

# A Hesychast Theory of Virtue

## Two Types of Epistemology and Practical Philosophy in the Palamite Treatise *Capita 150*

PICU OCOLEANU 

*University of Craiova*  
*E-mail: ocoleanu@yahoo.de*

**Abstract:** One of the issues debated by St. Gregory Palamas in the sentential treatise *Capita 150* is the practical problem of the genealogy of virtue, which he approaches in an eminently epistemological context. Palamas distinguishes between two modes of knowledge that are, equally, two ways of life: the natural and the spiritual. The natural mode of knowledge is articulated between three *topoi* of the self: perception (*aisthēsis*), the imaginative faculty of the soul (*phantastikon*) and the intellect (*nous*). The data of knowledge come eminently from the senses, being stored in the *phantastikon* so that later the intellect can lean in an intentional manner on them, thus producing virtues or vices. In contrast, the spiritual way of knowing has to do primarily not with sensory experience, but with that of the Holy Spirit, through which man shares what we know about God, the world, and ourselves. As knowledge of God, it is not a knowledge of the divine being or nature, but a knowledge of Him from His energies which, in order to share an authentic knowledge of God, must be uncreated. From the experience of God's grace, which is an experience of the inner man, another type of virtues arises. These presuppose, like the natural ones, a moral effort to fulfill moral imperatives, this time of divine origin, but springing from the original experience of repentance, which leads St. Gregory Palamas to call them "works of repentance" (*erga tēs metanoias*). They lead to the knowledge of Christ dwelling in the human heart through divine grace, but, equally, they are produced by this interior experience of an almost sacramental nature. As such, they are, ultimately, practical expressions of the love between God and man.

**Keywords:** Virtue, Practical Philosophy, Epistemology, Divine Nature, Uncreated Energy, Palamite Doctrine

**T**HE DECLINE OF THE HESYCHAST life after the 4th Athonite typicon (1407)<sup>1</sup> and the final conquest of the Byzantine Empire by the Turks (1453,

<sup>1</sup> Pr. dr. Teodor Bodogae: *Ajutoarele românești la mănăstirile din Sf. Munte Athos, Sibiu, 1940, 36–39.*

Constantinople; 1461, Trebizond) led to a relative oblivion of the exceptional theological work of St. Gregory Palamas. It was only in the 20th century that it was rediscovered in its depth and breadth, especially following its theological reception by Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae (1938) and Fr. John Meyendorff (1959), and then, the attempt to completely republish it in five volumes (vol. I, 1962; vol. II, 1968; vol. III, 1970, vol. IV, 1988; vol. V, 1992) by P.K. Christou in Thessaloniki. During this time, some works were published (often with many vicissitudes) in printing houses in the West, under Catholic ecclesiastical censorship<sup>2</sup>. These are, in particular, the texts published in the *Philokalia* edited by St. Nicodemus the Hagiorites and St. Macarius of Corinth in Venice in 1782, as well as those collected in vols. 150–151 of Abbot Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* (1865).

One of these texts is the treatise *One Hundred and Fifty Chapters on Topics of Natural and Theological Science, the Moral and Ascetic Life, Intended as a Purge for the Barlaamite Corruption*, a "true system of natural («physical»), spiritual and dogmatic theology"<sup>3</sup>, which programmatically synthesizes the entire Palamite thought, as Robert Sinkewicz, its scientific editor since 1988, observes, because "Palamas may well have been concerned that the debate about the relation between God's substance and his energies had become too divorced from the rest of theology and from soteriology in particular"<sup>4</sup>.

This Palamite treaty enjoyed a favorable reception due to its publication both in the *Philokalia* edited by St. Nicodemus the Athonite and St. Macarius of Corinth in Venice in 1782, and in vol. 150 of Abbot Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* (1865), given that the saint's polemical work remained largely unknown (or less known) until the 20th century, since, in the West, his anti-Latin works could not have seen the light of day<sup>5</sup>, having to pass, at

<sup>2</sup> A presentation of this true odyssey of the publication of some of the works of St. Gregory Palamas in the 17th–18th centuries is offered by deacon Ioan I. Ică jr, *Sf. Grigorie Palama – scriitor duhovnicesc isihast și opera sa*, studiu introductiv la Sf. Grigorie Palama, *Scrieri II: Fecioara Maria și Petru Athonitul – prototipuri ale vieții isihaste și alte scrieri duhovnicești*, Sibiu: Deisis, 2005, 5–150, in particular: 10–22.

<sup>3</sup> John Meyendorff, *Introduction à l'étude de Grégoire Palamas*, Paris: Seuil, 1959 [Patristica Sobornensia 3], 373–374, here 373: "véritable système de théologie naturelle («physique»), spirituelle et dogmatique".

<sup>4</sup> Robert Sinkewicz, *The Early Chapters of the «Capita 150»*, in St. Gregory Palamas: *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters* (Studies and Texts 83), Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto, 1988, 1–35, here: 4.

