

The Life: The Orthodox Doctrine of Salvation

Clark Carlton

Regina Orthodox Press, Salisbury, MA, 2000

190 pages, \$22.95

In this world, our way of life as Christians must needs be different from that of all other men. It will be different because our life is an application, a reflection of what we believe; and our faith is radically different from any other. As Fr. George Florovsky would say when he introduced his course on comparative religions, “If Christianity is a religion, then there are no other religions. If there are other religions, then Christianity is not a religion.”

Mr. Carlton has demonstrated the truth of these statements simply, clearly, and without polemics through the sacred history of salvation in the Church. In Part One, “Explaining salvation according to the beliefs of the Orthodox Church,” he begins with the soul of every man and its relation to God and creation. He orders the subjects of his exposition in imitation of academic categories—the Creation of Man, the Fall of Man, the Person of Christ, etc. These heads never limit him to a rigid category; his subjects flow smoothly with a natural progression. Theology is always joined to practical application and the explanations appeal to common experience.

In the second part of the book, he demonstrates the importance of doctrine among the Orthodox generally. Further on, the deviations of the doctrines concerning salvation among the Roman Catholics and Protestants are made plain. His chapter on satisfaction contains a valuable bonus. He proves that Nicholas Cabasilas did not accept the satisfaction theories of Anselm and Aquinas, even though he used Western terminology, probably because the Latins were attacking the Orthodox with these concepts foreign to the Church. Cabasilas, while using these foreign terms, did not narrow his answer to scholastic limits, but set it in the entire context of the Incarnation and Orthodox theology. His Orthodox redefinition of the terms is based on Scripture, having God’s glory and honor refer directly to the divine love and goodness rather than to the divine justice.

There are many ways of describing the Lord’s work of our salvation. Human language before the height and depth of this mystery can only be a metaphor. Gratitude is due to Mr. Carlton for removing unjustified reproach from the godly Nicholas Cabasilas.

On some points, we could have wished that more were said or, at times, that better phrasing, examples or expressions were used; but every book should be evaluated by the goals and limits set by the author. Mr. