēsen*)³⁵.

On the contrary, by capturing us, paradoxically, he restored our nature, gave us back our freedom, adopted us, and gave us a divine nobility, as Chrysostomus exclaims: “Alas! How great nobility did He confer on us! (*Oimoi, posēn eugeneian hēmin echarisato*)”³⁶.

The Divine Nobility (*eugeneia*) of Man Captured by Christ Jesus. Phil. 3.12 in *Exp. in Ps. 143* of St. John Chrysostomus

The attention that St. John Chrysostomus gives it to Phil. 3.12 ultimately has an anthropological basis. In this passivity of man’s capture by Christ Jesus resides according to him the restoration of fallen man, his liberation from sin, i.e. his resettlement in communion with God. The human condition can only be, definitively, a passive condition (*conditio passiva*), in which man suffers the work of God, without him remaining impassive. On the contrary, like St. Paul in Phil. 3:12, man responds with *pathos*, chasing and looking for his Savior in order to, in turn, capture him, to have fellowship with Him.

Therefore, it is no coincidence that St. John Chrysostomus returns to this Pauline verse in the context of commenting on a psalm with an anthropological content such as Ps. 143 (LXX)³⁷. Here, interpreting on the verse “3. Lord, what is man, that thou takest knowledge of him! Or the son of man, that thou makest account of him!”, he shows that the meaning of the first part of the verse refers not only to God’s act of reflection on man, but also to the fact that He makes Himself known to man. According to the Septuagint, the meaning of the text would be rather “3. Lord, what is man, that you have made yourself known to him? Or the son of man that you count him?”.

Consequently, the meaning of this verse refers to an epistemic passivity (but not an impassiveness) of man in relation to God in the sense of man’s

³⁴ PG 62, 268: “For we can flee from God, not in place, for He is everywhere, but with the deeds (*pheugein gar esti ton Theon, ou topō – pantachou gar esti –, alla tois ergois*)”.

³⁵ PG 62, 269.

³⁶ PG 62, 270.

³⁷ *Expositio in Psalmum CXLIII*, PG 55, 457–464.

capture by Him, expressed in Phil. 3:12, in other texts from the Pauline epistles (in particular, from 1 Cor.) and in John 15:16:

That is why Saint Paul does not stop saying: “But then shall I know fully, even as I also am known” [1 Cor. 13:12]. And Christ Himself: “You have not chosen Me (*ouch hymeis me exelexasthe*), but I have chosen you (*all’egō exelexamēn hymas*)” [John 15:16]. And elsewhere again Saint Paul: “But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him (*outos egnōsthai hyp’autou*)” [1 Cor. 8:3]. Therefore he continually and everywhere says that he was called (*klēton legei*) by God, showing that he himself did not run to Him, but was first called (*alla proteron eklēthē*). Thus he also says / in another place: “I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus” [Phil. 3:12]³⁸.

According to St. John Chrysostomus, the question about man is, after all, a question about knowledge. The mystery of anthropology is epistemological. As St. John Chrysostomus puts it:

It must be someone great who will know God, or rather he who is to be known by Him (*gnōrizesthai par’autou*). And not only that, but also the one to whom God makes Himself known (*hō mellei gnōrizein heauton ho Theos*). That is why the Septuagint translated it best, “that You made Yourself known to him (*egnōsthēs autō*)”, showing that we do not find Him (*ouch hēmeis auton euromen*), but He reveals Himself to us (*alla autos eurethē*). That he did not say, what is the man who knew You (*ho gnōrisas se*). But say “What is man, that You have made Yourself known to him (*oti egnōsthēs*)”?³⁹

The nobility (*eugeneia*) of man is manifested in the sublime of his knowledge (*gnōsis*) that transcends the limits of his nature (*physis*). This fact does not happen through human nature itself, but through the revelation of God because of His grace (*charis*), due to of His goodness (*chrēstotēta*) and love for people (*philantrōpia*). Man is not great by the virtue (*aretē*) obtained through the self-sufficiency of his own effort, nor only by his nature, although this was created by God directly in His own image (*kat’eikona Theou*), but by the knowledge he receives as a gift through the revelation of God, therefore, definitively, by the grace of God poured out upon him:

As then the psalmist says: What is man? And another wise man says: “Great is the man and worthy of honor is the merciful man” [*Mega anthrōpos kai timon anēr eleēmon / Magna res homo, et pretiosa res vir misericors* – Prov. 20:6LXX]. And elsewhere:

³⁸ *Exp. in Ps. CXLIII*, §2, PG 55, 458.