<sup>5</sup> John Meyendorff, *Introduction...*, 374: "La plupart des écrits de Palamas restant inédits, les *Capita* constituèrent jusqu'à présent, avec ses homélies, la principale source de références sur sa théologie. A la différence de la plupart des autres auteurs de *Chapitres spirituels*, il y apparaît surtout comme un dogmaticien: sa pensée s'y exprime dans des formules que sa polémique avec Barlaam et Akindynos a déjà fixées et, pour bien les comprendre, il faut se référer à ses écrits antérieurs, surtout aux *Triades*. Les *Capita* sont cependant précieux dans la mesure où, à la différence des oeuvres directement polémiques de Grégoire, ils nous révèlent le cadre philosophique général de sa pensée."

least in the 18th century, through the Caudine forks of censorship entrusted to the professors of the University of Padua<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover, this work itself could not appear in its entirety in the *Philokalia* of 1782, but was subjected to amputations that aimed to remove any nominal references to the opponents of St. Gregory Palamas fought by him: Barlaam, Akindynos or Nikephoros Gregoras. In place of these names, general terms<sup>7</sup> were placed. The very title under which the Palamite treatise appeared was amputated from its last part ("Intended as a Purge for the Barlaamite Corruption"). Most of these chapters were very likely drafted in the period 1344–1347<sup>8</sup>, during the civil war, the text being completed, however, by all appearances, in the years 1349–1350, during the first years of the episcopate of St. Gregory Palamas, a fact that is suggested by the existence of several parallels with passages in the homilies of the hesychast theologian<sup>9</sup>.

## 1. Two Types of Knowledge: Natural Knowledge and Spiritual Knowledge

Strictly speaking, Saint Gregory Palamas is trying to provide here an overall perspective on the scientific knowledge of his time (as Father Stăniloae observes, in many of its aspects "surpassed" by the scientific knowledge "acquired in the following centuries"<sup>10</sup>), but also a synthesis of theological knowledge as knowledge obtained exclusively through revelation from God in the Holy Spirit: "Where can we learn anything certain and free from

---

<sup>6</sup> Ioan I. Ică jr, *Sf. Grigorie Palama – scriitor duhovnicesc isihast și opera sa*, 83.

<sup>7</sup> John Meyendorff, *Introduction...*, 373: "les éditeurs y ont, en effet, remplacé les noms propres de Barlaam et d'Akindynos par des termes généraux..."

<sup>8</sup> John Meyendorff, *Introduction...*, 373: "En fait, Palamas a trouvé le temps de les rédiger au cours de la période troublée 1344–1347. Ce fait apparaît clairement dans le texte, surtout si l'on corrige la très inexacte édition de la *Philokalie*".

<sup>9</sup> Robert Sinkewicz, *The Later Chapters of the «Capita 150»*, in St. Gregory Palamas: *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, 36–55; here: 49–54.

<sup>10</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Scholion (footnote) 6*, in: *Filocalia VII*, Romanian translation by D. Stăniloae, second edition, Bucharest: Humanitas, 1999, 425. The Romanian theologian refers in particular to the astronomical knowledge presented by St. Gregory Palamas in this treatise: "Chapters 4–7 depict a vision of the sky that is surpassed by the astronomical knowledge acquired in the following centuries. But there is a truth in what St. Gregory Palamas says: the movement of nature is not carried by a soul, but by its physical laws" (our transl.). See also *Scholion (footnote) 7*, 426: "At that time, the idea was that the material world was composed of four elements: earth, water, air and fire, and above it was ether, as the fifth element. This simplistic idea about the five elements, about their changing proportions, about their arrangement in ever-widening circles that encompass each other, is inferior to the biblical intuition about the great complexity of the world, an intuition that is also peculiar to the Holy Fathers. It was peculiar to science and to a part of Hellenic and Byzantine philosophy, which modern science has surpassed. St. Gregory Palamas made use of that "science" in the chapters up to this point and in several others that follow, pursuing his goal of showing that the soul cannot be present as a moving force in this entire cosmos..." (our transl.).

deceit about God, about the world as a whole, about our own selves? Is it not from the teaching of the Spirit? For this teaching has taught us that God alone is true being, eternal being and immutable being, that he neither received being out of non-being nor returns to non-being, and that he is trihypostatic and omnipotent. In six days he brought forth beings from non-being by a word, or rather, as Moses says, he established everything at once, for we have heard him say, «In the beginning God created heaven and earth»<sup>11</sup>.

