

THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD TO HEAVEN - THE GLORY OF THE DEIFIED HUMAN BEING*

The joy that we live today is really great! We are glad because the concelebration and discussion with Your Holiness provided us a blessed occasion to live *in the unity of the Spirit and bond of peace* (Ephesians 4:3). We enjoy, especially today, at the feast of the Ascension of the Lord, the crowning of the mystery of the ascension into eternal glory of our human nature, and, through it, of the entire creation, *not from the lowest ones of the earth to the earthly ones, but from the earthly ones to the heaven of heaven and to the throne beyond them of the One Who rules over everything*", as Saint Gregory Palama says so nicely.¹

Your Holiness,

The wonderful mystery of the Ascension to heaven of Jesus Christ, our Lord, has multiple and deep significance. We only want to emphasise three of them.

1) The Ascension of the Lord means the deification of the human being

The bodily ascension to heaven of Jesus Christ, our Lord, represents first of all the ascension of the human nature to the divine glory, to a dignity and honour never achieved before. *"And with mercy you raised our decayed nature and put it be together with the Father"*, says the Penticostarion², while Saint John Chrysostom says that through the Ascension of Christ, our human nature *"went higher than the angels, raised over the archangels, over the cherubim and seraphim and never stopped until sitting on the throne of God"*.³

The Vespers of the feast of the Lord's Ascension shows us that the Ascension of the Lord is the means of achieving the complete separation from darkness of death and hell and reaching the heavenly light of eternal life, that is the raising of human nature in the love of the Holy Trinity and its reception on the throne of the divine glory: *"The angels are amazed to see human being higher than them. The Father receives in His bosom the One Whom He has always had in His bosom: the Holy Spirit orders all His angels: raise, rulers, your gates! All nations clap your hands, for Christ rose where He was before."*⁴

This raising of the human being was possible because the Christ Risen in glory never gave up the human nature, but assumed it completely and took it to the

* Speech of His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, delivered on the occasion of the *Feast of the Ascension of the Lord* (28 May 2009), in the Patriarchal Cathedral of *Saint Gheorghe* in Constantinople

¹ Saint Gregory Palama, *"Homily 21 - At the Holy Ascension"*, in *Homilies*, vol. II, Ed. Anastasia, Bucharest, 2004, pp. 7-8

² "Service of the Ascension of the Lord - Great Vesper", *Stihira V idiomela*, in *Penticostar*, EIBMBOR, Bucharest, 1999, p. 245

³ Saint John Chrysostom, *"Sermon at the Ascension of the Lord"*, in the *Sermons to Sundays and Feasts*, Ed. Bunavestire, Bacău, 2005, p. 20

⁴ "Service of the Ascension of the Lord", *Stihira I idiomela*, in *Penticostar*, ed. cit, p. 245

very centre of the Holy Trinity life. Christ does not go back to heaven and does not present Himself to His Father only as God, but also as human, *so that He may make us, humans, children of God according to the grace in the glory of the kingdom of heaven* (John 1:12 and 17:24).

The Orthodox theology teaches us that the Ascension of Christ in glory and His sitting on the right side of the Father represents the full deification of His humanity and also eternity of the humanity in God, the pneumatisation or full transfiguration of His human body, namely His supreme elevation to the state of *"transparent milieu of the infinite love of God"*⁵ - as Father Dumitru Staniloae says. The human being is raised to the supreme honour, in utmost rapprochement and full communion with his Creator, in the very intimacy of the divine existence of the Holy Trinity. Consequently, one can see that the Ascension of the human being into the divine glory was the very purpose of the coming down or incarnation of the Son of God. In a sermon at the feast of the Ascension of the Lord, Saint Gregory Palama shows that Christ *"raised in glory and entered into the Holy of the Holies not made by hand and sat on the right side in heavens, on the same throne of divinity, so that our nature, with which He mixed, should share in it"*.⁶ Thus, the Ascension of Christ in glory means the deification and glorification of the human being in the eternal love of God.

2) Christ Raised in glory becomes the Life of Christian's life

Nevertheless, the supreme raising of the humanity of Christ into the heart of the glory of the Holy Trinity, its place on the right side of the Father, does not mean the breaking of the communion with His disciples; it does not mean His isolation and moving away from those who believe in Him. No matter how paradoxical it may seem, the Ascension of the Lord represents, at the same time, *a supreme rapprochement of God to humanity*. Due to the supreme pneumatisation or supreme transfiguration of the body of Christ through Ascension, He can become interior to those who believe in Him (John 17:26). His human nature, raised into the intimacy of the glory of the Holy Trinity, becomes the centre of the transparency of the divine grace communicated to humans through the Holy Spirit, Who makes Christ present and working in Christians' life (John 14: 16-21; 16: 13-15; Galatians 2:20).

