

Ascesis: theology and practice in the Orthodox Church

(The first of three conferences on the concept of asceticism in the Orthodox Church)

Brussels, 26 November 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

First of all let me welcome all of you to this church of the Holy Trinity, of the Patriarchate of Moscow. A big thank you to its rector, Father Pavel Nedossekina, for kindly making the church available to us this evening. For those who arrived in the middle of the office, it was the Vespers of the Feast of the Holy Apostle Philip, which falls today, that we were celebrating.

Our archbishop, Vladika Simon, has asked me to give this conference to mark the desire of our Russian Church to be in contact and dialogue with the living Christian forces in the city of Brussels. None of us will pretend that the situation of the Christian religion is easy here in Belgium. For us Orthodox the temptation in this situation is to withdraw into our nice warm cocoon. Yes, our churches are still relatively full - but this is, in my opinion, failing to take our responsibility. We too have our contribution to make to strengthen the life and witness of Christians in a country where the vast majority of us are not just passing through, but are permanent residents. Our contribution will perhaps not be in the front line: others, and in particular the traditional churches of this country, will have first-line responsibility for the re-evangelisation of Belgium. Our task as Orthodox is to encourage, strengthen, and pray with and for them, and to provide certain resources from our own spiritual treasury. I hope that my contribution will help, in some little way, in this movement.

In approaching our subject for tonight – the theology and practice of asceticism in the Orthodox churches – let me first say a few words about the two concepts of asceticism and theology.

First asceticism, which comes from the Greek word *askesis*. Look up *askesis* in a Greek dictionary, and you will find: "*Exercise, practice*" and "*gymnastic exercises, lifestyle of athletes.*"

Even though the word does not appear as such in the New Testament, the comparison of the serious Christian life to that of an athlete appears more than once in Saint Paul's epistles. To the Corinthians he compares the Christian's discipline to that of an athlete, noting that: "*Any athlete foregoes everything, but they do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable*" (1 Cor 9.25). He reminds his spiritual son Timothy that "*the athlete receives the crown only if he has fought by the rules.*" (2 Tim 2.5.)

For the purpose of this evening's discussion, I have allowed myself to make the following definition ... It is far from perfect, but it points clearly in the right direction.

Asceticism: a disciplined struggle, lasting an entire lifetime, aimed at maximizing the space for the Holy Spirit in us.

Now two words about the role of the theologian in the context of asceticism. For me the theologian's primary role is to safeguard the purity of the experience of God, to maximize the space in which God can act.

The Orthodox theologian does this first by mounting guard against the doctrines and discourses that threaten to limit this space. I think here of St. Athanasius, who fought Arianism, the heresy which, by denying the divinity of Christ, essentially blocked the path of deification, which I will come to in a few moments. Or of St John Damascene, who in the eighth century fought against the iconoclasts who would have deprived us of the image as a means to enter into communion with the divine energies. But the theologian's struggle is not always against the great heresies, but as much against the wrong turnings, the compromises with the spirit of the age or other forms of interference which accumulate and eventually obstruct the passage of the divine energies.

In this context it should be added that to have a degree or even a doctorate in theology does not make you a theologian. In the Orthodox Church we insist that knowledge of God is essentially revelational - which means that God allows Himself to be understood at a level which corresponds to our spiritual development, and also to the usefulness of this understanding to his Church. In other words, to be a theologian, you need not only a strong intellectual background – the ability to analyze situations, draw conclusions, make hypotheses and test them, uncover concealed reference systems – but also need a strong spiritual life, made up of prayer, reading the Bible and the Fathers of the Church and of regular confession and communion. Any special wisdom that God gives is in the Church and for the Church, and not for the theologian's personal glory.

Let us now talk about the sources of the ascetic tradition of the Orthodox Church.

Here I will be extremely brief. I will leave aside the first ascetic theologians, who are difficult and not always entirely reliable, like Origen and Evagrius of Pontus. In a first movement, between the 5th and 7th centuries, we have Pseudo-Macarius, St. Dorothy of Gaza, St. Diadochus of Photiki, St. John Climacus and St. Maximus the Confessor. These are followed by a second wave at the turn of the millennium, the towering figure of which is St. Simeon the New Theologian. Finally, we see a last final flowering of eastern spirituality in the first half of the 14th century, before the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, associated with the hesychast movement and the two great hesychast saints Gregory of Sinai and Gregory Palamas.

