

Strife or Renewal

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In struggling for perfection, we are told to strive because the grace by which we are saved has outrun us. Our books say that God saves us when we fall or when we are “assaulted” by temptation. This is true; our books speak of resisting the evil one with the “full armor of God” and when the apostle lists that armor he mentions that it is truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, the helmet of salvation and the word of God. These help us “extinguish” all the arrows of the evil one. Yes, Paul here calls for much patience, gentleness in the Holy Spirit, love and the word of truth.

In the face of human weakness that threatens us from the inside – as James says – the Bible tells us to pray that the Spirit who is in the depths of God, would come down into our hearts. As such I do not find in the New Testament the idea of “strengthening the will” that we were brought up with in the missionaries’ schools. And it became clear to me later that that is the genius of the West which is enchanted with the human power that springs from Man’s inner being despite Augustine’s (the Father of the Christian West) stress on the supremacy of the action of Grace.

From what I know of the asceticism of the East - and I have assimilated thousands of its pages – in this field, I did not come across any talk about the strengthening of the human will except the little that came concerning the education of the human being (and we find this with St. John Chrysostom). And it appears to me that this is so due to the concern our Fathers have in distinguishing between mere human strife and the grace that comes down on us freely from God. Christian Eastern spirituality shuns what is merely human. But it also shuns the idea of man being at the mercy of the arbitrary temperament of a god who forces himself on man; such a forcing implies that we are still in the realm of animalistic dealing and that we have not gotten into the logic of the incarnation based on the participation between the Deity and the humanity, in Christ and in us. And so the Christian Eastern spirituality sees salvation as a combined effort between God and Man; an action depicted by the word “synergy” which implies the accompaniment of the divine action to the human effort. Yet what sounds as a contractual understanding is superseded with what is mentioned about God’s action in the practice of the invocation of the name of Jesus that God, by coming and filling one’s heart, purifies as a result the soul from all defilement. And only He (Man excluded) is able to save us from the spiritual death that lurks around us.

There remains a “big” question: “Why do we sin?” In other words, what is inside us that causes us to sin as the Bible says: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3: 23). The universality of sin and its prevalence in the human race is a point stressed in the Bible. When we see that the apostles sinned as they were following the Lord, and when we read in the Epistles how the apostles denounce the Christians for their sinfulness and they mention their (Christians) sins to them, we are faced with the question: “how can that be when Christ has arisen from the dead and He raises us with Him (that is He raises us from sin)?”

Here, I think we have to consider the dialectic of St. Paul. After Paul says: “If we have died with Christ we have faith that we will live with Him” and then he goes on saying: “Consider yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord”; he calls us not to let sin reign in our mortal body obeying it in lusting for things; then he goes on saying: “Do not offer your organs (meaning our whole body) as instruments of iniquity”. The Apostle knows that sin can be an obstacle in our way of beholding the resurrection of the Savior. In spite of this, he hopes that in being filled with the victory of Christ, we would not fall, so he says – in hope – “sin will not have dominion over you because you are not under the Law (the law of Moses) but under grace”.

Here, I have to remind us that our Fathers greatly stressed the fact that we are created in the image and likeness of God. The image – whether it is freedom of will or the mind or our total being – is that we, structurally, resemble God and the likeness is the “movement” towards God. This likeness, which is the “movement towards Him”, is fallen and this is why we need redemption. But the image in us has been marred; yet we remain in the image of God since the image passes away but we do not. Here sin corrupts the likeness and only Grace can bring it (the likeness) back. The Bible mentions “the mystery of iniquity” and answers the question “Why do we sin?” only through the Epistle of James where it says that lust moves us to sin and it has not ceased to do so despite the resurrection of Christ and His victory over death.

Yet we have two discourses on the resurrection the best of which is what the Lord told the sister of Lazarus: “I am the resurrection and the life” after a conversation between them about the resurrection of her brother. When Jesus told Martha “your brother shall rise from the dead” she said to Him I know that he will rise on the last day in the resurrection. It is then that Jesus tells her: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” As if Jesus wants to tell her that there is something more important than the resurrection on the last day, which is the resurrection in the present time for all those who love the Savior. It is a resurrection that eats up the weakness of Man and his lust.

Yet Paul gives the full understanding of the resurrection in his first letter to the Corinthians saying: “Now Christ has risen from the dead and has become the first fruit of those who die in Christ all shall live”; “...shall live” indicates the future, and so the possibility to sin remains in the present time in Paul’s dim understanding of the mystery of sin. Somewhere else he says “now we see dimly in a mirror”.

And perhaps the greatest vision is this “that we all and together shall be saved on the last day”. Sin, the sting of death remains now. When our being which is now marred by death will be redeemed on the last day, we shall be raised whole. Then God will give us full victory in our Lord Jesus Christ.

When in my youth I got interested in the subject of evil no one helped me as much as my instructor the great Russian theologian Father George Florovsky; he told me that we do not have a philosophy of evil in Christianity even though he exposed to me what other schools of thought say about that matter. We believe that Christ remains close to the sinner; so when we notice the presence of evil, we undertake to combat it in Christ who is in us. We are concerned with being rid of sin and Christ is our deliverer, individually and as a group, today and in the future.

Yet our curiosity leads us to some questions; why does one lie and another steal? Or why do you find some who are pure or almost pure, as if they are like that without making effort? We are told that people are like that as an answer but such an answer does not help; there is nothing that says for certain that we inherit our weaknesses in the genes. You find one addicted to crime and another is addicted – if one might say - to righteousness; I do not know, God knows. And none of us can pass judgment on others or examine the evil that is in the others; not even one’s own.

Yes we know that there are some people who immediately rise from their sins by God’s grace, and we find people who find it hard to rise. The repentance of the human being is as much a mystery as massive tendency of committing sins is. And from experience, we know that for some repentance is impossible while for others, falling into sin is impossible. Experience also shows that the virtues are strongly related together and that on the other hand, sins are also associated together. It is self-evident that the thief is a liar by definition and a potential killer at times; in the same way, the modest and humble person is virtuous, turning away from lust for money and power. And so, as you observe others and yourself, you could become either sad or happy.

The main thing you have to believe in is that even though you inherit this fragility of your nature – and that is what original sin, as Augustine said, is – yet nothing can make you one overcome by sin as if it predetermines you; you also are not predetermined in being virtuous either for it is written: “Everyone who sins is a

slave to sin” but in the hope of becoming free, the Blessed Lord says: “I do not call you slaves.....but I call you friends”.

In the face of the intensity of sin and its repetitiveness, the apostle says: “Where sin abounds, grace also abounds”. So we live in the hope of becoming righteous after sinning. And that is why the Saints of the Christian East call us not to brood over our previous sins, our souls being sapped with regret and pulled backwards to our past, so that we could go forward to the presence of the Lord who when He draws us to Himself, helps us not get carried away anew with our lusts.

Yes, the Saints speak of passionlessness or the state of serenity in the soul, or the state of freedom from the unconscious tendencies that compel us, but they also warn us that having that state is not a guarantee for its continuance; the enemy lurks seeking to harm us and only vigilant prayer reminds us of God’s power to overcome him. We do have a group of combatants whom we call the watchful and vigilant fathers. He who acquires watchfulness and vigilance is able to confront the seduction of the devil and to host (receive) Christ.

Translated by Riad Moufarrij