

Our Father Among the Saints Gregory Palamas

(c.1297 – reposed 1359)

Archbishop of Thessalonica

Homily XXXV

Another on the Transfiguration of the Lord

*In which it is proved
that although the Divine Light of the Transfiguration
is Uncreated, it is not God's Essence.*

1. THE Prophet Esaias foretold in respect of the Gospel that, “The Lord will give a concise word on the earth” (cf. Esaias 10:23 LXX). A concise word is an utterance containing an abundance of meaning in a few phrases. So let us look again at the Gospel passage which we examined earlier, and add what we left out, that we may take our fill of the incorruptible meaning stored up in it, and all receive divine inspiration.

2. “At that time Jesus taketh Peter, and James, and John, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, and was transfigured before them: and His face did shine as the sun” (Mt. 17: 1-2; cf. Mk. 9:2-3). “Behold, now is the acceptable time,” brethren, “In a day of salvation have I succored thee” (2 Cor. 6:2; cf. Esaias 49:8 LXX) a divine, new and eternal day, not measured in hours, never lengthening or shortening, uninterrupted by night. For us it is the day of the Sun of righteousness (Mal. 4:2), with Whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning (Jam. 1:17). That Sun, since the day when, by the good pleasure of the Father and the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, He lovingly shone upon us and led us “out of darkness into His marvellous light” (Pet. 2:9), continues without setting to shine upon us for evermore.

3. As the Sun of righteousness (Mal. 4:2) and truth, He does not consent to give light to, or to be known perfectly by, those who cultivate lying and either extol injustice or demonstrate it in their deeds. But He shines upon those who act righteously and love truth, is believed by them, and delights them with His rays. Therefore Scripture says, “Light has dawned for the righteous man, and gladness for the upright of heart (cf. Ps. 96:11 LXX). And the Psalmist and the Prophet also sings to God, “Tabor and Hermon shall rejoice in Thy name” (Ps. 88:12 LXX), foretelling the joy that those who later saw

that illumination would experience. Esaias tells us “loose every burden of iniquity, do thou untie the knots of hard bargains set the bruised free and cancel every unjust account” (Esaias 58:6 LXX). What then, “Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee, and the glory of the Lord shall compass thee” (Esaias 58:8 LXX). Again he says, “If thou shall take away from the midst of thee the yoke and the stretching forth of the hand, and murmuring speech, and if thou give bread to the hungry from thy heart, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in darkness, and thy darkness shall be as noonday” (Esaias 58:9-10 LXX). For that Sun makes other suns of those upon whom it brightly shines. “Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Mt. 13:43).

4. Let us cast off, brethren, the works of darkness, and let us perform the works of light, that we may not only walk honestly, as in the day (cf. Rom. 13:12-13), but also become children of the day (1 Thess. 5:5). And come, let us go up the mountain where Christ shone forth, that we may see what happened there. Or rather, if we become children worthy of that day, the Word of God will take us up when that time comes. Now, I beseech you, strive to lift up the eyes of your understanding towards the light of the Gospel message, that you may be transformed by the renewing of your mind (cf. Rom. 12:2), and having acquired the divine brightness from above, be conformed to the likeness of the glory of the Lord (cf. Rom. 8:29), Whose face shone like the sun today on the mountain.

5. In what way like the sun? There was a time when sunlight was not contained within the disc of the sun, for the light was made first, whereas the Creator of all formed the sun on the fourth day, kindling its light and making it the source of daylight and a luminary to shine by day (cf. Gen.1:14-19 LXX). Similarly, the light of the Godhead was not always contained in Christ’s Body for that light existed always without beginning, whereas the human body which the Son of God assumed from us was made later for our sake, receiving the fullness of the Godhead (cf. Col. 2:9), and so being kindled as a deifying and divinely radiant source of illumination. Christ’s face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as the light. “Shining.” says Mark, “exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them” (Mark 9:3).

6. Both Christ’s venerable Body and His clothes were radiant with the same light, but not equally so. His face shone like the sun, but His clothes became bright through contact with His Body, and in this way He showed us what those robes of glory will be

like, which those who are near God will wear in the age to come, and what those garments of sinlessness were like, which Adam took off because of his transgression, appearing naked and ashamed (cf. Gen 3:10 LXX). “The fashion of His countenance was altered, and His raiment was white and glistening,” says the divine Luke, regarding everything that happened as beyond comparison. (Lk. 9:29). Mark, however, describes Christ’s clothes as shining exceeding white as snow, but by this comparison he demonstrates that images and illustrations fall short of conveying the appearance of those garments. Snow is indeed white, but it does not shine, because its surface is always uneven, being entirely composed of small bubbles because of the air mixed into it. When a cloud can neither stay whole nor expel the air it holds, it freezes because of the extreme cold, and falls full of air, resembling foam in its whiteness and unevenness.