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| <i>First wave</i> | | |
| Pseudo-Macarius | Egypt | 300-391 |
| Diadochus of Photiki | S.W. Greece | Early 5th cent.– before 486 |
| Dorothy of Gaza | Palestine | c. 560 |
| John Climacus (of the Ladder) | Mount Sinai | 525-606 |
| Maximus the Confessor | Constantinople/Carthage/ Rome | 580-662 |

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| <i>Second wave</i> | | |
| St Simeon the New Theologian | Constantinople | 949-1022 |
| <i>Swansong</i> | | |
| Gregory of Sinai | Mount Sinai/Crete/Athos | c. 1260-1356 |
| Gregory Palamas | Athos/Thessalonica | 1296-1369 |

For Russia, there are two types of sources: the lives of the saints written by others, and their own writings. The first three names on my list, Saints Anthony and Theodosius of Kiev, and St. Sergei Radonezh in the Middle Ages, are known primarily by their *vitae*, written by others. The same is true of St. Seraphim of Sarov in the early 19th century. As for the writers I would mention, in the 16th century, St. Nil Sorsky, the holy fathers of Optina in continuous succession from the late 18th century until the 1917 revolution and, in the middle of the 19th century, St. Filaret of Moscow, St. Theofan the Recluse and St. Ignatius Brianchaninov. Outside of Russia I would mention Saint Silouan, a monk of the Athos monastery of Panteleimon, whose writings and life story have been popularized by the late Father Sophrony of Essex. To these names I would add two men who have died within the last 5 years in odour of sanctity, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, who lived in London, and Archimandrite Ioann Krestianken of the Monastery of Pskov, who in the 70s and 80s played a decisive role in the lives of many young men have gone on to become key figures in the Russian church. I would also mention in passing Father Nicolai Gurianov (also known as Nicolai of Zalit), the other great Russian elder of recent years, also died recently, but who left fewer written traces.

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| <i>Pre-1917</i> | | |
| Anthony and Theodosius of Kiev | Kiev | c. 983-1073 / †1074 |
| Sergius of Radonezh | Near Moscow | c. 1313-1392 |
| Nil Sorsky | N. Russia (Athos/Holy Land) | 1433-1508 |
| Seraphim of Sarov | Sarov | 1759-1833 |
| Optina fathers | Monastery of Optina Poustina | <i>flor. c.</i> 1820-1917 |
| Ignatius Brianchaninov | Caucasus | 1807-1867 |
| Philaret of Moscow | Moscow | 1782-1867 |
| Theofan the Recluse | Visha (diocese of Tambov) | 1815-1894 |
| <i>Post-1917</i> | | |
| Silouane of Athos | Mont Athos | 1866-1938 |
| Sophrony of Essex | Maldon (near London) | 1896-1993 |
| Anthony of Sourozh | London | 1914-2003 |
| Ioann Krestiankin | Pskov (Russia) | 1910-2006 |
| Nicolas Gurianov (of Zalit) | Island of Zalit (near Pskov) | 1909-2002 |

Before passing onto asceticism itself, let me express a word of caution: a danger we face when starting to look at asceticism is to focus on what our Catholic friends call the *peaks of contemplation*. We read with delight and marvel the stories of the lives and exploits of the great men and women of prayer of the Church like St. Seraphim of Sarov, who spent 1000 days in prayer, kneeling on a stone and was revealed in light to Motovilov, St Benedict enveloped in divine light, or St. Teresa of Avila and St. Mary of Egypt in levitation. We dream somehow of imitating them. But, to quote an old Russian saying: “If you see your brother starting to ascend into the clouds, take him firmly by the feet and pull him back to the ground”. All teachers of the spiritual life insist that we must move forward humbly one step at a time, starting from the beginning. Let us remain with both feet firmly on the ground at our own level and that of those for whom we carry a pastoral responsibility in the Church. As I read somewhere: ***“We should spend less time reading the lives of the first class saints and more time working to become fourth class ones”***.

