

## 10 The spiritual way

JOHN CHRYSOAVGIS

### INTRODUCTION: FROM *THEOSIS* TO *ASCESIS*

It has become fashionable, for Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike, to be infatuated with characteristic, even exotic, technical terms that define essential dimensions of Orthodox theology and spirituality. Scholars and students alike are generally enchanted, even distracted by the mystical or mysterious implications of such concepts as the way to *theosis* (namely, deification or divinisation), prayer of the heart (or the Jesus Prayer) and the vision of divine light. It may, therefore, be helpful to offer from the outset certain terminological clarifications of key theological concepts, mystical principles and spiritual practices as these translate into Orthodox life. Indeed, the term 'spirituality' itself assumes numerous meanings, being either loosely adopted sometimes or else completely dismissed at others. Some Orthodox theologians are quick to claim that there is no reference in the classical tradition to 'spirituality' as such and rightly emphasise the connection between the Spirit of God and the spiritual life. There is no doubt that the word 'spirituality' itself is vulnerable to misunderstanding and misuse unless carefully 'unpacked' and nuanced. Nevertheless, words communicate the pregnancy of divine life when we approach them in a spirit of humility and with a sense of awe. It is not surprising, then, to find that the literary classics of the early Church, and particularly of the early Egyptian and Palestinian desert, underline the rigorous discipline involved in personally appropriating, rather than merely arbitrarily describing, the spiritual way. In this regard, they prefer to speak more about *ascesis*, rather than about *theosis*.

Theological language is shaped very early in each person's life; in the Orthodox way, it is especially shaped by the lives of the saints, who have experienced the life of the Spirit. Therefore, in reclaiming our spiritual vocabulary, it is the saints of the Church who teach us the process of learning or re-learning what it is consciously to know and to reflect God's love in the world. In exploring, then, the writings of the 'Church Fathers', or in living with the tradition of the saints, we find

that vocabulary comes to life and ultimately challenges the ways we perceive God and understand the world in our struggle towards personal holiness and social justice, namely in the journey towards personal salvation and cosmic transformation.

This chapter concentrates on some of the fundamental terms and concepts that are central to any understanding of Orthodox spirituality and endeavours to unveil their intrinsic value today. It constitutes a humble effort to translate an ancient faith into a modern language.

#### ESCHATOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY: 'DYING, YET BEHOLD WE LIVE'

'Tawait ... the life of the age to come', proclaims the Orthodox 'symbol of faith', otherwise known as the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed, formulated in the fourth century and recited at each celebration of the Divine Liturgy. The technical term for talk regarding 'the age to come' is 'eschatology': it is the study of the 'last events' (*eschata*). Most of us assume that the 'last times' and the 'last things' imply an apocalyptic or even escapist attitude towards the world. Modern theologians had to disabuse themselves of the medieval legacy that eschatology is the last, perhaps unnecessary chapter in every manual or course of dogmatics. We appreciate more readily today that eschatology is not primarily the teaching about what *follows* everything else in this world. Rather, it is the teaching about *our relationship* to those last things and last times. In this way, eschatology is what properly defines and directs our spiritual ways and ascetic practices.<sup>1</sup>

In the formative years of Christian monasticism in the desert of Egypt and Palestine, the inhabitants of the desert there and in Sinai learned some of the fundamental insights about eschatology. The practice of asceticism is closely connected to the phenomenon of monasticism. In fact, the roots of Christian asceticism are, much like the origins of Christian monasticism, veiled in a cloud of mystery. Nonetheless, they are profoundly related to the effort of the early Christian Church to respond to Christ's call, recorded in the gospels, for his disciples to be 'perfect' and 'merciful', 'just as your heavenly Father is' (Mt 5:48; Lk 6:36). The entire concept of discipline was regarded not so much in terms of rigour as in terms of discerning ways to become disciples. Thus, asceticism looks to the transformation, and not the mortification, of the body and the world. Indeed, from the middle of the third to the late seventh centuries, the desert of Egypt, Palestine and Sinai became a laboratory for studying hidden truths about heaven and earth, as well as a place for drawing connections between the two. The hermits who inhabited those deserts experimented in and

explored what it means to be human and how to reach the depths of the divine. To them, the word 'eschatology' was no longer otherworldly; the struggle to embrace their brokenness and vulnerability dispelled any division between heaven and earth, or between time and eternity. They recognised that what is far more difficult and far more important than learning to live is learning to die. They realised how dying and loss are the best lessons in how to live 'in abundance' (Jn 10:10) and how to love to the fullest.