Hence, the pneumatisation or full transfiguration of humanity in Christ does not mean only its raising into the divine glory, but also the assumption of His presence in other people, as *dwelling of the crucified and glorified Christ in those who believe in Him and love Him*, so that they may become bearers of Christ, according to His promise: *"Whoever loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and my Father and I will come to him and live with him."* (John 14:23).

Therefore, the God-Man in heaven sits on the divine throne of the glory and lives in the hearts of those who love Him. He is also in the intimacy of the Holy Trinity and in the centre of the life of the Church, raises to heaven in glory and comes down mysteriously in the hearts of those on earth (Ephesians 1:20; 2:22; 3:17 and Colossians 1:27). In this sense, Augustin says that the Lord *"has never moved away from heaven when He came down to come to us; He has not moved away from us when*

⁵ D. Staniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. II, EIBMBOR, Bucharest, 1996, p. 123, "A human heart beats in the Holy Trinity" (Stăniloae)

⁶ St. Gregory Palama, *op. cit.*, p. 15

He raised to go back to heaven. He was already up there, while here, down on earth, as he Himself says: "And no one has ever gone up to heaven except the Son of God, who came down from heaven". (John 3:13).⁷

The Orthodox liturgical text of the feast of the Lord's Ascension shows the same truth. Thus, the kontakion says: "While accomplishing the plan for us and uniting those on earth with those in heaven, You raised in glory, Christ, our Lord, **wherefrom You have never left; but remaining close to us**, You say to those who love You: I am with you and nobody against you!"

3) The Church is the space of human's ascension to eternal life

Saint Gregory Palama emphasises the relation between the Mystery of the Ascension of Christ, our Lord, and the establishment of the Church through the coming down of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, when he says that the Master higher than heavens "raises any time He comes down, so that He may take those down here up with those from heaven and **establish one Church, heavenly and earthly, in the glory of His love for humans**. So, the disciples rejoiced and went back to Jerusalem and were always at the altar, had their minds to heavens, and they praised the Lord, preparing themselves to be ready for the announced coming down of the divine Spirit".⁸

Thus, the Church is the manifestation of the dwelling of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, in the people's hearts, as it was visibly established at the Pentecost as bestowal of the life of the One Holy Christ in the many people who believe in Him, the Head of the Church, so that they should become saints and children of God by grace (John 1:12 and Ephesians 2:18).

The feast of the Resurrection of the Lord, the feast of the Ascension of the Lord and the feast of the Pentecost are mysteriously related between themselves through the work of the Holy Spirit upon the risen body of Christ, so that through His body crucified, risen and ascended into glory He may bestow thereafter the eternal divine-human life of Christ in His Church, in order to prepare her as a bride for the eternal life (cf. John 6:40 and 47; Romans 6: 22-23; Ephesians 2:6) for the glory of the Kingdom of God or the glory of the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Revelation chapter 21).

Therefore, the Risen Christ in glory is present in the Church through the Holy Spirit, always guiding the Christians' life to the Resurrection of all human beings and to the heavenly Kingdom of the glory of the Holy Trinity, according to His promise: "When I raise from earth, I will attract you all to Me" (John 12:32).

Consequently, the final end of the Church is the Heavenly Kingdom of the Holy Trinity, celebrated as a foretaste in the Holy Sacraments and in the entire liturgical life of the Orthodox Church. This is why it is said that: "The Church is full of the Holy Trinity" (Origen) and that she is "the antechamber of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Saint Nicholas Cabasilas). And a liturgical chant says: "While staying in the Church of Your glory, we seem to be in heaven" (Matins service).

Your Holiness,

In the light of the feast of the Ascension of the Lord and Coming Down of the Holy Spirit, the matters of today's world that You mentioned call us, on one hand, to

⁷ See Augustin, Sermon 263, *Pour le jour de l'Ascension*, § 2

⁸ St. Gregory Palama, *op. cit.*, p. 13

the holy mission to announce the Gospel of the love of Christ even more and to call the people to acquire salvation and holiness in the Church of Christ, and, on the other hand, calls us to co-responsibility, cooperation, consultation and brotherly mutual inter-aid in difficult situations.