I turn now come to the starting point of any theology of asceticism: Adam and Eve. The royal entrance gate to ascetic theology in the Orthodox churches is the story of the fall of Adam and Eve, commented on a thousand times in the Fathers of the Church.

You all know the details. The ascetic path begins with Adam and Eve, outside the garden, far from God, bitterly bewailing their exile. As we sing on the threshold of Great Lent:

“Come, my wretched soul, and weep today over thine acts, remembering how once thou wast stripped naked in Eden and cast out from delight and unending joy.”¹

This distance from God is intolerable for the soul, and we seek, through our own spiritual discipline, but always with and through the grace of God, our way back to Him, through Christ the second Adam.

But not only must we find the Adam of before the fall, but we must step on out on the path originally intended for Adam. According to the Orthodox view, Adam before the fall still had a way to go to come closer to God, and finally take divinity on him (I will return to this theology of deification or theosis in a moment). Or as some of the fathers say, twisting maybe a little the words of the story of the creation of man in Genesis 1: 26, he had to progress from the *image* of God to the *likeness* of God. Indeed, pressing the narrative a bit, it is quite possible that Adam and Eve had an intuition of this vocation of deification: why otherwise would the evil one have tempted them with the words “you will become like gods?” Their fault was to want to seize divinity, before being ready for it, rather than allowing it to be given to them at the end of a necessary process. Incidentally, in some fathers we read that what finally condemned Adam and Eve to banishment from paradise was not so much the eating of the forbidden fruit as the refusal to repent. If they had said “yes, we have sinned, forgive us”, the story would have turned out very differently.

The ascetic path is none other than that of humbly tracking back to where Adam was before the fall, and then picking up the right path that he ought to have taken.

¹ Mattins of the Sunday of Forgiveness. Canticle 1.

Allow me to make at this point four points on the Orthodox perspective on the fall and its consequences for humanity:

- Orthodoxy has never felt happy with the idea of original sin. We firmly believe that man was created in the image of God, and that even if this image becomes obscured and even lost sight of, it remains there, in the depths of each man.
- Orthodoxy holds strongly to the notion of a fallen world, in other words this world is not normative. The structures that we know no more than a 'temporary holding pattern' that exist to prevent the world from sinking into oblivion. For this reason we reject the notion that man can produce a just, honest and beautiful world by his own strength and without God.
- - Orthodoxy insists that man is made up of both soul and body. Yes, the body is subservient to the soul, but from the earliest times Orthodoxy has been aware of the dangers of an approach, inherited from ancient Platonism, which would reduce the body to an encumbrance to be discarded as soon as possible. In the early decades of monasticism, when great importance was ascribed to physical asceticism, it was necessary to insist on the spiritual value of the body. Let us not forget that the final resurrection is a resurrection of body and soul and that the New Jerusalem where God will dwell with men is firmly on earth.
- Orthodoxy is very keen on the concept of the devil, the evil one and prince of this world. We do not talk too much about him, and that's good. But we are very aware of his presence and the danger he presents. I will return to this later in this paper.

We have looked at the starting point of the ascetic journey: Let us now look towards the goal.

This is none other than becoming, in the words of St. Peter, 'partakers of the divine nature'. (2 Peter 1.4).

This means having in ourselves the two natures, divine and human, the only difference with Christ being that He had the divine nature by nature, and for us it is the gift of God. This to the extent that we can, in the words of St. Paul, say that "*it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me*" (Galatians 2.20), or "*We have the mind of Christ*" (1 Cor. 2.16) - or in the old Latin version, which renders better the Greek: '*sensum Christi habemus*'.

The technical term in Orthodoxy that marks this arrival point is *theosis* or deification. We also describe as 'pneumatophore' or as 'spirit-bearing' someone who carries the spirit of God deeply and permanently.

The path to deification is a long and arduous, and lasts a lifetime. Every Christian is called, in one way or another, to start out on this road, at the pace that God sets for him or her.