Metaphysical and mystical reflections are fatally flawed if they do not begin with the reality of eschatology; it is eschatology which shapes the ascetic way and gives meaning to life in this world and to all of creation, including our tiny part in it. Living life to the full comes only when the ultimate concerns – namely, meaninglessness and death – have been honestly confronted and openly embraced. How we face or avoid these concerns has a profound consequence for our understanding of *ascesis* and *theosis*, as well as for our experience of solitude and community. For remembrance of death is a crucial virtue in the spiritual life, a daily and tangible reminder of human weakness and imperfection. If we want to come out of life nice and polished, we need simply to think of death. There is hardly an outward sense of perfection in nursing homes and hospices. Remembrance of death allows the reality of brokenness to be revealed truthfully, so that the lie that heaven is elsewhere may split wide open and genuine healing may begin. In the spiritual way, awaiting this fullness of the kingdom-to-come assumes the form of prayer, especially expressed through the silence of tears.

#### SILENCE AND TEARS: LEARNING TO LISTEN

In the same desert of Egypt, Palestine and Sinai, silence was described as the daughter of patience and the mother of watchfulness. For when all words are abandoned, a new awareness arrives. Silence awakens us from numbness to the world around us, from our dullness of vision.

Abba Poemen said: 'Be watchful inwardly; but be watchful also outwardly.'<sup>12</sup>

The early desert dwellers taught us that silence is a requirement of life; it is the first duty of love. Silence is a way of waiting, a way of watching, a way of noticing – instead of ignoring – what is going on in our heart and in our world. It is the glue that binds our attitudes and our actions, our belief and our behaviour. Silence reflects our ultimate surrender to God as well as our gradual awakening to new patterns of learning and living. When we are silent, we learn by suffering and undergoing, not just by speculating and

understanding. Silence confirms our readiness to lead a counter-cultural way of life, to choose rather than to be led, to admit our limited perspective as possessors and consumers in society, and to appreciate another, unlimited perspective of the spiritual way.

What we learn in silence is that we are all mutually interdependent, that the entire world is intimately interconnected.

Take a compass [says Dorotheus of Gaza in the sixth century] and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The centre point is the same distance from any point on the circumference ... This circle is the world and God is the centre; the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the centre are the lives of human beings ... The closer these are to God, the closer they come to each other; and the closer they come to each other and to the world, the closer they are to God.<sup>3</sup>

The truth is that all things are inseparably interrelated and closely inhering in each other – beyond our imagination. Nothing living is self-contained; the brokenness of one person or element reflects the fragility of the whole world: 'If one member suffers, all suffer together with it' (1 Cor 12:26). There is no autonomy – only a distinction between a sense of responsibility and a lack thereof. The result of any bifurcation between spirituality and reality is inevitably catastrophic.

One of the more tangible ways of expressing our vulnerability, at least according to the classical texts of Orthodox spirituality, is weeping or the shedding of tears. The gift of tears is 'native' to Christianity and may be traced from the New Testament through the early desert tradition; it has played a dominant role in various ascetical and mystical expressions throughout the centuries. The Eastern Church has in fact served as a cradle for this treasure given to Christianity by Jesus, who 'blessed those who mourn' (Mt 5:4).<sup>4</sup> Tears were accorded a particular priority in the East, perhaps on account of the emphasis on the heart as a vessel of the Holy Spirit. The gift of tears may not easily be understood in our world; then again, it may readily be misunderstood as an emotional outburst or confused with various kinds of tears, not all of which are the fruit of the Spirit and some of which are in fact the product of passions. For there are passionate tears of envy, just as there are natural tears of grief. Still, this spiritual teaching is in fact one of the more consistent doctrines practised and taught by the early Eastern Fathers.