It is a completely different paradigm of knowledge, totally different from the natural one, which thanks to divine Revelation offers us a sublime knowledge not only about God and His work, but also about the world and even about ourselves. Thus, both the theology and economy of God, as well as Christian anthropology, are the result of the discovery of God. In a few lines, St. Gregory Palamas synthesizes the entire Orthodox anthropology revealed to us through divine revelation, highlighting the honor and care that man has enjoyed since creation, since he was created following the deliberation of the council of the Holy Trinity, through the direct intervention of God, in the image of his Creator, having the perspective of deification through communion with God through the uncreated grace that springs from the divine being: “Thus was the first of beings brought forth in creation and after the first another and after that still another, and so forth, and after all things man. He was deemed worthy by God of such honour and providential care that before him this entire sensible world came into being for his sake, and before him right from the foundation of the world the kingdom of heaven was prepared for his sake and counsel concerning him was taken beforehand and he was formed by the hand of God and according to the image of God. He did not derive everything from this matter and the sensible world like the other animals but the body only; the soul he derived from the realities beyond the world, or rather, from God himself through an ineffable insufflation, like some great and marvellous creation, superior to the universe, overseeing the universe and set over all creatures, capable of both knowing and receiving God, and, more than any, capable of manifesting the exceeding greatness of the Artificer; and not only is the human soul capable of receiving God through struggle and grace, but also it was able to be united with God in a single hypostasis”<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> St. Gregory Palamas, *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, ed. R. Sinkewicz, §21, 103 (gr., 102). The following references to *Capita 150* will refer to this critical edition. A translation into Romanian was provided by Fr. D. Stăniloae: Sf. Grigorie Palama, *150 de capete despre cunoștința naturală, despre cunoașterea lui Dumnezeu, despre viața morală și despre făptuire*, in *Filocalia VII*, second edition, Bucharest: Humanitas, 1999, 421–516; also, deacon Ioan I. Ică jr. translated a selection of chapters from part I of the treatise entitled *Capitole antropologice, psihoteologice și economice* in the volume Sf. Grigorie Palama, *Scrieri II: Fecioara Maria și Petru Athonitul – prototipuri ale vieții isihaste și alte scrieri duhovnicești*, Sibiu: Deisis, 2005, 253–286.

<sup>12</sup> §24, 107–109 (gr., 106–108).

As the 14th-century Archbishop of Thessaloniki shows in the next chapter, revealed anthropology presupposes a sacred topography, an understanding of “what place man has before God” (*tina topon echei ho anthrōpos para tō theō*<sup>13</sup>). Within this topography, man has a unique position among all earthly and heavenly creatures: compared to “all other things which this heaven and earth bear”<sup>14</sup>, which are “completely devoid of intelligence” (*nou pantapasin amoira*)<sup>15</sup>, man is superior; on the other hand, spiritual beings, “even though they be more worthy of honour than we because they are without bodies and are nearer to the utterly incorporeal and uncreated nature”<sup>16</sup> are “fellow servants with us and (...) in the image of the Creator”<sup>17</sup>.

Specifically, within the material world, only man is created in the image of God, thus being able to look towards Him – hence his name *anthrōpos*, associated in classical and patristic literature with looking up, towards heaven – to enter into loving communion with Him and to know Him personally. Hence his affinities with God – the divine inclination, faith and loving aspiration towards his Creator: “For of all earthly and heavenly things (*eggeiōn kai ouraniōn*) man alone was created in the image of his Maker, so that he might look in him and love him, and that he might be an initiate and worshipper (*mystis kai proskynētēs*) of God alone and might preserve his proper beauty by faith in him and inclination and disposition towards him, and that he might know that all other things which this heaven and earth bear are inferior to himself and completely devoid of intelligence”<sup>18</sup>.

Starting from these premises, St. Gregory Palamas distinguishes between the cosmology and anthropology that man reaches based on the natural knowledge he has on the basis of the divine *image* within him and the cosmology and anthropology revealed by God in the context of His discovery of Himself (of *theology*) and in the horizon of man’s living communion with God through the uncreated grace that springs from the being of God (respectively of the *likeness* to God).

Strictly speaking, the second way of knowledge (spiritual knowledge, specific to the Christian man) surpasses the first (natural knowledge, specific to philosophy and natural sciences), being undoubtedly superior to it: “man’s knowledge of God and his understanding of himself and his proper rank (which knowledge now belongs to those who are Christians, even those considered uneducated laymen) [are] a more lofty knowledge than natural science and astronomy and any philosophy in these subjects”<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, even the mind’s knowledge of its own weaknesses is a superior mode of

---

<sup>13</sup> §26, 108 (eng., 109–111).

<sup>14</sup> §27, 111 (gr., 110).

<sup>15</sup> §27, 111 (gr., 110).

<sup>16</sup> §27, 110 (eng., 111).

<sup>17</sup> §27, 110 (eng., 111).

<sup>18</sup> §26, 111 (gr., 110).

<sup>19</sup> §29, 113 (gr., 112).

knowledge to that specific to natural knowledge: “also our mind’s knowledge of its own weakness and the search for its healing would be incomparably superior by far to the investigation and knowledge of the magnitudes of the stars and the reasons for natural phenomena, the origins of things below and the circuits of things above, their changes and risings, their fixed positions and retrograde motions, their disjunctions and conjunctions, and, in general, the entire multiform relation that results from their considerable motion in that region. For the mind that realizes its own weakness has discovered whence it might enter upon salvation and draw near in the light of knowledge and receive true wisdom which does not pass away with this age”<sup>20</sup>.

## 2. The Natural Way of Live and its Associated Virtues

As a result, two different ways of life arise from this: one based on natural knowledge and the other, on spiritual knowledge, the result of the germinative presence of God’s grace in the human heart.

Natural knowledge is obtained by the mind based on empirical observations, made through the senses, and imagination as the capacity to combine at will the data obtained through the senses: “in general all knowledge of anything collected from perception of particulars, we have gathered together from the senses and the imagination through the mind (*ex aisthēseōs kai phantasias ... dia tou nou*), and no such knowledge could ever be called spiritual (*pneumatikē*) but rather natural (*physikē*), which does not attain the things of the Spirit”<sup>21</sup>.