7. As snow’s whiteness is inadequate to depict how delightful that light was, the Evangelist added the word “Shining” to show that the light which made those clothes glistening white was uncreated. It is not a property of light to render the objects it illuminates sparkling and white, but to show up what colour they are. This light, however, apparently revealed, or rather, transformed, the things it shone upon, which visible light cannot do. Even more mysterious is the fact that, even though they were changed, at the same time the light kept them unaltered, as will soon become clear. How could the light with which we are familiar do all this? The Evangelist, to indicate that not only the extraordinary radiance and loveliness of the Lord’s face was above nature, but also the beauty of His clothes, takes them beyond the bounds of natural beauty by adding the description, “shining” to “white as snow.” Then, since skill can also seem enhance natural beauty, he sets this loveliness above artificial beautification by saying, so as no fuller on earth can white them” (Mark 9:3).

8. The pre-eternal Word, Who became flesh for our sake, the enhypostatic wisdom of the Father, also bears within Himself the word of the Gospel proclamation. The writing of this message is like a garment, white and clear, but also shining and radiant like pearls, or better put, full of divine worth and inspiration for those who regard the things of the Spirit spiritually, expound the written words in a way worthy of God, and demonstrate that the phrases of the Gospel’s preaching are such that no fuller on earth, that is to say, none of the wise men of this age, can make them clearer. But why even mention elucidating such words? Such a person cannot even understand them when someone else explains. “The natural man,” as the Apostle tells us, “receiveth not the things of the Spirit: neither can he know them” (1Cor. 2:14). As a result he wrongly

interprets instances of divine and spiritual radiance, which lie far beyond the reaches of the human mind, as natural light, “intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind” (Col. 2:18).

9. When Peter’s understanding had been illuminated by that most blessed sight, he was raised to a greater love and longing for God, and did not want to be separated from that light. “It is good for us to be here,” he said to the Lord. “If Thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for Thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias” (Matt. 17:4), not knowing what he was saying (cf. Mk. 9:6) The time for all things to be restored had not yet come, but even when it does, we shall not need tents made by hand. Nor should the Master be put on the same level as His servants by them all having similar dwellings. As His true Son, Christ is in the bosom of the Father, whereas the prophets, as true sons of Abraham, will dwell, as is fitting, in Abraham’s bosom. As Peter spoke these words, without realizing what he was saying, “Behold a bright cloud overshadowed them” (Mt. 17:5), interrupting his words and making clear what sort of tabernacle was appropriate for Christ. But what was this Cloud, and, if it was bright, why did it overshadow them? Was it not the unapproachable light in which God dwells, and with which He covers Himself as with a garment? (Ps. 104:2). “He Who maketh the clouds His chariot,” as the Scriptures say (Ps. 104:3), and “made darkness His secret place; His pavilion round about Him” (Ps. 18:11). And as the Apostle says, “He Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto” (1 Tim. 6:16). Thus on this occasion the same phenomenon was both light and darkness, overshadowing because of its exceeding brightness.

10. But the holy theologians bear witness that even that light which was made visible earlier to the Apostles’ eyes was unapproachable. “Today,” says one of them, “is the abyss of unapproachable light, today the unlimited outpouring of divine radiance is clearly seen by the Apostles on Mount Tabor” (S. John of Damascus *Homily on the Transfiguration of Our Saviour Jesus Christ* 2 (PG 96:545B). And the great Dionysius, having stated that the unapproachable light, in which God is said to dwell, is darkness, says “It is here that everyone found worthy of knowing and seeing God comes” (Letter V). It follows that the light, which the Apostles saw shining from the Lord’s face, was the same as the bright Cloud, which later overshadowed them. But in the first instance, because it appeared more dimly, it could be seen, whereas later it shone so much more strongly that it was invisible to them on account of its overwhelming brilliance, and thus it overshadowed Christ, the Fount of divine, eternal light and the sun of

righteousness (Mal. 4:2). For the one and same light of the visible sun allows us to see by its rays, but also takes away our sight if we look directly at it, since its brilliance exceeds the measure of our eyes.