Very important here, especially in the Orthodox tradition, is the example of people who have progressed very far on this way, and in whom we really sense this divine presence. Among

the major Russian examples we can cite the 14th century St. Sergius of Radonezh and the 19th century St. Seraphim of Sarov. In fact, every generation has witnessed a more or less continuous succession of *starsi*, men and women of great spiritual depth, often blessed with gifts of healing and discernment, whom people have come from afar to visit to their great spiritual benefit. Russia seems to have been particularly blessed by the presence of such persons, especially and specifically in the 20th century, a time when much of the outer structure of the Church was in ruins.

But *starsi* are not an exclusively Russian phenomenon. I think of the Greeks *gerondas* Joseph the Hesychast and Paissi of Koutlema of Mount Athos, Father Porphery, whose very beautiful biography was published three or four years ago in English, or Archimandrite Aemilianos, who revived the monastery of Simonos Petros on Mount Athos, and who is still alive. All these Greeks have the advantage of having been the subject of many well-written biographies, translated into English or French, which is not always the case with their Russian colleagues. You will also find similar men in the Romanian and Serbian churches.

These men inspire us by their example and support us with their prayers on our ascetic way towards theosis. To quote St. Paul's magnificent words:

"With this great cloud of witnesses around us, therefore, we must throw off every encumbrance and the sin that all too readily restricts us, and run with resolution the race which lies ahead of us..." (Hebrews 12.1).

At this point we must mention purity of heart, which is essential for theosis, and repentance, an essential tool for exorcising this sin which is rooted in our hearts.

For without this purity of heart, there is no vision of God. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God", Christ teaches us, and we sing at every liturgy.

Or again in Psalm 23, which is part of the prayers of preparation for Holy Communion:

"Who will ascend unto the mountain of the Lord, who shall stand in his holy place,
The man with clean hands, pure heart ... He will carry the blessing of the Lord ..."

This nexus of sin, repentance and confession is a subject that is at once theologically straightforward, but quite tricky in practice, especially as regards the practice of confession. As I am not a priest, I will concentrate more on the theological aspects.

In play here are three elements:

- 1) Our own psyche
- 2) The reference framework we use for interpreting the world around us
- 3) The presence of the devil.

Let us examine each of them in turn:

- The first element is our human psyche: we all experience this ambiguity in our heart, the desire to do good, but the fact that we often do evil. We speak here in the Orthodox Church of the passions. This word describes the situation where it is as if our natural energies lose their balance, and we let ourselves be carried away off the proper path, often with a violence or an accumulation of energy that can be quite frightening.

Here is a list of eight passions, which closely resembles that of the seven deadly sins of Catholic spirituality. I add here that the number eight has nothing sacred or magic about it, and we find lists of varying length, even up to thirty of more:

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| • Gluttony | γαστρομαρια |
| • Fornication | πορνεια |
| • Avarice | φιλαργυρια |
| • Sadness | λυπη |
| • Anger | οργη |
| • Acedia (melancholy) | ακηδία |
| • Vainglory | κενοδοξία |
| • Pride | υπερηθανια |
| • | |

Many writers, both ancient and modern, have attempted to penetrate towards a deeper understanding of those sins. Some speak of two dynamics, linked both with the loss of God:

- pride as the desire to define oneself without reference to God
- the desire to fill that uncertain emptiness or *Angst* which confronts us in the absence of God, an emptiness that we cram full with excessive sexuality, avarice, gluttony, over-work...

To the passions we need to add the psychological wounds, more or less well-healed, that many people bear, even if we perhaps do not attach as much importance to these as does secular psychiatry.

- Second element: The reference framework with which we interpret the world around us, including our own system of morals and values: that is to say the more or less explicit code by which we try to live.

This is quite a difficult area and perhaps not as well explored as it should be. Let me explain with practical examples: it has happened to me several times in recent weeks, when speaking with non-Orthodox Christians, to ask myself whether the reference framework by which they interpret the world is truly Christian, or if it has not been coloured or suffered interference from elements that are not Christian at all? Some brandish the distinction *animus-anima*, a hypothetical structure borrowed from Jung, as if it were Christian dogma. Others, especially those who passed through university in the 60s, seem to have an idea of freedom that is as Marxist as it is Christian. Some require all Christians to sign up to the social concept of democracy, whereas Christianity defines only the goal – justice – not the means. More subtle, and very dangerous it seems to me, is an image of the ideal Christian that is a little bland, with no place for that good dose of masculinity and courage that is necessary to succeed on the spiritual path.