Analyzing the manner in which perception proper is articulated, St. Gregory Palamas distinguishes between the latter, the contents obtained through perception, and the perceived bodies. The contents obtained through natural knowledge are not identified with the perceived bodies. Moreover, a distinction must be made between the proper forms of bodies and their impressions (*ektypomata*) in the knowing intellect: “Sight is formed from the manifold dispositions of colours and shapes, smell from odours, taste from flavours, hearing from sounds, touch from things rough or smooth according to position. The formations that occur in the senses arise from bodies but are not bodies though corporeal, for they do not arise from bodies in an absolute sense, but rather from the forms which are associated with bodies. They are not themselves the forms of bodies but the impressions left by the forms, like images inseparably separate from the forms associated with bodies. This is more evident in the case of vision and especially in the case of objects seen in mirrors”<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> §29, 113 (gr., 112).

<sup>21</sup> §20, 103 (gr., 102)

<sup>22</sup> §15, 99 (gr. 98)

It is a triple epistemological transition: from the bodies themselves to their forms, from the forms of the bodies to the senses, and from the senses to the impressions accumulated through them in the knowing intellect. The first transition, which, in Kantian language, we could call from the thing in itself (*das Ding an sich*) – respectively from the *noumenon* – to the *phenomenon*, does not enter into the concerns of the Byzantine theologian of the 14th century. It refers to an ontological background for which Gregory Palamas as a theologian shows no interest at all.

He particularly follows the way in which the forms of bodies are impressed on the senses and are subsequently stored as images in the power of imagination, so that the latter can then combine these images independently of the reality of the bodies themselves and their forms. St. Gregory Palamas pays special attention not only to the way in which empirical knowledge is produced, but also to the power of imagination of the soul. The images obtained through the senses are stored as in a treasury in the imaginative faculty of the soul (*to phantastikon*), so that it can later operate freely with them, separated from perception itself and from the bodies that caused their formation through perception: “The imaginative faculty of the soul, which in turn appropriates these sense impressions from the senses, completely separates not the senses themselves but what we have called the images in them from the bodies and their forms. And it holds them stored there like treasures, bringing them forward interiorly for its own use, one after another, each in its own time, even when a body is absent; and it presents to itself all manner of things, objects of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch”<sup>23</sup>.

The 14th-century Archbishop of Thessaloniki sketches in this sense an epistemological topography of the soul, placing the imaginative faculty of the soul (*to phantastikon*) in the middle, between the mind (*nous*) and the senses (*aithēseis*). The mind, which is by itself separate from the senses, leans upon these images stored in the *to phantastikon*, operating with them in its own way.

It is a movement of descent (*katabasis*) of the mind, similar to that specific to the prayer of the heart described very plastically by another hesychast author of the 14th century, St. Callistus the Patriarch, in the initial 14 chapters of the treatise «On Prayer» from the Greek *Philokalia*<sup>24</sup>, selected from his treatise «100 chapters on the purity of the heart...» rediscovered and published in full fifteen years ago<sup>25</sup>. St. Kallistos the Patriarch investigates

<sup>23</sup> §16, 99–101 (gr. 98–100)

<sup>24</sup> *Tou Makariou Kallistou tou patriarchou Kephalaiā peri proseuchēs*, in *Philokalia*, third edition, vol. IV, Athēnai 1961, 296–298. Romanian translation by Dumitru Stăniloae, in *Filocalia*, vol. VIII, second edition [first ed.: 1979], Bucharest: Humanitas, 2002, 215–220.

<sup>25</sup> *Tou hagiōtatu patriarchou Konstantinoupoleōs kyr Kallistou kephalaia R' peri katharotētos psychēs, pōs kata mikron autē kathairetai kai eis theōrian anagetai; codex Matsouki Ecclesiae S. Parascevae (olim monasterii Bylizias 5)*, f. 387–393v., editet by Antonio Rigo in *Byzantion. Revue internationale des études byzantines* 80 (2010), 344–407 and translated into Romanian by Ioan

here the way in which the mind explores the grace-filled depths of the heart, probing them with its intelligible rays<sup>26</sup>. It is about a common understanding of the hesychast authors, a common good of hesychasm. It is not by chance that St. Gregory Palamas articulates his epistemological outline of natural knowledge according to the same model, in which the mind leans, this time not on the heart filled with the living waters of grace, but on the imaginative faculty of the soul. It is a matter of an inner kinetics of the inner man before the reception of grace, i.e. of the natural man: "When the mind lingers over the imaginative faculty of the soul and thereby becomes associated with the senses, it produces a composite knowledge (*symmikton ... tēn gnōsin*)"<sup>27</sup>.