11. The visible sun shines as is natural to it; not by its own will, nor only on those it wishes. Christ, however, the Sun of truth and righteousness (cf. Mal. 4:2), not only possesses the divine nature with its natural radiance and glory, but also the divine will which is in keeping with these, and He illuminates only those He wishes, and to the extent that He chooses, providentially for their salvation. When He so willed, He shone like the sun and was seen by the Apostles' eyes, though not for long. Then when He chose to shine more brilliantly, He was invisible to them on account of His exceeding splendour, as though He had entered a bright Cloud. A voice was heard from the Cloud saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him (Mt. 17:5). After the Lord was baptized in the Jordan the heavens were opened and the same voice came out of that glory (Mt. 3:16-17); that glory which Stephen later saw when, full of the Spirit, the heavens opened to him, and he looked up (Acts 7:55-56). Now this voice is heard out of the Cloud overshadowing Jesus, so this Cloud must be the same as God's celestial glory. How, then, can this heavenly light be a normal, visible light?

12. The Father's voice from the Cloud taught that all things before the coming of Our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, the sacrifices, the proclamation of laws, the adoption of sons, were imperfect and were neither established nor performed according to the will of God at that time, but were permitted because of the advent and manifestation of the Lord that was to come. He is the beloved Son, in Whom God is well pleased (cf. Mt. 17:5), upon Whom He rests and with Whom He is completely satisfied. So He exhorts us to listen to His Son and obey Him. If He says "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life," listen to Him (Mt. 17:13-14). And if He tells you that this light is the kingdom of God, hear Him and believe Him, and make yourselves worthy of such a light.

13. When the bright cloud appeared and the voice of the Father sounded forth from it, the disciples, it says, fell on their faces (Mt. 17:6). This was not on account of the voice, because the same thing had happened on many other occasions, not just at the Jordan, but also in Jerusalem when the saving Passion was at hand. For the Lord said, "Father glorify Thy Name. Then came a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again" (John 12:28). The whole multitude heard this, but none of

them fell to the ground. But here there was not just a voice, but with the voice limitless light blazed forth. That is why the God-bearing Fathers rightly recognized that the disciples fell on their faces, not because of the voice, but because of that extraordinary uncreated light. As Mark tells us, they were frightened even before the voice came (Mk. 9:6), obviously on account of the divine manifestation.

14. But when, for all these reasons, it clearly appeared that this light is divine, supernatural and uncreated, what befalls those who are excessively taken up with secular, non-spiritual learning, and who are incapable of understanding the things of the Spirit? They fall down a different chasm, for they say that the light is not the divine glory, nor the kingdom of God, His beauty, His grace, or His radiance, as we have been taught by God and the Theologians, but affirm instead that what they formerly claimed was visible and created light is God's essence.¹ In the Gospels the Lord tells us that this

¹ St Gregory is referring here to an 'about-face' in the contentions of his theological adversaries, Barlaam, Akindynus et al., advocates of the thought of Thomas Aquinas. In the early stages of their attack against Orthodoxy (1337-1351), that is, in the disputations with Barlaam the Calabrian, which culminated in the defeat of Barlaam in the first of the three councils at Constantinople, in 1341, the anti-Orthodox camp maintained that the divine and supranatural Light of Christ is both sensible and created; whereas later, upon being persuaded by the Patristic citations produced by St Gregory, they were persuaded that the Light of Christ is uncreated. This, sadly, was no advance in their position for they then insisted on identifying the divine light with the essence of God. St Gregory wrote his 35th Homily against this latter mistaken position.

In this St Gregory's adversaries were following what may be described as an *essentialist* line of thought, which also happens to be the general perspective adopted by the post-Augustinian, non-Orthodox tradition in the west. Based on a rigorist dialectical focus on the divine simplicity, those who held the essentialist position were led to the conclusion that anything that is not be divine essence cannot be identified with God in Himself, and must be created. Conversely, anything that is uncreated, and therefore identifiable with God's very being, must refer to His essence, since in God there can be nothing other than essence or substance (cf. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), e.g. *On the Trinity* IX. i, 8, and *De Fide et Symbolo* 19). So, either the Light of Tabor is not a revelation of the divine essence, and therefore created, or it is uncreated and therefore a manifestation of the divine essence.

The Orthodox Fathers teach that the uncreated light of Mount Tabor is the light of the Divine Energies.