³⁹ PG 55, 458 (§1).

“In the image of God he made him” [Gen. 1:27]. At the same time, he gave him power over the whole creature. There are some that the world is not worthy of. But those are said in regard to the virtue (*peri aretēs*) they have shown. And that What is man? it is said about nature (*peri tēs physeōs*). But nature is also great (*hē physis megalē*). Great, yes, but if you consider the knowledge (*tēn gnōsin*) by which it was deserved, then nature is far inferior (*poly katadeestera*) to knowledge. Let the sons of heretics hear that they show such madness, exceeding all measure, being touched by the last ignorance and who claim to know things above them. (...) Think how many miracles have happened so that we can find God, not what His being is (*to ti tē ousian estin*), but that He exists (*hoti esti*)⁴⁰.

However great and noble (*eugenos*) man is in knowledge, he cannot know God in Himself, in His being, but according to His revelation to man either naturally, through His work (*oikonomia*) in the world, or above naturally, through supernatural revelation. This in no way means that man does not know God at all⁴¹, but that he knows Him only to the extent that He is revealed to him and not in His mysterious being. The knowledge of God is a gift received from God himself by creating us as beings capable of such knowledge and by revealing Him to us as His dialogue partners.

By this, St. John Chrysostomus resumes a topic intensively addressed by the great Cappadocian Fathers of the 4th century (in particular, by St. Basil the Great⁴² and St. Gregory of Nyssa⁴³) in their polemic against Eunomius. According to him, knowing God is an act of passivity on the part of man taken captive by God, who receives unconditionally what God reveals to him through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2.10: “But God has revealed them to us by His Spirit”) after the prior exclusion of any human thought of it or, rather, “bringing every thought into captivity (*aichmalōtizontes tan noēma*) to the obedience of Christ (*eis tēn hypakoēn tou Christou*)” (2 Cor. 10:5)⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ PG 55, 458–459.

⁴¹ PG 55, 459: “So you don't know God at all? – I will be told. Far from me this thought. But I know that he exists, that he loves people, that he is good and supportive and everything else that the Scripture says about him. But I don't know what nature is (*to de ti tēn ousian, ouk oida*). And Adam thought to seek more, being persuaded by the devil, and for this insatiable desire he lost also what he had. What also happens (*paschousin*) to heretics carried away by human thoughts and not hearing that the Lord gives wisdom (*hoti Kyrios didōsi sophian*) and that knowledge and understanding spring from his face”.

⁴² *Contra Eunomium*, libri quinque, PG 29, 468–774.

⁴³ *Contra Eunomium*, libri duodecim, PG 45, 243–1122.

⁴⁴ PG 55, 459: “They don't hear St. Paul, who says: ‘But God has revealed them to us by His Spirit’ [1 Cor. 2,10], excluding any human thoughts (*kai tous logismous ekbballontos*). ‘And every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ’ [2 Cor. 10.5]”.

Therefore, the meaning he gives to this epistemological limitation of man as a creature of God is of a moral nature. Man knows as much as he knows because God gives him this possibility as a great gift. Instead, he cannot know God in himself, in his being, in order to have the saving experience of humility:

Therefore He made man humble and at the same time gave him great gifts (*megala echarisato*), so that he would not exalt himself, having to humble (*to metriazein*) himself, starting from the nothingness of his nature (*tēn apo tēs physeōs euteleian*)⁴⁵.

If for Chrysostomus the core of anthropology's meaning is epistemological, then the meaning of epistemology is to the highest degree moral in nature. Therefore, the treatment of St. John Chrysostomus related to Phil. 3:12 ultimately reaches the same moral approach as in the case of St. Basil the Great. For if for the latter this Pauline text was from the very beginning situated in a moral context, respectively linked to the theme of the virtue of humility as a theological virtue, springing from grace, at the Patriarch of Constantinople from the beginning of the 4th century, it was interpreted in anthropological context (and definitely, as we have seen, epistemological).

The Christian way of life begins with the capture of man by Christ and proceeds thereafter as a race for man to acquire the divine, to commune with God and to obtain the prize (*brabeion*) of the resurrection in glory (*exanastasis tēn endoxon*). Ultimately, the core of moral life takes shape in both Holy Fathers in the same dialectic of the passivity of taking man into divine captivity by Christ Jesus and the active involvement of man in order to achieve salvation as the perfect communion of man with God.

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⁴⁵ PG 55, 460.

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