

Reprinted with permission from "One Church", the bi-monthly journal of the Patriarchal Parishes in the U.S., Moscow Patriarchate, Vol. XLVIII, No. 5, 1994

Made in the Image of the Holy Trinity: Where Does Sex Fit into this Picture?

By Laura Jones

We can say that the life of the Triune God is that of eternal ecstasy of the three Divine Persons, for ecstasy means a kind of going out from one's self. And so we pray:

I glorify the Son and the Spirit Who come from the Father as light and ray from the sun: the One begotten as Offspring, the Other proceeding and sent forth.¹

The Church also puts this prayer into our mouths:

I am an image of Thine ineffable glory, even though I bear the marks of sin.²

How then do we reflect the Divine ecstasy of the Three in One? In sexual ecstasy one goes out of oneself to be physically lost in another person. Spiritual writers utilize erotic imagery very much, as also does Holy Scripture, to describe the mystical ecstasy of being lost in God. Such a correlation is also found in the traditions of non-Christian religions where belief in the Holy Trinity is absent. In what way must ours be an especially Trinitarian spirituality? How, moreover, does such a spirituality transform our understanding of our own, properly human, sexuality?

A contemporary American mystic, Herbert Schwartz, has explored in a very practical manner the right order of knowledge and love in us, deriving from the order of the Trinitarian Persons in the Holy Trinity and I believe we will find his teaching of value. Let us begin by contrasting our knowledge with knowledge within the Trinity.

Whatever we know we know through the medium of a concept. So the concept by which we know is at once a kind of medium and in a certain sense a limitation, whereas in the Trinity, the knowledge that the Father has is the Person of the Son; the Word is a Person distinct from Himself. So for God knowledge and union with the principle are identical, whereas for us, knowledge and union with the object are distinct, because we're united with the object but we're not united with it simply; we have an image of the object.³

Although our knowledge does not unite us with what is known, God's invisible nature, as St. Paul says, is clearly perceived in His visible creation. (Rm 1:20) Were the image and likeness of the Triune God not clouded in us by the fall, therefore, our knowledge would lead us to God and also arouse in us a hunger for Him so that we would seek Him in love.

The mind is made to know being as universal, which is ultimately God. If we were not fallen, knowledge would always lead us to God. This means that knowledge would always come from love and move us to love, because the knowledge of the thing you desire leaves you without the possession of it, that's why the cult of knowledge is a perversion.

The cult of knowledge is a perversion of our very nature. Our nature was made in the image of the Trinity. Thus, in us, knowledge rightly leads to love.

In God, knowledge is always knowledge-in-love, because the knowledge of the Father and Son is in the love of the Holy Spirit. However, because we're creatures, we can do one without the other. We can have knowledge without loving the object, and when you do that, you really love yourself, because you love your possession of the object rather than the object itself.

In our society, in which intellectual attainments tend to be greatly revered, I think we do not often recognize intellectual self-love as the perversion it is, nor do we have a sufficiently sensitive conscience about living in our own ideas and intellectual conceptions. This prevents us from perceiving the reflection of the Holy Spirit in our psychological make-up. Insofar as the Spirit is sent into the world, and experienced by us, He is akin to love. This is why in the prayer quoted above, in which the Father is likened to the sun, the Son can be said to come from Him as light, and the Spirit as the warmth of the sun's ray. This is also the teaching of St. Gregory Palamas, which I quote from Fr. John Meyendorff's study of Palamas:

After referring to the traditional Patristic scheme of the Word (Logos) and the Breath (Pneuma), [Gregory Palamas] goes on, "This Spirit of the Word from on high is like a mysterious love of the Father towards the Word mysteriously begotten; it is the same love as that possessed by the Word and well-beloved Son of the Father towards Him Who begat Him; this He does insofar as He comes from the Father conjointly with this Love, and this Love rests naturally on Him."⁴

This understanding follows the Orthodox formula: The Spirit proceeds from the Father **through** the Son.⁵ Similarly, in us, when we use our minds rightly, knowledge leads to love.

Our society has developed technologically because there was always a desire for a more and more perfect performance. Unless you have that desire to know which comes from the desire to love more, nothing more can happen.

Here the children of mammon are wiser in their generation than the children of light. I believe that when we find ourselves confessing the same sins time and time again, we seldom try to understand why nothing is happening in our spiritual life, why we are not changing in any way.

When you're sincere in your relation to God and things go wrong, you use your head; otherwise you're a hypocrite, you don't really want any relation to God. Nevertheless, today you hardly meet a person who wants a relation to God who uses his head about it. There is rather a type of rational despair.

Formed as we are within a society that takes pride in intellectual feats which have resulted in its advanced technology, it seems that for the most part we do not know how to use our minds to know God.