Tears are another means of surrendering – of dying, although always in the context and in the hope of new life and resurrection. They are a way of embracing darkness in order to receive light. No wonder, then, that the

wisdom of the early desert emphasised remembrance of death as an essential virtue in the spiritual way; it was another dimension to remembrance of God. The pioneer Fathers and Mothers of the desert embraced their mortality; they were comfortable with the concept and the experience of death. They recognised death as an important way of connecting to themselves, to their neighbours and to God. Unfortunately, so often, we endeavour to cheat death; we instinctively try to avoid or escape death: 'Abba Poemen said: "Weeping is the way that the scriptures and the Fathers give us: 'Weep!' Truly, there is no other way than this".'<sup>5</sup> The desert elders learned to embrace human shortcoming and welcomed human failure as the ultimate opportunity for receiving divine grace and strength, which can only be 'perfected in weakness' (2 Cor 12:9). Somewhere on that long trail between childhood and adulthood, many of us lose touch with the vital skills that permit us to know ourselves. Part of the problem is that we set impossible goals, which can be met only by angels. The spirituality of the desert taught its inhabitants that perfection is for God alone; we are called neither to forgo nor to forget our imperfection. Strangely, the fragility and vulnerability of life itself reveals the priority of confronting and embracing our innermost weaknesses. Life has a way of finally catching up with us – so that we can look it in the face! The truth is that God may be discerned in the very midst of every tension and trial. This understanding was part and parcel of desert wisdom. In the desert, the Gospel injunction to 'be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5:48) becomes a vision of realism precisely through the realisation and acceptance of human imperfection. The way of the ascetics is indeed the way of *theosis*; but it is understood only as the way of imperfection. *Theosis* is no less, and no more, than falling down and getting back up, starting anew. If our eyes enjoy the vision of God (the mystery of becoming God), it is because our tears can express the beauty and the mystery of being all too human. Tears are the closest companion of deification, our sure escape-route from death to life.

In light of this, therefore, the spirituality of tears becomes an overture of joy. In the seventh century, St John Climacus speaks of 'joyful sorrow'. Tears are at once the foretaste of death and of resurrection. They are not, as unfortunately they are often perceived, a negative aspect of the spiritual life, a way of merely regretting past sins or ongoing weaknesses. As symbols of imperfection, tears are in fact the *sole* way of spiritual progress. While it may be true that *theosis* is the culmination of Orthodox theology and spirituality, so eloquently articulated in the writings of such mystics as Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory Palamas, the great majority of classical patristic literature focuses not so much on deification as on the

long journey of the spiritual way – namely, on the gradual stages, the painful steps towards this sublime goal. The saints know that this alone is what – realistically and uniquely – lies within our grasp. They are convinced that one silent tear will advance us further in the spiritual way than any number of louder ascetic feats or more visible virtuous achievements. In this way, tears signify fragility and woundedness, the broken window through which God enters the heart, bringing healing and wholeness to both soul and body.

Thus, the silence of tears prepares the heart for self-knowledge and compassion. It allows us the time and space to become alert to ourselves and to others. Unfortunately, however, we tend to confuse self-knowledge with self-absorption, whereas, in reality, self-knowledge leads away from self-absorption towards a sense of what, in the sixth century, Barsanuphius and John would call ‘forgetting oneself’.<sup>6</sup> Curiously, while – in the church life generally and the spiritual way especially – we encourage the need for knowing and loving others through compassion, we less frequently reward the virtue of knowing ourselves through silence. Yet knowing why we do what we do facilitates the awareness also of why other people do what they do, and in the end leads to the acceptance of other people as they are. Narcissism is not too much self, but rather insufficient knowledge of our true self. People who are self-absorbed or self-centred normally suffer from too little rather than too much self. Moreover, we often seek intimacy by facing in the wrong direction: instead of looking inward, we turn outward towards others. Nevertheless, the isolation of solitude serves as the first step towards any intimacy or communion with other people.

Silence, then, is the great stabiliser; it resembles a secret compass in our relationships with God, with others and with ourselves. Silence is about being, and not simply doing; it renders the heart acutely attentive and uniquely receptive. Through silence, the heart is gradually refined and increasingly educated in the art of attentiveness. Silence provides the space and the capacity to listen to and soak up what another person is conveying. In brief, it is the skill as well as the tool whereby we acknowledge that what is going on in someone else’s world matters.

