

The Mysteries of the Cross

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On this the third Sunday of Great Lent the Church gives us the gift of the precious and life-giving cross--not just as a signpost for where we are headed, but even more so as a reminder that the cross is the very center of our Christian life and, indeed, the very center of all creation. St. Paul teaches us that "By the cross, the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14). What does he mean by these words? How, *in practice*, is the world crucified to me, and I to the world? In his homily on this Sunday of Great Lent, in the middle of the fourteenth century, St. Gregory Palamas offers us a beautiful explanation of St. Paul's words, seeing in them two sequentially related mysteries of the cross that are revealed *to us* and *in us*. (My reflections this morning are drawn from St. Gregory's Homily 11, especially §7, in his *Homilies*.)

The First Mystery

In the first mystery, *the world is crucified to me*, which St. Gregory understands to mean that *I flee from the fallen world* because I see it as dead, crucified, and thus as a source of death to me. This flight from the fallen world is well-expressed in the life of Abraham: "The LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your relatives and your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (Gen 12:1). God called Abraham to leave his place of security and earthly well-being, his place of comfort, even his relatives. And he is not called to leave simply for the sake of leaving, but to travel to a land God will reveal to him, a promised land filled with blessings. The first mystery focuses on what we are leaving; the second mystery on where we are going.

Our flight from the fallen world involves leaving behind anything that hinders our single-minded pursuit of the land which God has promised us--his kingdom and his righteousness (Mt 6:33). We separate ourselves in tangible ways from any created thing that hinders our communion with God. This is what Jesus instructs us to do when he teaches us to pluck out our eye and sever our hand, if they are a cause of stumbling for us, that is, if they distract us from following him (Mt 5:29-30; 18:8; Mk 9:43-48). The Church has made clear that, while we are not literally to harm our bodies, we are to take extreme measures to separate ourselves from anything that is compromising our relationship with Christ.

The best way to find out if something is hampering our relationship with God is to fast from it for a period of time, replacing it with prayer, spiritual reading, and acts of mercy toward others. Stylish clothes, delectable foods, streams of information, and so forth are among the things we might do without for a period of time to learn if they have a hold on us. If we find ourselves bored and restless without the attention-demanding enticements of the world, we know that they have become replacements for God, distractions in our pursuit of him, and we need to take more extreme measures to sever ourselves from them--to crucify them.

Fleeing the world, St. Gregory reminds us, extends even to separating ourselves from family and friends insofar as they divert us from Christ. He is echoing St. Paul's sober warning: "Do not be deceived; bad company corrupts good character" (1 Cor 15:33). These stern exhortations derive from our Lord's frequent teaching that we must love him more than we love our own family, reminding us that he did not come to bring peace on the earth but a sword, dividing a family of five--two against three and three against two (Lk 12:51-53; Mt 10:21,34-36).

Relentlessly and forcibly fleeing worldly temptations in these ways crucifies the world to us, and thus, in these practical actions, the cross is revealed *to us*. We come to experience the power of the cross severing us from the transitory and illusory substitutes for life-giving communion with our Creator.

The Second Mystery

In the second mystery of the cross, *I am crucified to the world*, which St. Gregory understands to mean that *the world flees from me*. It is one thing to say that I *choose* to separate myself from those aspects of the fallen world that distract me from Christ; it is quite another to no longer have desires for, or even besetting thoughts about, those things. In fact, typically when we cut ourselves off from temptation, we find that the related inner desires intensify and the thoughts proliferate. So, in the second mystery of the cross, all of those desires that are within us, all those yearnings, all those longings, all those thoughts roaming around in our heads, which look to the world for life--those are now dead. The first mystery is an *external* crucifixion while the second is *internal*.

The cross in this second mystery involves a divine surgery that removes these cancerous, life-threatening, and self-destructive passions and thoughts, freeing us to be single-minded in our love for God and liberated to enjoy his creation without being manipulated by it. How does this happen? St. Gregory explains in very practical ways how we become crucified to worldly allurements. It happens only by having a vision of God, as Moses had at the burning bush. *Only God* can burn up our wayward desires and banish invasive thoughts; we can't do it ourselves. St. Gregory describes three steps that place us in a position for this divine surgery, to ready ourselves for the refiner's fire.

The Ascetic Life

The first step of the second mystery, a step toward the promised land God is revealing in us, is the ascetic life. We simply do what Orthodox emphasize all the time, and especially during this time of Great Lent: we do acts of kindness and mercy toward others; we intensify our prayer; we fortify our prayer with fasting and prostrations; we stay up at night a little longer, or arise a little earlier, to keep vigil, being on the watch for the return of Christ and the enemies that are trying to break in and steal our attentiveness; and finally, we read the holy Scriptures, and other spiritual

readings, meditatively, to let the seeds of life enter into our hearts. Most importantly we practice these activities in secret so as not to draw attention to ourselves. The second mystery *begins* with sustained ascetic effort, and if we fail to remain faithful to these foundational practices, as if there were a short-cut to our destination, we abandon our journey toward the revelation of the cross within us. There are no short-cuts.