- Third element: the presence of the evil one. "Be sober, be vigilant, because your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

Although we do not talk too much about him, we know that anyone who advances seriously on the spiritual journey will encounter him. For me the best image of him is a thief who prowls around a house, trying all doors and windows to see if there is a badly closed one which he can open and enter. Each of us also, as the late Cardinal Basil Hume often said, has his or her weak point, which we need to recognize and guard particularly carefully. For some it is sex, for others alcohol, pride, overwork, or a kind of vague laziness.

As we move along the spiritual path, certain elements begin to stand out in greater relief:

- First, attention turns from the individual sins to what lies behind them. What is the insecurity or fear behind this pride? Why this one glass of wine too many almost every night?
- Second: we cease playing the psychiatrist with ourselves by asking: "where does this sin come from, whose fault is it?" We realize that sin, wounds, pain and evil are all entangled in the bottom of our heart. That we will never untangle them completely, nor cure ourselves by our own strength.
- Thirdly: at a certain point in time all this hurts, it is painful, you feel empty, joyless. Here I think we must have the courage to accept this feeling of imperfection. We must take this burden as a cross we are asked to bear, presenting it to Christ, in full knowledge of all its horror and of all the suffering which underlies it, but at the same time confident in His mercy, and that this evil can, so to speak, be carried into the process of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.
- Fourth, we must realize that, in the spiritual economy, I am more than myself. What I do, good and bad, does not stop at me, even if I do not directly harm anyone. In more theological language, my purification (or lack of it) involves not only my own little individual human hypostasis, but also, in a way we only partially understand, the essence of humanity itself. I will stop here and leave it at this, as this is a very sensitive area and not very well mapped out.

It is time now to talk about hesychasm and the prayer of Jesus, which, like the icon, have become a 'badge' of Orthodox Christianity.

First, I strongly advise against reading the 'Russian Pilgrim'. This little book, published in the 19th century and a bit of a bestseller in religious bookstores in this country, fails to convince me. For me it is too 'gentle Jesus'. When when I expressed my doubts to my wife, she showed me a small book written in Russian by Professor I.A. Osipov of the Theological Academy of St. Sergius in Russia, where he compares the pilgrim's story with the description of the path of asceticism given by the great Russian theologian St. Ignatius Brianchaninov. On this basis Osipov roundly condemns the Russian Pilgrim as irresponsible and downright dangerous, accusing its protagonist of seeking a little too fast the sweetness of spiritual life

without the effort of deep repentance. I wonder if we should not translate and publish this little book in French or English as a necessary corrective.

Let us take therefore another guide, St. Nil Sorsky, a Russian abbot of the final years of the 15th and the early years of the 16th century. In his monastic rule or *Ustav*, St. Nil says, quoting St. Simeon the New Theologian, "true silence and humility or hesychia [which is nothing but the common Greek word for silence] is to seek the Lord in the heart, that is to push the intelligence into the heart, pray there and concern ourselves only with that".

St. Nil says elsewhere that we must "look into the depths of our heart", where, he says, we should say the Jesus prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me".

If I understand correctly, the idea is that with the help of this prayer, said breathing slowly and trying to avoid all outside distraction and mental effort, that prayer becomes rooted in the depths of our hearts. Where, one might add, it may be that a rather inchoate prayer already exists, the 'inner groaning' of which St. Paul speaks in the 8th chapter of his letter to the Romans.

But what matters is the end, not the way to get there. A great spiritual figure of the Coptic Church, Matthew the Poor, who died two or three years ago, writes that the Jesus Prayer is not a magic formula, and that other words taken from the Gospels or the Psalms can calm the heart and focus it on God. Catholic monasticism also makes heavy use of *lectio divina*, i.e. slow and meditative reading, not too intellectual, of the Scriptures and other spiritual works. St. Nil Sorsky recommends it too. A monk of Mount Athos explained to me once that a historical reason for the popularity of the Jesus Prayer is the fact that many monks and hermits were illiterate, and in addition, even if they could read, candles with which to read at night were expensive. Ultimately every one of us, with the help of his or her spiritual guide, needs to find the right balance of method here.

