

This is a chapter from *The Non-Orthodox: The Orthodox Teaching on Christians Outside of the Church*. This book was originally published in 1999 by Regina Orthodox Press in Salisbury, MA (Frank Schaeffer's publishing house). For the complete book, as well as reviews and related articles, go to <http://orthodoxinfo.com/inquirers/status.aspx>. (© Patrick Barnes, 1999, 2004)

## II. The Orthodox View of Grace

The Orthodox view of Grace is quite distinct from that of the West, especially as developed by the Scholastics from seeds in the theology of the Blessed Augustine. As the Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky explains:

[The] theology of the Eastern Church distinguishes in God the three hypostases, the nature or essence, and the energies. The Son and the Holy Spirit are, so to say, personal processions, the energies, natural processions. The energies are inseparable from the nature, and the nature is inseparable from the three Persons. These distinctions are of great importance for the Eastern Church's conception of mystical life:...

3) The distinction between the essence and the energies, which is fundamental for the Orthodox doctrine of grace, makes it possible to preserve the real meaning of Saint Peter's words "partakers of the divine nature" [2 Peter 1:4]. The union to which we are called is neither hypostatic—as in the case of the human nature of Christ—nor substantial, as in that of the three divine Persons: it is union with God in His energies, or union by grace making us participate in the divine nature, without our essence becoming thereby the essence of God. In deification [*theosis*] we are by grace (that is to say, in the divine energies), all that God is by nature, save only identity of nature . . . according to the teaching of Saint Maximus. We remain creatures while becoming God by grace, as Christ remained God in becoming man by the Incarnation.<sup>10</sup>

Eastern tradition knows no such supernatural order between God and the created world, adding, as it were, to the latter a new creation. It recognizes no distinction, or rather division, save that between the created and the uncreated. For [the] eastern tradition the created supernatural has no existence. That which western theology calls by the name of the supernatural signifies for the East the uncreated—the divine energies ineffably distinct from the essence of God. . . . The act of creation established a relationship between the divine energies and that which is not God. . . . [However,] the divine energies in themselves are not the relationship of God to created being, but they do enter into relationship with that which is not God [*i.e.*, His creation], and draw the world into existence by the will of God.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clark and Co., 1957), pp. 85-86, 87.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

In short, the Orthodox understanding of the nature of Grace is that it is the very energies of God Himself. Through the Trinitarian ministry of the Holy Spirit—a ministry involving both general and special activities—these energies are mediated to mankind. This stands in contrast to the Latin view flowing mainly from the anti-Pelagian writings of Saint Augustine. For Roman Catholics, Grace is a created intermediary between God and man.

### **The General Ministry of the Holy Spirit**

Although a Protestant work, Thomas Oden’s systematic theology accurately and succinctly captures the Orthodox position on the general activity of the Holy Spirit:

The work of the Spirit does not begin belatedly at Pentecost, but is found profusely in all creation and its continuing providences, and especially in the entire history of salvation.

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*General and Special Operations of the Spirit.* As the Son is said to be coworking with the Father in creation and with the Spirit in consummation, so the Spirit coworks with the Father in creation and the Son in redemption (Athanasius, LCHS 1.22-27). These are viewed as general operations shared in the divine triad.

In this sense it is celebrated that God’s Spirit creates (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 104:30; Job 33:4), redeems (Isa. 44:3, 23), and offers gifts to creatures (Gen. 2:7; 41:38; Exod. 28:3; 31:3). The Spirit illumines reason, enables political order, and restrains the capacity for humanity to destroy itself. Among these “general operations” of the Spirit shared with the Father and the Son are the offering of life, supporting of life newly given, nurturing continuing life, strengthening life nurtured, and guiding life strengthened. This applies to all forms of life, whether plant, animal, or human.<sup>12</sup>

*It Is the Spirit Who Convicts.* Conviction is the work of the Spirit in which one grows in awareness of one’s lost condition. Through convicting grace the Spirit works to awaken the realization of how deeply one is personally trapped in intergenerational patterns of sin, unable to break free (Exod. 20:5; Num. 14:18; cf. Jer. 31:29, 30; 1 Cor. 2:14). . . .