Wisdom for us is not to penetrate the ultimate principle of things. Faith by its nature is a mystery because by it we reach God Who is a mystery. When you use your mind to go to God, you should use it to know what to do, but not to try to penetrate the principle.... The measure of understanding is to know what to do; you always use your mind in order to know what to do. But you shouldn't use it to try to penetrate the principle, because the principle is God.

We find this same teaching in the great Orthodox Father, St. Symeon the New Theologian:

So God Who dwells in him teaches such a man about things to come and things present, not by word, but by the action and experience and reality. As God removes the veil from the eyes of his mind He shows him what is His will and what is useful for him. As for other matters, He persuades him not to be inquisitive about them or seek them or be curious about them, for he cannot boldly look into even the things that God reveals to him and shows him.... He considers himself with all his soul to be unworthy of the vision of such goodness and does not wish to look closely at them or fully understand them. He is constrained by trembling, fear, and reverence to cry, "Who am I, Lord ... that Thou should reveal such mysteries to me, unworthy as I am, and has wondrously made me ... even to participate and share in [these mysteries]!"⁶

By contrast, technological advancement entails an ever increasing penetration of the principles governing the created universe, and this is not wrong, because

God has given us stewardship of our world. What is wrong is to seek to know God, the ultimate principle of all things, in like manner. “In Thy Light we see Light” (Ps 35:10); God Himself will reveal Himself to us when He wishes, and to the degree that He wishes. This knowledge is not something we can attain by our own understanding alone. What we can do with our understanding is seek after that which will unite us more intimately to God, for it is within this union that God reveals Himself to us.

And so we pray in the services in this manner: “O Unity thrice-radiant in Thy Persons, **grant me a strong mind that I may keep and observe Thy divine commandments** and may **ever chant to Thee with faith: Blessed art Thou**, the God of our Fathers.”⁷

The right use of our minds in relation to God is therefore not the acquisition of speculative knowledge but rather of the practical knowledge of what we must do in order to draw near to God.

We begin this process with what we already know. If you practice what you know you’ll know what to practice. Whatever defects there are in your understanding, God will help you in those if you practice whatever you know.... The way you use your head is based on faith. Just as in mathematics you have certain axioms – you believe them because they are a given – and then you reason from them, so with faith we reason from our faith, which is given. You don’t become perfect in faith if you just accept it; you have to be a doer, not just a hearer of the Word. (James 1:22) For a man to be a doer entails a rational development.... You don’t know by reason that God loves you no matter what; you have to know it by faith. You know by faith that Christ is your Redeemer. The principles themselves are not sufficient, as reasoning is not sufficient in itself. The reasoning from those principles is what is sufficient.

We see how critically necessary it is to reason from the principles of faith, not just accept them and let it go at that, when we reflect on Christ as our Redeemer. We know by faith that He was sent for our redemption because “God so loved the world” (Jn 3:16), but it still remains deeply in our fallen nature to believe that we are **not** loved. If it were not so difficult for us to believe in God’s love for us, then why did He have to devise such a dramatic plan for our salvation: death by crucifixion? But the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ remains a distant historical event as long as we do not realize the extent to which we feel ourselves unloved, and suppress this, so that this suppressed need for love expresses itself in a kind of generalized need for public approval, and we do not experience God’s love, which is so great that He sent His only-begotten Son to die on the Cross for us.

At that point at which you see yourself as unlovable you would look for pleasure in other things. All the energy that God gave you to increase

your faith would be lost. I would say that people spend their whole lives seeking pleasure in that way, actually trying to run away from God, because they don't believe their natural desires can be satisfied in him.

Since the effect of sin is to separate us from God, it is especially in the experience of our sinfulness that we are tempted to believe ourselves unloved and unlovable. But "God sent His Son into the world not to judge the world – but that the world may be saved by Him." (Jn 3:17) God became man so that we might become gods, as the Fathers tell us.

The whole meaning of Jesus' Passion is that we can attain God. So if you don't use your mind to convince yourself you can attain this good, inevitably when you conclude that you can't, you'll seek pleasure and distraction.... So what do you do about it?

You do what the Psalmist says: "On His Law I meditate day and night." (Ps 1:2) The Law is the Law of God's merciful love.... The more you're convinced of that, the more you will be able to practice fortitude as you see yourself overwhelmed by your own weakness and inclination to evil.

This meditation is the right reasoning from the principle of faith which is God's merciful love, so great that He sent His only-begotten Son into the world to suffer and die and be resurrected for our salvation. We must meditate on this day and night, that is to say, constantly, because, in our fallen condition, our misgiving about God's love is constantly operating in us, day and night.

So, practically, the most important thing in the world is to be convinced that God is attainable. He is yours if you want Him. And you'll see if you examine your conscience that in your heart you hardly ever believed that. With the right conscience there is joy in that belief because when you're working for an end, you're convinced you'll get it. That is why we are told to rejoice and again to rejoice. (Phil 4:4) You can also see the significance of charity. When you sin against charity, you convince your neighbor he doesn't have what it takes. When you convince him of that, you're cooperating with the devils, because that is their objective: to generate despair. If you cast the beam out of your own eye, you know your neighbor needs the same thing you need: the courage to go on against all the evidence of his fallen nature.