Utter silence can almost feel like death; yet, in its essence, it too is associated with the desire for ‘life in abundance’ (Jn 10:10), beyond ‘mere survival’. Most of us deny the relation between silence and death by entering a whirl of individual achievement and social activity that renders death improbable or impossible, at least in our own minds. By contrast, silence is like ‘marking’ – and not merely ‘killing’ – time! It is like standing respectfully and reverently before even the most frightening experience of failure and isolation. It is a renewed sense of anticipation

and expectation of the last times and the age to come. In silence, we become aware of being alive, and not dead – of having needs and temptations, and of being able to face and embrace these without turning elsewhere, without turning away. In silence, we are not empty; we are not alone; we are not afraid. We simply ‘know that God is’ (Ps 45 [46]:10–11) – an experience that may occur in a split instant or take shape over an entire lifetime.

Finally, silence introduces an apophatic element to the way of intimacy and love. For through stillness comes the refreshing suggestion of approaching and acknowledging others by ‘not knowing’ them. If we are fixed to our preconceptions or fears of people, then we may never enjoy perfect silence. When we ‘know’ someone, we have already shut our eyes to that person’s constant process of change and growth. We limit ourselves by rooting others in the past and not rejoicing in their potential. Therefore, through the power of silence, we can risk embracing the other person in his or her entirety, in his or her eternal dimension – beyond what we could ever comprehend or tolerate.

#### THE PASSIONS OF THE SOUL: GROWING THROUGH SUFFERING

Silence is the way we begin to notice what is happening inside and around us. However, progress in the movements of the heart takes toil and time. We do not change suddenly, magically becoming new people, our old faults forgotten. We can never run away from who we are; we shall never escape temptations and passions: our temper, vanity, ambition, fear, envy, delusion, resentment or arrogance.

In the spiritual classics of the early desert, knowing oneself means knowing one’s passions; and knowing – at least, in the biblical sense – means loving. It implies being aware of one’s behaviour, and particularly one’s weaknesses. Indeed, in the ascetic tradition, there are two ways of understanding and responding to the passions. Sometimes, passions are perceived as negative; this derives from the Stoic concept of sins and vices, whereby these are regarded as a disorder or disease. Alternatively, passions may be perceived as positive; this conveys the Aristotelian understanding of sins or vices, whereby passions are considered neutral forces or natural impulses. According to the former view, passions are intrinsically evil; they are a pathological condition. The source of passions is the Devil; passions must, therefore, be eradicated or eliminated. According to the latter view, passions are intrinsically objective; they are neither good nor evil, neither right nor wrong. The source of passions is God; passions, then, must be redirected or transfigured. Indeed, in the second of his

*Ascetic Discourses*, in the fifth century, Abba Isaiah of Scetis claims that all passions – including anger, jealousy and even lust – are granted by God with a sacred purpose: namely, to reflect and reveal our ‘passion-ate’ love for God and ‘com-passion’ for God’s creatures.<sup>7</sup>

Our passions and problems cannot be denied or concealed; for, potentially, they are the very resources for spiritual renewal and revitalisation. When our passions are misdirected or distorted, the soul is divided; we are no longer whole or integrated. So passions are never either quashed or quenched; they are fulfilled and transformed by God’s loving grace. In the solitude of the heart, through common temptations and all-too-human tensions, we become painfully aware of what is lacking. There, we are haunted by the absence of love and begin to yearn for the depth of communion. The cell of the ascetic symbolises the safe haven of the heart, where one can always willingly return to discover more and more of the authentic self, irrespective of how painful an ordeal or how agonising a struggle this may be. Such a discovery through solitude eventually becomes a fountain of healing. Embracing solitude in the loneliness of the cell (or the soul) means knowing what you think, understanding how you behave, and finally accepting others without the need to defend yourself. It is assuming responsibility without the least sense of self-justification or self-righteousness. Ultimately, the measure to which we are able to acknowledge and accept others will depend on the degree to which we can understand and tolerate ourselves. This is because we are more united to each other through our weaknesses than through our strengths; we are more like one another through our shortcomings than through our successes. Passions are what connects us with one another; this is exactly why passions can be fully understood only through others.