*The Spirit Convinces the World of Sin, Righteousness, and Judgment.* The Spirit penetrates the self-deceptions, evasions, defensive ploys, and indifference of the world. The Spirit works to change the lowered awareness of sin into heightened awareness, making the unrighteous hungry for righteousness, as if already facing the final judgment (*An Ancient Homily by an Unknown Author* [Second Clement], 16-20, AF, pp. 68-70; cf. St. John 16:8-11).<sup>13</sup>

We see, here, the wide range of the Spirit’s ministry in creation. In this regard, Saint Athanasius the Great, in his *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*, states:

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Oden, *Life in the Spirit* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), pp. 34-35.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

The Saviour is working mightily among men, every day He is invisibly persuading numbers of people all over the world, both within and beyond the Greek-speaking world, to accept His faith and be obedient to His teaching.<sup>14</sup>

Saint John Cassian makes similar remarks in his *Conference XIII*, “On the Protection of God”:

The grace of Christ then is at hand every day, which, while it “willeth all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,” calleth all without any exception, saying: “Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.”<sup>15</sup>

Saint Seraphim of Sarov’s famous conversation with Nicholas Motovilov affords us further insight into the Orthodox teaching regarding Grace:

However, that [*i.e.*, the fact that “the Spirit of God was not yet in the world”—St. John 7:39] *does not mean that the Spirit of God was not in the world at all*, but His presence was not so apparent as in Adam or in us Orthodox Christians. *It was manifested only externally*; yet the signs of His presence in the world were known to mankind. . . . The grace of the Holy Spirit *acting externally* was also reflected in all the Old Testament prophets and Saints of Israel. The Hebrews afterwards established special prophetic schools where the sons of the prophets were taught to discern the signs of the manifestation of God or of Angels, and to distinguish the operations of the Holy Spirit from the ordinary natural phenomena of our graceless earthly life. Simeon who held God in his arms, Christ’s grandparents Joakim and Anna, and countless other servants of God continually had quite openly various divine apparitions, voices and revelations which were justified by evident miraculous events. Though not with the same power as in the people of God, nevertheless, the presence of the Spirit of God also acted in the pagans who did not know the true God, because even among them God found for Himself chosen people. . . . Though the pagan philosophers also wandered in the darkness of ignorance of God, *yet they sought the truth which is beloved by God, and on account of this God-pleasing seeking, they could partake of the Spirit of God*, for it is said that the nations who do not know God practice by nature the demands of the law and do what is pleasing to God (cf. Rom. 2:14). . . .<sup>16</sup>

In any attempt to elucidate an Orthodox position on dogmatic issues, it is also important to consult the texts of the Divine Services. A brief look at some frequently used prayers will help to illustrate the concept of the Holy Spirit’s general ministry. The first example introduces the *Trisagion* and is recited at almost every Orthodox service:

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<sup>14</sup> Trans. A Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary Press, 1993), p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> Trans. the Rev. Edgar C. S. Gibson, M.A., *NPNF* 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., Vol. 11, p. 425.

<sup>16</sup> “A Conversation of St. Seraphim of Sarov with N. A. Motovilov,” (Blanco, TX: New Sarov Press, n.d.), pp. 12-13, em-phases ours.

O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, Who art everywhere present and fillest all things, the Treasury of good things and Giver of life. . . .

Here one can see an affirmation of the Holy Spirit's general ministry towards all of creation in which He fills all things with the energies of God in His rôle as the Divine Agent of Him by Whom "all things consist" (Col. 1:17). The second example is the prayer which concludes the First Hour. Based on Saint John 1:9, it is a good example of the Orthodox understanding of the Economy of God towards His creation:

O Christ the True Light, Who enlightenest and sanctifiest every man that cometh into the world: Let the light of Thy countenance be signed upon us, that in it we may see the Unapproachable Light. . . .

Concerning the verse in Saint John's Gospel which inspired this prayer, Saint John Chrysostom comments:

If He "lighteth every man that cometh into the world," how is it that so many continue unenlightened? For not all have known the majesty of Christ. How then doth He "light every man"? He lighteth all as far as in Him lies. But if some, willfully closing the eyes of their mind, would not receive the rays of that Light, their darkness arises not from the nature of the Light, but from their own wickedness, who willfully deprive themselves of the gift. *For the grace is shed forth upon all, turning itself back neither from Jew, nor Greek, nor Barbarian, nor Scythian, nor free, nor bond, nor male, nor female, nor old, nor young, but admitting all alike, and inviting with an equal regard. And those who are not willing to enjoy this gift, ought in justice to impute their blindness to themselves; for if when the gate is opened to all, and there is none to hinder, any being willfully evil remain without, they perish through none other, but only through their own wickedness.*<sup>17</sup>

In short, everyone born into this world is a recipient of the general ministry of God in his Redemptive Economy. Moreover, in this prayer one can see God's involvement both in the *beginning* of man's salvation—the general "enlightenment" of man (which is, as will soon be shown, distinct from the *illumination* given only in Holy Baptism), such that his reason-endowed soul is rendered accountable to God (cf. Romans 1:19-20)—and in the *fullness* of man's salvation: union with God in the Unapproachable Light (*theosis*).