Inner Exploration

Ascetic practices, however, in and of themselves, are not the goal, nor even sufficient for reaching the goal. They are the leaves, not the fruit. They are necessary but inadequate for the production of divinely infused fruit. What else is needed? Once we place ourselves in this spiritual gymnasium, we are called to embark on an exploration, searching *within ourselves*. This is the second step toward experiencing the mystery of the cross revealed within. We are seeking the hidden treasure, the kingdom of God tucked away deep inside us, buried under layers of passions and distracting thoughts.

In the course of our ascetic effort, our mental attention must turn toward what is happening inside us. Maybe we're doing a few extra prostrations even though we are not motivated to do them. Maybe we persist in prayer even though we are distracted by worries and anxieties about the state of the world. Maybe we silently perform an act of mercy toward someone whom we envy. When we not only engage in these ascetic efforts as outward actions but also simultaneously peer inside ourselves, we will, in due time, with persistence and fortitude, glimpse a haven of calm in the midst of storming passions, a gentle light in the abyss of darkness, a soft voice among the deafening thoughts--a fleeting-yet-satiating taste of the hidden treasure, of the inner kingdom, of the King himself, indeed, of the cross. He has revealed his cross not simply *to us*, but *in us*--even if only for a vanishing moment.

Focused Inner Attention

The third stage of this second mystery of the cross is to focus our attention on that which we are discovering during our inner exploration, to keep our *nous* fixated on this revealed inner presence even though we may also be experiencing a raging storm of intrusive thoughts and emotions. One of the terms St. Gregory uses to describe this focused attention is *anatheorein*, to examine carefully, to take a second look, to re-contemplate, to relentlessly meditate on. It is arduous, and sometimes discouraging, work. The saints didn't become saints by following the path of least resistance, and no less is asked of us. "The gate is narrow and the path is difficult that leads to life, those who find it are few" (Mt 7:14). Indeed, when our inner search in the context of our ascetic effort reveals a glimpse of the inner kingdom, we will be flooded all the more with distracting passions and thoughts; the devil never sleeps. But it is here that we are at long last engaged in the internal battle for our own soul. Satan will not release it without a fight, and it is here in the classroom of our own soul that God is teaching us how to let him fight for us,

how to let go of the passions and thoughts so he can cleanse us from them, so that they can no longer be a tool in Satan's hand.

An Inner Burning Bush

St. Gregory describes this inner transformation in this way: As we are engaged in ascetic effort, searching for the kingdom within us, and contemplating what we are discovering, there will arise in us a certain warmth, the very warmth of the burning bush. We will come to experience in our own uniquely existential way what Moses experienced while standing before the burning bush. We'll stand on holy ground; our sandals will come off. The passions and thoughts will start to dissipate, leaving us no longer manipulated by them but rather released from their power over us. St. Gregory doesn't describe this inner experience as a raging and violent fire, but as a gentle warmth that even provides a type of cooling refreshment, a docile freedom whereby the inner, violent monsters are slain. Those things that don't belong in us, the sins which dwell in us as foreign invaders disrupting and torturing our inner life, flee because they cannot stand to be in the presence of that gentle warmth, of the King on his cross. The world flees as we are crucified.

The Cross Revealed in Us

In this way, little by little, gradually over time, as we persist in the ascetic effort, searching for that hidden treasure, gathering our mental focus on what God is showing us in our inner life, we come to experience with increasing frequency and stability the kingdom of God within us, revealed-in-us as the cross on which we are crucified with Christ. Our wandering desires and thoughts flee from the inner presence of the Crucified One. This is precisely what St. Paul meant when he said, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, and the life which I now live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and offered himself up for me" (Gal 2:20). It is what he meant when he said, "I die daily" (1 Cor 15:31). It is what he meant when he said that we are "always carrying the dying of the Lord Jesus in our bodies that the life of Jesus may be manifest in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:10). It is what our Lord meant when he exhorted us to take up our cross daily (Lk 9:23).

Human beings are creations of God that have the life-giving cross buried deep within them. The Christian life consists in the inward pilgrimage to find that cross, to place ourselves in a position to allow God to reveal it to us, so that we may gradually come to the continual mystical awareness of the cross firmly planted in our hearts. In this way we come to find out who we truly are as human beings--not mere puppets controlled by the passing fads of advertisers and the incessant moralizing of media outlets in our crazed and manipulative world, but unencumbered vessels of love inwardly communing with our Creator, rightly united to the Source of Life, and thus able to receive everyone and everything in this beautifully created world--all creation--to freely embrace and enjoy it without looking to it for what God alone can provide. This is the mystery of the cross revealed within us. By the prayers of St. Gregory Palamas, may God lead us on this inward journey.