In the absence of grace, the intellect's inclination towards the images stored in the *phantastikon* is not purely contemplative, but has an intentional character. It depends on the way in which the intellect operates with the images stored in the treasury of fantasy (of the imaginative faculty of the soul) – with and without passion or in an intermediate way, respectively with and without error: "This imaginative faculty of the soul in the rational animal constitutes an intermediary between the mind and the senses. For when the mind beholds and dwells upon the images received within itself from the senses as separated from bodies and already incorporeal, it formulates thoughts in various ways by distinctions, analyses and syntheses. This happens in different ways: with and without passion and somewhere between passion and apatheia, both with and without error"<sup>28</sup>. Our entire moral life and the articulation of the practical philosophy of natural man depend on these five types of operation by the intellect with the images obtained through the senses (*aisthēseis*) and stored in the *phantastikon*. Strictly speaking, moral life and practical philosophy crystallize at the meeting of intellect (*nous*) and imagination (*phantastikon*). They do not only concern the contents of knowledge obtained through the senses and the imaginative faculty of the soul, but also the *a priori* contents of the mind (or of pure practical reason, as Kant would say): "And these are the situations from which are born most virtues and vices (*aretai kai kakiai*), as well as both good and evil opinions. Since not every thought comes to the mind from these and concerns these, but you could find some things which cannot fall under the observation of the senses since they are passed on to thought by the mind (*hypo tou nou tō logismō didomena*), for this reason I said that in thoughts (*en tois logismois*) not every truth or error (*alētheian ē planēn*), virtue or vice (*aretēn ē kakian*) has its origin in the imagination"<sup>29</sup>.

---

I. Ică jr in the volume *Despre Lumina taborică, rugăciunea lui Iisus și curăția inimii. Scrieri filocalice uitate*, ed. a II-a., Sibiu: Deisis, 2013, 193–228.

<sup>26</sup> Tou Makariou Kallistou tou patriarchou Kephalaia peri proseuchēs, §1–§14, especially §7, 296–298.

<sup>27</sup> §19, 101 (gr. 100).

<sup>28</sup> §17, 101 (gr. 100).

<sup>29</sup> §17, 101 (gr. 100).

The virtues (and their opposite, the vices) are the result of the way in which the mind leans on the images obtained through the senses and operates with them, once stored in the imaginative faculty of the soul. By this, St. Gregory Palamas links practical philosophy to epistemology in such a way that it seems to make it an annex of the latter. The accomplishment of good is directly linked to the knowledge of truth. The virtuous way of life of the natural man depends on the accuracy of his capacity for knowledge, namely on the correct positioning in the inner topography of the epistemic faculties of the soul (perception, imagination and intellect) and on the correct interaction between them. In particular, the intentional approach of the mind in relation to the data obtained through sensory means is important. However, unlike Kant four centuries later, Palamas gives a much wider space to perception and the imaginative faculty of the soul both in the process of knowledge and in practical philosophy. For him, both knowledge and the moral life of natural man start from perception (*aisthēsis*) and imagination (*phantastikon*), the intellect subsequently intervening in an intentional manner, to operate with the data obtained in a sensory-imaginative manner. This fact causes the Byzantine theologian astonishment and admiration: “It is a great wonder and worthy of consideration, how beauty or ugliness, wealth or poverty, honour or dishonour, and, in a word, either the intelligible light which grants eternal life or the intelligible darkness of chastisement becomes fixed in the soul through transitory and sensible things”<sup>30</sup>

### **3. The Spiritual Way of Live and its Virtues as Works of Repentance and Love**

If the knowledge and practical philosophy of the natural man starts from the reality of creation perceived through the senses and the power of imagination, the knowledge and practical philosophy of the inner man have their beginning in the direct relationship with the divine, respectively with the grace of God as uncreated energy that springs from the being of God.

This type of knowledge St. Gregory Palamas calls “spiritual” (*pneumatikē*), since it “attains the things of the Spirit”<sup>31</sup>. In contrast to natural knowledge, spiritual knowledge is “certain and free from deceit”, being obtained through the divine “teaching of the Spirit”<sup>32</sup>.

But how is this way of knowing possible, since man as a natural being is characterized by the natural way of knowing, articulated by the intellect’s leaning on the data obtained through the senses and stored in the imagi-

---

<sup>30</sup> §18, 101 (gr. 100).

<sup>31</sup> §20, 103 (gr., 102).

<sup>32</sup> §20, 103 (gr. 102).

native faculty of the soul? By analogy, spiritual knowledge should be achieved through communion not with the natural ones that the human self receives from nature through perception and analyzes at an intellectual level, but through communion with the spiritual ones, i.e. specific to the Holy Spirit. Except that the Holy Spirit is a divine person of the Holy Trinity, and from this point of view we arrive at an essential epistemological problem typical of late antiquity: how can we know God, since the divine being fundamentally differs from created existences? In other words, how will we get close to God?

St. Gregory Palamas presents this problem in the terms in which St. Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite formulated it in the Christian world: "Every nature is utterly remote and absolutely estranged from the divine nature. For if God is nature, other things are not nature, but if each of the other things is nature, he is not nature: just as he is not a being, if others are beings, and if he is a being, the others are not beings"<sup>33</sup>.

It is quite an *aporia*: based on the radical ontological difference between the divine and human natures, it would seem that the only conclusion that could be drawn from this is the impossibility of knowing God, which would lead to the total annulment of the possibility of theology as a science about God and of any form of communion with the divine, that is, of holiness. By doing this, however, Palamas brings the problem exactly to the center of his fierce dispute with the representatives of theology of Western inspiration: Barlaam of Calabria (also mentioned in the title of the treatise by referring to "the Barlaamite Corruption"), Akindynos and Nikephoros Gregoras.