How do we recognize the presence of God in the heart? A traditional sign of God's presence in the heart, in both the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions, is what is known as the 'tears of the heart', first in the form of tears of repentance, and after that tears of joy. I think I know what this is about, but not enough to speak about it in public.

What I can say is that joy is a sign of God's presence, joy deeper than mere earthly happiness. Not a noisy, boisterous joy, more a quiet sense of God's presence and of being on the right path. It may also happen, at the beginning of our Christian journey, that God presents himself to us very strongly as joy, comfort or consolation, in order to encourage us. But later He is almost certain to withdraw. We will have to weep, to dig deeper, recognize the presence of certain impurities, certain inadequacies in the depths of our hearts that prevent the Lord from advancing further. And then God will return, perhaps. And leave and come back and leave again. I'm told that at the end it is a constant presence. I am not there yet - far from it.

But to use an English expression: “don’t try and run before you can walk”. I’m pretty certain a good spiritual guide will not allow a new convert to throw himself at once into the Jesus prayer. He will insist initially on a normal prayer life, both privately and in church.

Similarly I would caution against an ‘all you need is love’ approach, or for the more sophisticated among us ‘ama and fac quod vis’. There are Christians who talk incessantly about love. You may be surprised to hear that the word ‘love’ appears only quite rarely in the Church fathers. Rather they have a lot to say about discipline, humility, obedience, curbing the passions, fear of death. The fact is that true divine love, the love that Jesus showed and that His saints have shown down the centuries, is a gift from God, a fruit that can ripen fully only in a heart that has been thoroughly cleansed. I spoke a few weeks ago with a priest in Moscow who had known the *staretz* Father John Chrestiankin, and another lesser-known elder, Archimandrite Seraphim Tyapotchkin, who died in 1982, and who lived hidden away in a small village several kilometres from the nearest bus stop. He described both men as having a total love, gentle and strong at the same time. Let’s purify our understanding of what true love is before talking too much about it.

So far I have not yet tackled fasting and vigil - two important traditional instruments of asceticism. Each could be the subject of a full lecture. They are both quite sensitive areas, with excesses on both sides - too much and too little.

I will limit myself here to a few remarks only:

- An important reason for fasting is to expand our area of freedom. Freedom in the sense of not being a prisoner of one’s desire for food, for alcohol, for sexual activity, for nicotine, for entertainment. None of these elements, with the possible exception of nicotine, is bad in itself. But excessive and passionate use of each of them dulls the spirit, and ‘animalizes’ us fairly quickly. It’s good to remind ourselves that we can do without, at least for a limited time.
- It is good practice to seek specific permission from your spiritual director - or as we say, his blessing - if you want to do something unusual. Firstly so as not to do anything stupid which could damage your health, and second so as not to fall into the traps of the devil, especially that of pride. You might be interested to know in this context that the longest obligatory fast in Orthodox monasteries lasts a little over two days, from after supper on the Sunday of Forgiveness till Wednesday of the first week of Lent (noon in an Athonite monastery).
- The Church has always made the link between hard prayer and the fact of fasting. We immediately recall Christ’s words on healing the boy with the dumb spirit, immediately after his Transfiguration. The disciples asked why they could not exorcise the evil spirit. Jesus answers that “this type cannot be driven out except by prayer and fasting”. (Mark 9.29.). Even if biblical scholars tell us that the words ‘and fasting’ are a later addition and not *ipsissima verba* of Christ, it is clear that the early Church linked the two. If we are healthy and want to ‘pray hard’, we need to think very seriously about our practice of fasting.
- On vigil I will not talk too much. I have practiced it a little myself, as much as a solution for bouts of insomnia - when it is better to get up and pray than to remain turning in bed. Some fathers say that one prostration at night is worth ten during the daytime. Others

insist that a good Christian can survive on six hours of sleep per night. I cannot, and there I recommend you look for other guides in this area.

I think I have more or less covered the essentials.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for listening.