### The Special Ministry of the Holy Spirit

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<sup>17</sup> "Homily VIII: John i. 9," trans. the Rev. Philip Schaff, in Vol. 14 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1<sup>st</sup> ser., ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994 [1886]), p. 29, emphasis ours. Cf. St. John 3:19-21; Romans 1:18ff. This set will henceforth be referred to as *NPNF*. The set of *Ante-Nicene Fathers* will be noted as *ANF*.

Beyond His general ministry in creation, there is also a special ministry of the Holy Spirit to those within the Church. For a description of this, we turn again to various Saints, beginning with Saint Seraphim's conversation with Motovilov:

But when our Lord Jesus Christ condescended to accomplish the whole work of salvation, after His Resurrection, *He breathed on the Apostles, restored the breath of life lost by Adam, and gave them the same grace of the All-Holy Spirit of God as Adam had enjoyed.* But that was not all. He also told them that it was expedient for them that He should go to the Father, for if He did not go, the Spirit of God would not come into the world. But if He, the Christ, went to the Father, He would send Him into the world, and He, the Comforter, *would guide them and all who followed their teaching into all truth and would remind them of all that He had said to them when He was still in the world.* What was then promised was *grace upon grace* (St. John. 1:16).

Then on the day of Pentecost He solemnly sent down to them in a tempestuous wind the Holy Spirit in the form of tongues of fire which alighted on each of them and entered within them and filled them with the fiery strength of divine grace which breathes bedewingly and acts gladdeningly *in souls which partake of its power and operations* (cf. Acts 2:1-4). And this same fire-infusing grace of the Holy Spirit which is given to us all, *the faithful of Christ, in the Mystery of Holy Baptism, is sealed by the Mystery of Chrismation on the chief parts of our body as appointed by Holy Church, the eternal keeper of this grace.*<sup>18</sup>

In *The Spiritual Life and How to Be Attuned to It*, Saint Theophan the Recluse writes:

Such a disposition of our soul [towards salvation] makes it ready for Divine communion, and the grace of the Holy Spirit, *which has acted hitherto from the outside by arousing us, establishes itself within, not directly, but through the means of a sacrament [Mystery].* The believer repents, is baptized and receives the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). This is the very action of Divine communion—living and active.<sup>19</sup>

The spiritual classic *Unseen Warfare* makes a similar statement:

Thus teach the holy fathers. Saint Diadoch is the most definite among them, when he says that before holy baptism Divine grace moves a man towards good *from without*, while Satan is hidden in the depths of the heart and soul. But after a man has been baptised, the demon hovers outside the heart, *while grace enters within* (*Philokalia* 4. 76).<sup>20</sup>

Speaking of the manifestation of God's Grace in the Holy Mysteries, Vladimir Lossky writes:

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<sup>18</sup> "A Conversation," p. 14, emphases ours.

<sup>19</sup> Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1996, p. 113, emphasis ours.

<sup>20</sup> Lorenzo Scupoli, ed. St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, rev. St. Theophan the Recluse (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), p. 153, emphases ours.

As He descended upon the disciples [at Pentecost] in tongues of fire, so the Holy Spirit descends invisibly upon the newly-baptized in the sacrament of holy chrism. . . . The Holy Spirit is operative in both sacraments. He recreates our nature by purifying it and uniting it to the body of Christ. He also bestows deity—the common energy of the Holy Trinity which is divine grace—upon human persons. It is on account of this intimate connection between the two sacraments of baptism and [chrismation] that the uncreated and deifying gift, which the descent of the Holy Spirit confers upon the members of the Church, is frequently referred to as “baptismal grace.” . . . Baptismal grace, the presence within us of the Holy Spirit... is the foundation of all Christian life.<sup>21</sup>

The term “baptismal Grace,” also appropriately called “ecclesial Grace,” helps one to keep in mind an important distinction in the way God relates to those within the Church. Thus, Holy Baptism is the Mystery by which a person is incorporated into Christ, which is His Body, the Church (Eph. 1:22-23).<sup>22</sup> By this Mystery, one is given the Holy Spirit and begins to participate as a new creation and “human temple” (1 Cor. 6:19) in the Divine Energies, or Grace, of God. This special impartation of and relation to the Holy Spirit can only be conferred by the Church.