Thus formulated, the *aporia* seems insurmountable. Nevertheless, there is the divine revelation that God carries out precisely in order to communicate to man truths about Him, about the world and about man himself. Now, the revelation is based precisely on the possibility of a communication between God and man, of a knowledge by man of the divine and a sharing by man of the latter in order to fulfill the prescriptions of moral normativity revealed by God in the Holy Spirit and to achieve their finality which is holiness as likeness to God.

Therefore, there is a possibility of knowing God and of man's communion with Him. This possibility, St. Gregory Palamas shows, is based on the fact that God, although ontologically different from those that exist, is present in His creation, being "the nature of all beings and is referred to as such"<sup>34</sup>. This fact, however, does not have to be realized in a pantheistic manner – the extreme opposite of the *aporia* of the impossibility of knowing God formulated above – for this communion to be real and not a simple form of determinism. Or, the only possibility to fulfill this condition is to make a clear distinction between the divine nature and the works (energies) of

<sup>33</sup> §78, 173 (gr. 172).

<sup>34</sup> §78, 173 (gr. 172).

God: "But God is the nature of all beings and is referred to as such, since all participate in him and receive their constitution by this participation, not by participation in his nature, far from it, but by participation in his energy. Thus is he the very being of beings and the form in the forms as the primal form and wisdom of the wise and generally all things of all things. He is not nature because he is beyond all nature, and he is not being because he is beyond all beings, and he is not nor does he possess form because he is beyond form"<sup>35</sup>.

The Palamite ontological distinction between the divine nature and the divine energies, both necessarily uncreated in order to truly belong to God, makes it possible not only to overcome the alleged aporia of the impossibility of the knowledge of God, but also to explain how it is possible for man to attain holiness as likeness to God. The consequences of this distinction are not only epistemological, but also moral<sup>36</sup>, for on its basis it becomes possible for man to approach God, to have intimate communion with Him, and finally the deification of man, which is, ultimately, the finality of the incarnation of the Son of God: "How then can we draw near to God? By drawing near to his nature? But not one of all created beings possesses or will possess any communion in, or affinity to, the supreme nature. If then anyone has drawn near to God, he has surely approached him by means of his energy. How then? Is it by a natural participation in that energy? (*hōs metechōn ekeinēs physikōs;*) But this is common to all created beings. Therefore, it is not for those who are near by nature but for those who approach by free choice (*proaireseōs*) to be near to or far from God. Now free choice (*proairesis*) belongs to rational beings alone (*monōn tōn logikōn*). So only these among all other beings are either far from or near to God, either by drawing close through virtue (*di'aretēs*) or by drawing away through evil-doing (*kakias*). Therefore, these beings alone are capable of wretchedness (*athliotētos*) or blessedness (*makariotētos*). But let us hasten to attain blessedness"<sup>37</sup>.

Even if holiness and likeness to God are obtained through communion with God through the sharing of His uncreated energies, this does not occur automatically as a natural act, but presupposes the free will of man, his free decision taken on the basis of a deliberation carried out rationally, with discernment. This requires the transition from the ontological register to the moral register, or, in other words, from the instinctive reception of grace to personal communication with God, an approach of which only rational beings are capable.

Ultimately, irrational creatures also share in divine energies, but they do so exclusively in an instinctive way. Moral rapprochement with God

---

<sup>35</sup> §78, 173–175 (gr. 172–174).

<sup>36</sup> §78, 173 (gr. 172): "If you accept this as true also for wisdom and goodness and generally all the things around God or said about God, then your theology will be correct and in accord with the saints".

<sup>37</sup> §78, 175 (gr. 174).

through man's appropriation of the Lord's behaviors<sup>38</sup> is an even deeper way of sharing in divine energies, in which they support and guide him as a rational being towards interpersonal communion with God.

It thus becomes clear why Palamas felt the need to begin his treatise with a long digression on created nature and on natural knowledge and morality: man, too, through his rational nature as the image of God, has an important contribution to drawing near to God, for this does not occur automatically, in a deterministic manner, despite the fact that God is omnipotent and works ceaselessly through His uncreated energies, but presupposes his free participation and living involvement in communion with God, achieved, of course, through His grace. Therefore, the Archbishop of Thessaloniki insists in the context of his approach to the problem of the relationship between God's nature and divine energies on the importance of man's conscious assumption of drawing near to God through his performance of good works and leading a moral way of life: "Therefore, this is how far from God we are by our nature – woe unto us indeed! – at least, if we should not draw near to him out of free choice for the good by means of good works and ways (*di'ergōn kai tropōn agathōn*)"<sup>39</sup>.

On the one hand, moral striving is specific to the divine image in man as a free and rational being and is necessary for drawing close to God. On the other hand, man's fall into sin considerably affected his capacity to advance towards the likeness of God and to engage in a plenary relationship with Him. Therefore, insists St. Gregory Palamas, there was a need for "the saving economy (*sōstikēn oikonomian*)"<sup>40</sup> of God which culminated in the coming of the Savior Christ through whom we received saving grace. Thus, if it had not been for the death of Christ, "we would not in fact have gained the riches of the first fruits of immortality, nor would we have been summoned up to heaven, nor would our nature have been enthroned above every principality and power «at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens»<sup>41</sup>. Thus, by his wisdom and power and out of love for mankind God knows how to change to the better the falls which result from our freely willed deviation from the course"<sup>42</sup>.