Father Michael Azkoul's Conclusion to "The Influence of Augustine of Hippo on the Orthodox Church" ©1990 ISBN 0-88946-733-1 (pp. 265-271 ends with these lines, "The West must return to the Fathers." Vernon J. Bourke's "The Essential Augustine" © 1964-1974 (No ISBN is available in my copy) is available on line.

glory is shared not only by Himself and the Father, but also by the holy angels. As the godly Luke writes, “Whosoever shall be ashamed of Me and of My words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when He shall come in His own glory, and in His Father’s, and of the holy angels” (Lk. 9:26). Consequently, those who assert that this glory is God’s essence say that the essence of both God and the angels is the same, which is the extreme limit of profanity.

15. Not only angels, but the saints among men are partakers in this glory and the kingdom. But whereas the Father and the Son with the divine Spirit have this glory and kingdom by nature, holy angels and men have them by grace, receiving radiance from that Source. That both Moses and Elijah were seen with the Lord in the same glory proves this to us (Mt. 17:3). Nor was it just on Tabor that Moses appeared as a partaker of God’s splendour, but also on that occasion when his face was so glorified that the Israelites could not look at it (Ex. 34:29-30; 2 Cor. 3:7). This is demonstrated by the theologian who said that Moses received the Father’s immortal glory in his mortal face, and by another who contradicted Eunomius, when the latter said that “the glory of the Almighty was not passed on to the Son, (Eunomius of Cyzicus d. 394 *Confession of Faith* by saying that “even if they were speaking about Moses, he could not tolerate such a statement” (From St. Gregory of Nyssa’s *Refutation of Eunomius’ Confession of Faith* 120, *vulgo, Against Eunomius II* (PG 45:521A)).

16. The glory, kingdom and radiance shared by God and His saints are one and the same. That is why the Psalmist and Prophet sings, “Let the brightness of the Lord our God be upon us” (Ps. 90:17 LXX). But no one has yet dared to say that God shares one and the same essence with His saints. The one divine splendour is seen now on the mountain to be common to the Word’s divinity and His Flesh, but that His divinity and flesh have a common essence is an assertion of Eutyches and Dioscorus, not of those who want to be godly. All will see that glory and brightness when the Lord appears, shining from the east to the west (cf. Mt. 24:27), but those who went up with Jesus have seen them already. Nobody, however, has stood in the substance and essence of God (cf. Jer. 23:18 LXX), and seen or declared His nature. The divine light is given by measure and is received to a greater or lesser extent, being distributed, undividedly divided, according to the worthiness of the recipients. The proof of this is near at hand. Whereas the Lord’s face shone more than the sun, His clothes became shining and white as snow. Both Moses and Elijah were seen in this same glory, but neither of them

shone like the sun. And the disciples themselves were able to see that light, but not to gaze at it.

17. Thus is this light measured out and distributed, while remaining entire, and is received more by some, less by others. It is known partly now, partly later, so Paul says, “We know in part, and we prophesy in part” (1 Cor. 13:9). By contrast God’s essence is absolutely indivisible and incomprehensible, and no other being can receive it, either to a greater or lesser extent. Only the accursed Messalians think otherwise, supposing that God’s essence can be seen by those among them who are worthy. We, however, turn aside from heretics of earlier ages and out own and believe, as we were taught, that the divine kingdom, glory, splendour, ineffable light, and divine grace can be seen and shared by the saints, but not God’s essence. So let us make our way towards the radiance of the light of grace, that we may acknowledge and venerate the threefold Godhead, Who shines with a single indescribable radiance from one nature in three persons. Let us lift up the eyes of our understanding to the Word Who now sits, with His Body, above the vaults of heaven. And He Who sits in divine splendour on the right hand of majesty, utters these words to us as if from afar, “If anyone wants to stand in the presence of this glory, let him imitate Me as far as he can, and follow the way and manner of life I taught on earth.”

18. Let us look with our inner eyes at this great spectacle, our nature, which dwells for all eternity with the immaterial fire of the divinity. Let us take off the coat of skins (cf. Gen. 3:21), the earthly and carnal ways of thinking, in which we were clothed because of our transgression, and stand on holy ground (cf. Ex. 3:5), each one of us hollowing our own ground by means of virtue and reaching up to God. In this way we shall have boldness when God comes in light, and as we run to Him we shall be enlightened, and, once illumined, shall live forever to the glory of the One brightness in Three Suns, now and forever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

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(Migne. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Graeca. Tomus 151: Homilia XXXV: columna 424-436. In venerabilem Domini et Dei ac Salvatoris nostri Jesu Christi Transformationem; ubi probatur quod in ea est Lumen, increatum esse).*