What has been said thus far—especially the distinction between Grace *upon* and *within*—helps to provide a theological explanation for the existence of non-Orthodox Christians who undeniably exhibit the workings of Divine Grace in their lives. There are innumerable examples of believers who clearly appear to have had a deep relationship with Christ, as attested by their words and deeds.<sup>23</sup> Some famous ones readily come to mind: C. S. Lewis—a Christian apologist whose thinking was close to Orthodoxy in many ways—is a “hero” to innumerable Christians of every variety. His writings have been instrumental in leading many to faith in Christ. Then there is Mother Theresa, who is revered by thousands as a model of Christian charity. One also

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<sup>21</sup> *Mystical Theology*, pp. 170-171.

<sup>22</sup> The discussion of Baptism in Chapter Five may be largely meaningless to those from Protestant confessions which affirm a nominalist view of the Mysteries—*e.g.*, those descendents of the Zwinglian and Anabaptist wings of the Continental Reformation. The Mysteries are to them mere outward signs and do not spiritually effect anything. In these confessional groups, one becomes a Christian by a mere “profession of faith.” Membership in the (invisible) true Church is by “faith alone.” Thus to them, discussions about the “validity” or efficacy of their sacraments will most likely seem irrelevant.

<sup>23</sup> Caution is required here, however. Occasionally one will find misguided Orthodox Christians who have adopted as their own one or more “saints” of Roman Catholicism (post-Great Schism), Francis of Assisi being the most common. Although we do not wish to cast judgment upon Francis, to uphold such a person as a model is a grave error, as the following studies clearly bear out: *Unseen Light* (Blanco, TX: New Sarov Press, 1999, forthcoming); Father George Macris, “A Comparison of the Mysticism of Francis of Assisi with that of St. Seraphim of Sarov,” *Synaxis*, Vol. 2, pp. 39-56; “Francis of Assisi,” *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XII, No. 2, pp. 41-42. The divergence of Roman Catholic spirituality from that of Orthodoxy will become readily apparent after reading these.

recalls William Law, who wrote the challenging Anglican classic on the spiritual life, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. And we cannot forget Cardinal John Henry Newman, whose love for God in his intellectual biography, *Apologia pro vita sua*, is most evident. Of course, Orthodox Christians would readily disagree with many things these people wrote and did. Nevertheless—recognizing in them true feeling, piety, and love for God—, we can rightly thank God for their lives and work, not presuming to know how He will judge them. In such people it is obvious that God has found hearts that are open to Him.

But Orthodox Christians should also say that this openness is in reality the reception of the *external* influence of God's Grace (Divine Energies) upon their lives, which is not the same thing as the *internal* working of ecclesial Grace given only through Baptism. Recall the emphases on this distinction in the above passages by Saint Theophan the Recluse. The following from his *magnum opus* drives our point home with even greater lucidity and ties together the earlier statement about Grace being given to all men:

Thus, for arousal of the slumbering spirit within man and the leading of it to contemplation of the divine way, divine grace either 1) *directly* acts upon it, and, in carrying out its power, gives the opportunity to break the bonds that hold it, or 2) *indirectly* acts on it, shaking the layers and meshes off of it and thereby giving it the freedom to assume its rightful position.

The divine grace that is everywhere-present and fills all things *directly* inspires the spirit of man, impressing thoughts and feelings upon it that turn it away from all finite things and toward another better, albeit invisible and mysterious world.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, it could be said that non-Orthodox Christians such as we have listed—being deeply motivated by a love for God which arose from the external operation of divine Grace—“practiced by nature the demands of the law and did what was pleasing to God.”

However, “[none] of them [found] themselves under the activity of the grace which is present in the Church, and especially the grace which is given in the Mysteries of the Church. They [were] not nourished by that mystical table which leads up along the steps of moral perfection.”<sup>25</sup> Outside of the Church one may be able to make some admirable moral and spiritual progress. One cannot, however, participate in the Grace-filled life of the Church—an existence that is immeasurably different than one finds in

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<sup>24</sup> Trans. Fr. Seraphim Rose and the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, *The Path to Salvation* (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1996), pp. 109-110.

<sup>25</sup> Father Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1994 [1983]), p. 245.

the “mere Christianity” outside<sup>26</sup>—or, in this life, achieve the ultimate aim of the Christian Faith—deification (*theosis*).<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

When endeavoring to understand the Orthodox doctrine of Grace, one must keep in mind not only the unique Orthodox distinction between the Divine Essence and Energies of the Holy Trinity, but also the two ministerial aspects of the Third Person: the general (external) and the special (internal). The general ministry of the Holy Spirit applies to all of creation and involves a variety of salvific activities. Towards mankind His redemptive ministry is of an external nature. His special ministry—involving the internal operation of ecclesial Grace through initially imparted Baptism—is given to the organic members of His Body and continues in the mystical life of the Church, mainly through Holy Communion.