#### SPIRITUAL DIRECTION: LEARNING WITH OTHERS

One way of recognising the spiritual unity that binds all human beings is silently embracing the reality of our passions and weaknesses. Yet in the early desert of Egypt and Palestine, both lay Christians and ordained clergy, novices and monastics alike, would travel long distances in order to visit renowned elders for a word of advice or, as they would call it, ‘a word of salvation’. Inasmuch as they recognised how they were filled and formed by human passions, these same charismatic elders had become Spirit-filled and ultimately transformed. Thus, they were able to convey the lessons of their journey and communicate a word of healing to those who approached them. This self-knowledge – perhaps above all other qualifications, spiritual (such as great feats of fasting<sup>8</sup> and prayer<sup>9</sup>) or secular (such as

education<sup>10</sup> or even age<sup>11</sup>) – was what rendered the *abba* ('spiritual father') or *amma* ('spiritual mother') uniquely skilled and prepared to guide the souls of others.

If there is one lesson learned in the early desert, then, it is the conviction that, in order to achieve self-knowledge, we also need to trust at least one other person. The desert elders spoke of obedience and spiritual direction. Obedience is essentially an act of listening; it is the art of listening attentively or closely, which is precisely the implication of the Greek word *hyp-akoe* ('obedience'). However, the goal of obedience is not to repress the will; it is in fact to stabilise the will. This is why obedience is the measure and criterion of authentic solitude and silence: Barsanuphius claims that 'when you hasten to do something on your own, then the resulting silence is from the devil'.<sup>12</sup>

While the fine balance between isolation and intimacy is actually impossible to attain without divine grace, it is extremely difficult to sustain without sharing with, or baring all before, a spiritual director. Through someone else's belief in our self, we begin confidently – i.e., by the act of confiding and confessing – to rediscover the solid ground within. Sharing our thoughts and temptations openly with at least one other person enables us to become familiar with the desires and conflicts that drive our behaviour. Furthermore, listening to and accepting the reality of our self renders us more aware of and more caring towards others, which is precisely the way of *theosis* or being 'like God'.

One reason for sharing with others is quite simply that most of us are harsher critics of ourselves, striking the most painful blows against ourselves at just the time when we most require tolerance and compassion – virtues that undoubtedly characterise the early desert elders, such as Arsenius and Macarius in Egypt, as well as Barsanuphius and John in Gaza.<sup>13</sup> Obedience clearly goes against the grain of so much in our contemporary society, which espouses such notions as individuality and independence. Nonetheless, when someone is unable to build up from even the smallest patch of solid ground, then terms like 'freedom' and 'will' have little resonance.

In addition to – or rather, as a consequence of – obedience, the desert elders (especially Barsanuphius and John) frequently cite Galatians 6:2 and emphasise that assuming responsibility for 'the burdens of others' is critical to growing spiritually. Acknowledging responsibility for the consequences of one's thoughts and actions implies not blaming others: 'To come to perfect silence, one must first endure insults from other people, as well as contempt, dishonour and hurt ... in order that the labour may not be in vain (cf. 1 Thess 3:5)'.<sup>14</sup> The point is that we can be authentically

attached only when we have become completely detached. This is essentially the experience of letting go and of trusting. It is the ability to forget oneself in an effort to reach out to another person.

In the spiritual way, one is called to liberation by way of the margins of self-renunciation, in the paradox of self-subjection to a spiritual elder. 'Those who seek to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life will preserve it' (Lk 17:33); Christ speaks these words in light of the day of his glorious Second Coming. The Christian lives in the shadow of this day, in the light of the age that is both already at hand and yet to come.

This surrender of one's self is no easy task. The ascetic chooses to go to extremes because of the extremity of the fallen, self-enclosed condition. It is a limiting situation that requires equally unlimited measures. However, obedience to one's spiritual elder does not resemble the submission that one experiences in the world; for it subsists – or, at least, it ought to exist – in the context of love. Without this kind of personal relationship, one gains nothing but a feeling of guilt from obedience. And such guilt defeats the purpose of obedience, which is spiritual liberation.