So true love for another person is not mere feeling, but feeling which derives from and is informed by the very rational conviction that we are loved by God. The joy this inspires is the rational ecstasy of that invincible faith which has the power to move mountains. (Mk 11:23)

If you had a natural desire to get rich, well, you wouldn't have that fulfilled until you got rich. What would be sustaining you would be the image, the

hope, of getting rich. Thus, in a certain sense you would have it before you had it, and if you didn't have this quasi-pleasure of the object in anticipation, you wouldn't move to it. The same thing is true in our relation to God. Even more so in Christ, because we not only have the image, we have Him Who is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life". (Jn 14:6) Just as we are sustained by this expectation in natural pleasures so in a greater way through faith we are constantly refreshed by what we're going to gain. Not only are you going to get the object, but in some way you already possess it, and that gives you joy and the strength to go on.... Just as when a man is overcome by sexual desire everything else would be obliterated, so when you turn to Jesus this way there is a supernatural obliteration of everything else, and the more you do this the more you'll experience this joy and that is what generates the strength. So you must practice that, especially in moments when you're overcome by the evil you see in yourself. In those moments when you turn to Jesus you'll experience that obliteration of everything else; nothing else will exist. And it is that experience which generates a closer union with God, because you already experience the fruition, so to speak, of what you seek.

"Let Us make man to Our image and likeness," (Gen 1:26) God said. Many of the Fathers teach that God's image is in us by our nature, and we grow in God's likeness as we progress in the life of faith. The joy or rational ecstasy described here is a truly Trinitarian divine likeness of knowledge-in-love. The love is begotten of the firm knowledge that God loves me even as I see my own sinfulness. It is knowledge which is also the source of love for others inasmuch as it enables me to see others as needing this same conviction of their holiness in God as they confront their inclination to evil.

The rational ecstasy we have described is not always sensibly pleasurable. Indeed it is the source of the fortitude that we need to hope against hope as we are overwhelmed by the painful awareness of our sinfulness. We may ask how this relates to sexual union, and to the intensely pleasurable sensible ecstasy that it normally entails. For the answer we will go back to what we said near the beginning of this study, about intellectual self-love which is a perversion because our knowledge should lead to love: love of God, and of others in God. To seek our own pleasure in sex is likewise a perversion, and for the same reason: it short circuits our love of the other person. The rightful ecstasy of sex is not that of our own sensible pleasure, but the ecstasy of love for the other person, drawing us out of ourselves and out of our own self love. This is a very rational ecstasy, deriving from a right knowledge of one's spouse in God. For we are not lovable in and of ourselves. We are created by God and re-created in Christ. Indeed, we are deified by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in virtue of our baptism, and this is what makes us lovable – and *infinitely* lovable. It is not right to see sex as having everything to do with love and nothing to do with knowledge. The sexual union not informed, at least implicitly, by this right understanding that we are lovable because God loves us, because He so loved us that He sent His

only-begotten Son to die on the Cross for us – such union is debased to something on the animal level.

Rightly understood, true and holy conjugal union does reflect the Spirit of the Word from on high. It is like a mysterious love of the Father towards the Word mysteriously begotten. It is the same love as that possessed by the Word and the well-beloved Son of the Father towards Him, the Son Who comes from the Father conjointly with this love, which rests naturally on Him.

So, perhaps, in light of this we should modify the title of this little study. Sex does not have to be “fitted into” the image of the Most Holy Trinity in us; when it is right, it flows from this and itself reflects it! It also provides an especially graphic model for the right order of knowledge and love in our relationships as well.

Footnotes

1. Orthros. Sunday of the Last Judgment, *The Lenten Triodion*, trans. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware. London: Faber and Faber, 1984, p. 157.
2. Idem., Orthros, Saturday commemorating the dead, p. 128.
3. *Daily Talks of Herbert Schwartz*, ed. Laura Jones, unpublished. Quoted material is from this source unless otherwise identified.
4. *Physical Chapters*: Cap. Phys. 36, col 1144D-1145A. Quoted in *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, by John Meyendorff, trans George Lawrence, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974, p. 232.
5. *La foi orthodoxe*, St. John Damascene, Paris: Institut Orthodoxe Francais de Theologie, Editions Cahiers Saint-Irenee, 1966, p. 137.
6. *The Discourses*, trans C.J. deCatranzaro, New York: Paulist Press, 1980, p. 190.
7. Sunday of the Holy Fathers, Nocturns (Mesonyctics), the Kanon of the Holy Trinity, Ode Seven, in *The Pentecostarion*, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston: 1990, p. 345.