Although he is a theologian of grace as uncreated energy, situating himself in many chapters of this treatise and others like it in Augustinian lineage, St. Gregory Palamas insists especially on the moral efforts of man in the process of deification (*theōsis*). Even if he affirms the importance of the fact that "the kingdom of heaven has drawn near to us through the condescension of God the Word unto us"<sup>43</sup> and that through the sacrifice

---

<sup>38</sup> Mth. 11: 29.

<sup>39</sup> §79, 175 (gr., 174).

<sup>40</sup> §53, 147 (gr., 146).

<sup>41</sup> Hebr. 8:1.

<sup>42</sup> §54, 147–149 (gr., 146–148).

<sup>43</sup> §57, 151 (gr., 150).

of Christ “we have gained the riches of the first fruits of immortality” and “have been summoned up to heaven”<sup>44</sup>, he does not cease to insist on the fact that the moral normativity instituted by God remains valid also for man who partakes of the grace imparted by Christ: “...the commandment of God is with us even now. On the one hand, if we obey it and set our will to live by it, it frees us from the punishment for all our sins and from the ancestral curse and condemnation. But, on the other hand, if we reject it even now and prefer to it the temptation and counsel of the evil one, we cannot but be banished from that life and society in paradise and fall into the Gehenna of eternal fire with which we were threatened”<sup>45</sup>.

Unlike the morality of the natural man, which Palamas focused on at the beginning of the treatise in an epistemological context (§15–§20), where virtues (and vices) were presented as the result of the way the mind operates with the images obtained through perception and stored in the *phantastikon*, the virtues of the Christian man are defined by him as “works of repentance”<sup>46</sup>. Now, repentance is not a fundamental experience of the natural man, but is a gracious experience, springing from obedience to the commandment of God. In fact, he shows, “the commandment ... laid before us by God” is “repentance”<sup>47</sup> itself.

St. Gregory Palamas even offers a whole list of virtues as “works of repentance”, connecting them to the Kingdom of God that is within us: “Let us acquire the works of repentance (*ta erga tēs metanoias*): a humble attitude, compunction and spiritual mourning, a gentle heart full of mercy, loving justice, striving for purity, peaceful, peacemaking, patient, glad to suffer persecutions, losses, disasters, slander and sufferings for the sake of truth and righteousness. For the kingdom of heaven, or rather, the King of heaven – O the unspeakable munificence! – is within us<sup>48</sup>. To him we ought always to cling (*kollasthai*) by works of repentance and perseverance (*dia tōn ouranōn tēs metanoias kai hypomonēs ergōn*), loving as much as possible him who loved us so much (*agapōntes ōs dynaton ton tosouton hēmas agapēsanta*)”<sup>49</sup>.

These are virtues of the inner man, into which, through divine grace, Christ himself, the King of heaven, has entered – absent from the “natural” man or, better said, from the man living in the condition of the absence of grace as a consequence of the fall into sin. So, on the one hand, the virtues as works of repentance are direct implications of the presence of grace that works the disposition of repentance in the heart of man. On the other hand, however, through them we access God or, as Palamas says, «we cling» to Him.

---

<sup>44</sup> §54, 147 (gr., 146).

<sup>45</sup> §55, 149 (gr., 148).

<sup>46</sup> §57, 151 (gr., 150).

<sup>47</sup> §56, 149 (gr., 148).

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Lk. 17:21.

<sup>49</sup> §57, 151 (gr., 150).

But, above all, the virtues as consequences of fulfilling the divine commandments are the loving response that man gives to God, «who loved us so much». In this sense, from virtues is born the love of God, but vice versa, from the love of God are born the virtues: “The absence of passions and the presence of virtues establish love of God, for hatred of evil things and the consequent absence of the passions introduce instead the desire for and the acquisition of good things. How could one who loves and possesses good things not love in a special way the master who is goodness itself and who alone is both provider and preserver of all good? In him he has his being in a singular manner and him he bears within himself through love, according to the one who said, «He who abides in love abides in God and God in him»<sup>50</sup>. You should know not only that love for God is based on the virtues, but also that the virtues are born of love. And so the Lord says at one point in the Gospel, «He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me»<sup>51</sup>; and on another occasion, «He who loves me will keep my commandments»<sup>52</sup>. But neither are the works of virtue praiseworthy and profitable for those who practice them without love, nor indeed is love without works. Paul at one time makes ample demonstration of this when he writes to the Corinthians, «If I do such and such but have not love, I gain nothing»<sup>53</sup>. And in turn, at another time, the disciple specially beloved by Christ does likewise when he says, «Let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth»<sup>54</sup>.<sup>55</sup>

It is a dialectic of gracious love and moral effort through which we assimilate the virtues and, implicitly, the Good to which they lead as permanent habits, because in them lies, as D. Stăniloae shows, Christ himself<sup>56</sup>. Ultimately, the virtues as fruits of the moral life and of practical Christian philosophy are almost like sacramental realities that place us in a relationship of love with God, the latter itself further bearing virtues<sup>57</sup>.

---

<sup>50</sup> 1 Jn 4:16.

<sup>51</sup> Jn 14:21.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Jn 15:15.23.

<sup>53</sup> 1 Cor. 13:1–3.