The spiritual elder, then, does not aim at imposing rules and punishments. The elder never prescribes rules but rather becomes a personal rule or living model, not so much through his or her words as through example. 'Be their model, not their legislator' is the advice of Abba Poemen.<sup>15</sup>

In a unique and refreshing passage from the seventh-century *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, John Climacus describes the spiritual guide as a 'sponsor' (*anadochos*), the term used for a god-parent at the sacrament of baptism. The concept signifies someone who assumes responsibility for another.<sup>16</sup> The source of this doctrine is Pauline: 'We who are strong ought to bear the failings of the weak' (Rom 15:1). The spiritual elder does more than direct responsibly; he assumes direct responsibility for the disciple. Barsanuphius of Gaza writes to one of his disciples: 'I assume and bear you, but only on this condition: that you bear the keeping of my words and commandments.'<sup>17</sup> The process of spiritual direction clearly implies a profound sense of love for and solidarity with another human being, for the elder assumes the suffering of others and, therefore, 'bears the cross' (Lk 14:24) of Christ himself. This reveals the art of spiritual direction as a way of love.

Therefore, in opening up to a spiritual elder, one allows the divine other into the whole of one's life. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to allow at least one other into the deepest recesses of the heart and mind, sharing every thought, emotion, insight, wound and joy with another person whom we trust completely. For most people, however, this is a difficult venture. It is not easy to open up to another person,

revealing the vulnerable and darker aspects of our life. Our culture encourages us from an early age to be strong and assertive, to handle matters alone. Yet, for the spiritual wisdom of the early desert, such a way is false; it is, in fact, the way of the Devil. For 'we are members one of another' (Rom 12:5), not islands unto ourselves. And the Orthodox spiritual way proposes a variety of contexts within which we may begin to open our hearts and affirm the communion that exists among us: these include the sacramental way of confessing to a parish priest and the spiritual way of sharing with an experienced elder, whether male or female.

People need others because often the wounds that they feel are too deep to admit to themselves; sometimes, the evil is too painful to confront alone. The sign, then, according to the Orthodox spiritual way, that one is on the right track is the ability to share with someone else. This is, of course, precisely the essence of the sacrament of confession or reconciliation. Yet repentance (or *metanoia*) should not be seen in terms of remorse, but rather in terms of reconciliation, restoration and reintegration. Confession is not some kind of transaction or deal; it defies mechanical definition and can never be reduced in a juridical manner merely to the – albeit significant – act of absolution. Confession is not some narcissistic self-reflection. Sin is always understood in Orthodox spirituality as a rupture in the 'I-Thou' relationship of the world; otherwise *metanoia* could easily lead to paranoia. Instead, genuine confession always issues in communion; it is ultimately the ability to utter, together with at least one person, 'Our Father'. It is the sacrament of the Eucharist, the mystery of communion, lived out day by day.

#### THEOSIS THROUGH ASCESIS: THE WAY OF AUTHENTICITY

The ascetic way, then, is a way of authentic liberation and communion. For the ascetic is the person who is free, uncontrolled by attitudes that abuse the world; uncompelled by ways that use the world; characterised by self-control, by self-restraint, and by the ability to say 'no' or 'enough'. Indeed, asceticism aims at refinement, not detachment or destruction. Its goal is moderation, not repression. Its content is positive, not negative: it looks to service, not selfishness; to reconciliation, not renunciation or escape: 'Without asceticism, none of us is authentically human.'<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately, however, centuries of misunderstanding and abuse have tainted the concept of asceticism, identifying it either with individualism and escapism or else with idealism and angelism. Both tendencies verge on the point of dis-incarnation, promulgating enmity towards the

world. Yet, at least in its more authentic expression, asceticism is a way of intimacy and tenderness, a way of integrating body, soul and society. In this respect, asceticism is essentially a social discipline. Moreover, it is never practised in a way that would insult the Creator. It is no wonder, therefore, that even after years of harsh and frugal living, the early desert Fathers and Mothers would emerge in their relationships as charming and compassionate, accessible and tranquil.

In the Orthodox spiritual way, one example of this may be seen in the discipline of fasting. Orthodox Christians fast from all dairy and meat products for half of the entire year, almost as if in an effort to reconcile one half of the year with the other, secular time with the time of the Kingdom. To fast is not to deny the world, but in fact to affirm the world, together with the body, as well as all of the material creation. It is to recall that humanity is not called to 'live by bread alone' (Mt 4:4) but rather to acknowledge that all of this world, 'the earth, and all the fullness thereof, is the Lord's' (Ps. 23 [24]:1).