This is why we would like to consult periodically the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the other sister Orthodox Church as well, having the liturgical concelebration as an icon of light and source of inspiration for co-responsibility and pastoral and social cooperation.

The glorified feast of the Ascension of the Lord provides us, once again, the occasion to express our love and special appreciation towards the venerable Ecumenical Throne, as the first among the Orthodox Patriarchal Sees and the Mother Church wherefrom the Romanian Orthodox Church received the autocephaly in 1885, and the confirmation of the elevation to the rank of Patriarchate in 1925.

At the same time, on the account of the autocephaly of the Romanian Orthodox Church, from 1885 and of the Patriarchate, from 1925, we consider that *the full freedom and highest dignity in the Church of Christ call us to more co-responsibility, cooperation and common service of Orthodoxy.* Therefore, paying attention to the very content of the *Tomos* for granting the autocephaly (25 April 1885) – namely that the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church is declared “brother in Christ” – our Synod has the duty to show permanently fraternal co-responsibility in keeping and promoting the Orthodox faith and in intensifying the Orthodox mission in the world.

As Your Holiness recalled in Your speech today that in 1885 the Romanian Orthodox Church was “*proclaimed from a daughter Church, a sister Church, equal in rank*”, this fact obliges us to be more cooperative in keeping and promoting the values of Orthodoxy today.

We do also appreciate especially the love and appreciation the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople showed towards the Metropolitanate of Wallachia, when offering to the metropolitan from Bucharest, in 1776, the honourable title of “*Locum tenens of the Throne of Caesarea of Cappadocchia*”. This obliges us, too, to appreciate, by words and deeds, the great spiritual legacy inherited from the Cappadochian Saints. In this sense, while wishing to emphasise once more the special spiritual personality of the Cappadochian Saints, in general, and that of Saint Basil the Great, in particular, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church decided, following our proposal, to proclaim, all over the Romanian Patriarchate, the year 2009 as *homage-commemorative year of Saint Basil the Great, Archbishop of Caesarea of Cappadocchia (+379 – from whose passing away we commemorate 1630 years) and of the other Cappadochian Saints.*

In this context, the Romanian Patriarchate publishes this year, 2009, for the first time in the Romanian language, *opera omnia* (the complete works) of Saint Basil the Great, in commented edition, as well as a series of academic studies entitled “*Studia Basiliana*”, included in three volumes; the next years, it intends to publish the complete works of Saint Gregory of Nazianz and of Saint Gregory of Nyssa.

Besides, we also added many books designed to promote selectively and thematically the most beautiful teachings of Saint Basil the Great and of other Cappadochian Saints, so necessary and spiritually useful to the clergy and faithful of our Church.

It was also during this homage-commemorative year that a gilded silver medal of the image of Saint Basil the Great was issued, that we offer with much love to Your Holiness and to all the members of the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

In the same perspective, we decided that this year *Saint Paul the Apostle* Centre of Pilgrimage of the Romanian Patriarchate should intensify the pilgrimages to Cappadochia. One proof in this regard are the many Romanian Orthodox believers from home and from the Romanian Orthodox Diocese of the Northern Europe (Scandinavia) that joined us in this spiritual journey to Constantinople and Cappadochia.

This is why we do hope that the light of the feast of the Ascension of the Lord should take our pilgrim's steps in the footsteps of the great Cappadochian Saints, as witnesses to Christ, who calls us to "*raise our sight and thoughts to highness, to raise ourselves... to the heavenly gates*"⁹, to the love of the Holy Trinity.

Therefore, let us watch and set the eyes of our souls to the goods of the Kingdom of God, as the Ascension of the Lord calls us to hope and love, to dignity and holiness, raises us beyond all temptations and decays of this world, and guides each one of us to heavenly thought, to acquiring the "*thought of Christ*" (1 Corinthians 2:16), that gives us peace and spiritual joy.

As a sign of profound gratitude for the joy of concelebrating today in the Patriarchal Cathedral from Constantinople, we wish to offer to Your Holiness, with deep respect and brotherly love, a holy chalice and a set of holy encolpion on behalf of the Romanian Patriarchate, praying Christ, our Lord, to give You peace, joy, good health and much help in the service of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and of the fraternal pan-Orthodox communion.

⁹ "Service of the Ascension of the Lord" – Matins, Icos, in *Penticostarion*, ed. Op. cit. p. 255