<sup>54</sup> 1 Jn 3:18.

<sup>55</sup> §58, 151–153 (150–152).

<sup>56</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Scholion (Footnote) 53*, in *Filocalia VII*, 459–460: “Spiritual goods are one with virtues, that is, with habits and the various kinds of good. Therefore, when we speak of goods, we understand virtues and vice versa. For spiritual goods truly become ours when we assimilate them as permanent habits through our labors. But in them is Christ himself. For He has culminantly assimilated to Him and therefore from Him radiates in us their power or the power for them, and this power is both spiritual sweetness and happiness for us and for others. The person who is consistently good or strengthened in virtue shows his goodness by radiating his goodness towards others. Virtue is the mode of generous existence, of existence open to others, unlike passion, which is the mode of selfish existence. Through the good that radiates from someone to another, he himself penetrates into that. Through His virtues, which become a source of power for ours, Christ Himself permeates and dwells within us” (our transl.).

<sup>57</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Scholion (Footnote) 54*, in *Filocalia VII*, 460: “The virtues culminate in love, the culminating stage of generosity. But the virtues themselves, as forms of gen-

## References

### Sources

- Gregory Palamas, St. *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*. Studies and Texts 83. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1988.
- Grigorie Palama, Sf. *150 de capete despre cunoștința naturală, despre cunoașterea lui Dumnezeu, despre viața morală și despre făptuire* [One Hundred and Fifty Chapters on Natural Knowledge, the Knowledge of God, Moral Life, and Practice]. In *Filocalia*, vol. VII, 421–516. Romanian translation by Dumitru Stăniloae. 2nd ed. Bucharest: Humanitas, 1999.
- Grigorie Palama, Sf. *Capitole antropologice, psihoteologice și economice* [Anthropological, Psychotheological, and Economic Chapters]. In *Scrieri II: Fecioara Maria și Petru Athonitul – prototipuri ale vieții isihaste și alte scrieri duhovnicești*, by Sf. Grigorie Palama, 253–286. Sibiu: Deisis, 2005.
- Makarios Kallistos, Patriarch. *Kephalaia peri proseuchēs* [Chapters on Prayer]. In *Philokalia*, vol. IV, 296–298. 3rd ed. Athens, 1961.
- Kallistos, Patriarch of Constantinople. *Kephalaia R' peri katharotētos psychēs, pōs kata mikron autē kathairetai kai eis theōrian anagetai* [One Hundred Chapters on the Purity of the Soul: How It Is Gradually Purified and Raised to Contemplation]. *Codex Matsouki Ecclesiae S. Parascevae (olim Monasterii Bylizias 5)*, ff. 387–393v. Edited by Antonio Rigo. In *Byzantion: Revue internationale des études byzantines* 80 (2010): 344–407.
- Calist Patriarhul, Sf. *Capete despre rugăciune* [Chapters on Prayer]. In *Filocalia*, vol. VIII, 215–220. 2nd ed. Bucharest: Humanitas, 2002.
- Calist Patriarhul, Sf. *100 de capitole despre curăția inimii, cum câte puțin se curățește și se ridică spre vederea contemplativă* [One Hundred Chapters on the Purity of the Heart: How It Is Gradually Purified and Raised to Contemplation]. In *Despre lumina taborică, rugăciunea lui Iisus și curăția inimii. Scrieri filocalice uitate*, 193–228. 2nd ed. Translated into Romanian by Ioan I. Ică Jr. Sibiu: Deisis, 2013.

### Secondary Literature

- Bodogae, Teodor. *Ajutoarele românești la mănăstirile din Sfântul Munte Athos* [Romanian Support for the Monasteries of Mount Athos]. Sibiu, 1940.
- Ică Jr., Ioan I. *Sfântul Grigorie Palama – scriitor duhovnicesc isihast și opera sa* [St. Gregory Palamas as a Hesychast Spiritual Writer and His Work]. Introductory study to *Scrieri II: Fecioara Maria și Petru Athonitul – prototipuri ale vieții isihaste și alte scrieri duhovnicești*, by Sf. Grigorie Palama, 5–150. Sibiu: Deisis, 2005.

---

erosity, could not grow in us if they were not supported by the impulse of generosity” (our transl.). See also *Scholion (Footnote) 54*, 460: “Love without steadfast deeds, strengthened in virtues, is not true love, but deeds without love are not deeds capable of transforming us either, but remain appearances or sporadic gestures without inner substance, without consistent, lasting warmth, without attachment to the one to whom they are addressed. It leaves the one who commits them isolated and cold”.

- Meyendorff, John. *Introduction à l'étude de Grégoire Palamas*. Patristica Sobornensia 3. Paris: Seuil, 1959.
- Sinkewicz, Robert. "The Early Chapters of the Capita 150." In *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, by St. Gregory Palamas, 1–35. Studies and Texts 83. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1988.
- Sinkewicz, Robert. "The Later Chapters of the Capita 150." In *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, by St. Gregory Palamas, 36–55. Studies and Texts 83. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1988.
- Stăniloae, Dumitru. "Scholia (Footnotes)." In *Filocalia*, vol. VII. Romanian translation by Dumitru Stăniloae. 2nd ed. Bucharest: Humanitas, 1999.