Therefore, like every ascetic discipline, to fast is ultimately to learn to give, and not simply to give up. As another act of 'letting go', it is not an expression of denial, but in fact an offering of thanks. It is a way of breaking down barriers, established by selfishness, between myself and my neighbour, as well as between myself and the world around me. In a word, to fast is to love. It is to move away from what I want to what the world needs. It is to be liberated from greed, control and compulsion. Fasting is to value everything for itself, and not simply for ourselves.

In the final analysis, the aim of asceticism is to regain a sense of wonder, to be filled with a sense of goodness and of God-likeness. It is to see all things in God and God in all things. And it is precisely here that *ascesis* encounters *theosis*. For the most divine experience is to discover the wonder of God in the beauty of the world and to discern the limitless nature of grace in the limitations of the human body and the natural creation. There are those among us who may well be converted 'suddenly with a light flashing from heaven' (Acts 9:3) or be 'caught up to the third heaven' (2 Cor 12:2). Yet such ecstasy is experienced by very few – 'scarcely one among ten thousand . . . indeed, scarcely one in every generation', according to Abba Isaac the Syrian.<sup>19</sup> It is no wonder, then, that the desert Fathers encourage their disciples to restrain someone rising to spiritual heights: 'The old men used to say: "If you see someone climbing toward heaven by his own will, grab his foot and pull him down; for this will be for his own good".'<sup>20</sup> The ascetic literature clearly demonstrates a preference for the more lowly experience of those who have known their passions and recognised their failures. John Climacus refers to

them as 'blessed': 'I saw ... and was amazed; and I consider those fallen mourners more blessed than those who have not fallen and are not mourning'.<sup>21</sup> While the end of *ascesis* may be the vision of God or *theosis*, the way of *ascesis* is none other than the daily life of self-knowledge or integrity, carved out of the ordinary experience of everyday life perceived in the extraordinary light of the eternal kingdom. It is the gradual – and, as a result of our resistance, painful – process of learning to be who you are and do what you do with all the intensity of life and love. 'An old man was asked: "What is it necessary to do to be saved?" He was making rope; and, without looking up from the work, he replied: "You are looking at it"'.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the ascetic way defines in a uniquely tangible and concrete manner the theological doctrines concerning the original creation of the world, the divine Incarnation of the Word, and the age to come that we expect.

### Further reading

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### Notes

1. See Bishop H. Alfeyev, 'Eschatology', above, for further discussion.
2. *Sayings*, p. 186: Poemen 137.
3. Dorotheus of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*, pp. 138–9.
4. See I. Hausherr, *Penthos: The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1982); K. C. Patton and J. S. Hawley (eds.), *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).
5. *Sayings*, p. 184: Poemen 119.
6. See J. Chryssavgis (ed.), *Barsanuphius and John: Letters*, vols. I–II (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2006–7).

7. See J. Chryssavgis and P. R. Penkett (eds.), *Abba Isaiah of Scetis: Ascetic Discourses* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2002). For more on passions and healing, see J. Larchet, *The Theology of Illness* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2002).
8. Cf. *Sayings*, p. 84: Theodora 6.
9. Cf. *Sayings*, p. 131: Macarius the Great 19.
10. Cf. *Sayings*, p. 10: Arsenius 6.
11. Cf. *Sayings*, p. 175: Poemen 61.
12. Barsanuphius, *Letter* 93.
13. On spiritual direction in the early church, see G. Demacopoulos, *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007); J. Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Brookline MA: Holy Cross Press, 2000).
14. Barsanuphius, *Letter* 185.
15. *Sayings*, p. 191: Poemen 174.
16. John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 4.104.
17. Barsanuphius, *Letter* 270.
18. Cf. K. Ware, 'The way of the ascetics: negative or affirmative?' in V. Wimbush and R. Valantasis (eds.), *Asceticism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 13. See also P. Nellas, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1987).
19. Isaac of Nineveh, *Mystic Treatise* 22.
20. Cf. C. Stewart (trans.), *The World of the Desert Fathers: Stories and Sayings* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1986), p. 37.
21. See John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 5.
22. Cf. Stewart, *The World of the Desert Fathers*, p. 35.