The Trinitarian ministry of the Holy Spirit is available to all. The Spirit of God operates externally upon all of mankind, bringing those who are willing to the Son—who is the Head of the Church, His Body; and once incorporated into Christ through Baptism—having been imbued with the Divine Energies of God—the newly illumined person is given access to the Father.

One should not conclude from an affirmation that the Divine Energies of God act upon *individual persons* that the Christian *group* of which they are a member is therefore a “church” in the truest sense of the word. To affirm such would be to divide the indivisible—for the Church is one as Christ is one—and to allow an admixture of truth with error that denies the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ that He would send the Holy Spirit to guide His Bride into all truth and preserve Her from error.<sup>28</sup> Those Orthodox who observe the virtues found in various heterodox believers and conclude that they must be somehow in the Church because they “appear to be Orthodox in so many

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<sup>26</sup> On this theme see Archbishop and Holy New Martyr Hilarion (Troitsky), *Christianity or the Church?* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1985).

<sup>27</sup> On the necessity of divine Grace for Christian perfection see St. John Cassian, *The Conferences*, XIII. St. John lived in Gaul and was a contemporary of St. Augustine. This Conference is a classic treatise on the Orthodox doctrines of Grace and free will.

<sup>28</sup> St. John 14:16, 26; 16:13; cf. also 1 Timothy 3:15; St. Matthew 28:20; 2 Timothy 2:15.

The Holy Spirit teaches the Church through the holy Fathers and Teachers of the [Orthodox] catholic Church. . . . The Church is taught by the life-creating Spirit, but not otherwise than [has been taught] through the holy Fathers and Teachers. . . . The [Orthodox] catholic Church cannot sin or err or express falsehood in lieu of truth, for it is the Holy Spirit who forever works through the Fathers and Teachers, who faithfully ministers and protects her from error. (St. Justin of Chelije, summarizing the Orthodox position on the infallibility of the Church with an excerpt from a recent Epistle of the Orthodox Patriarchs, in *The Struggle for Faith*, pp. 134-135.)



ways” have not sufficiently understood or experienced their own Faith. Their charity towards these people is to be commended; yet it must not lead to a distortion of the nature of the Church.

Unfortunately, Orthodox ecumenists often disregard the principles we have briefly laid out in this chapter. The following statements made by Metropolitan Damaskinos of Switzerland constitute a typical example:

We should be prepared to seek and to recognize the presence of the Spirit—which means: the Church—outside our own canonical boundaries, by which we identify the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. . . ; only this attitude will allow us to recognize Churches outside our own ecclesiastical boundaries, boundaries which we tend all too often to equate in an exclusivistic way with salvation inside the One. . . .<sup>29</sup>

We trust that our readers can begin to see why there is ecclesiological confusion within Holy Orthodoxy today, and why it is so important to have a firm grounding in Orthodox theology. For to overlook even these elemental points of Orthodox dogma could lead to conclusions that are very spiritually harmful to an Orthodox Christian:

The characteristic belief of the heresy of ecumenism is this: that the Orthodox Church is not the one true Church of Christ; that the grace of God is present also in other “Christian” denominations, and even in non-Christian religions; that the narrow path of salvation according to the teaching of the Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church is only “one path among many” to salvation; and that the details of one's belief in Christ are of little importance, as is one's membership in any particular church. Not all the Orthodox participants in the ecumenical movement believe this entirely (although Protestants and Roman Catholics most certainly do); but by their very participation in this movement, including invariably common prayer with those who believe wrongly about Christ and His Church, they tell the heretics who behold them: “*Perhaps what you say is correct,*” even as the wretched disciple of St. Paisius did. *No more than this is required for an Orthodox Christian to lose the grace of God;* and what labor it will cost for him to gain it back!

How much, then, should Orthodox Christians walk in the fear of God, trembling lest they lose His grace, which by no means is given to everyone, but only to those who hold the true Faith, lead a life of Christian struggle, and treasure the grace of God which leads them heavenward.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Archimandrite Cyprian Agiokyprianites, *Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement* (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Ortho-dox Studies, 1997), p. 20. These statements were made during the course of three separate addresses delivered in Lyons (1981), Nice (1981), and Geneva (1995). Concerning the misleading charge of “exclusivism” we will have more to say in the Epilogue.

<sup>30</sup> Fr. Seraphim Rose, *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future* (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1996 [1975]), p. 191.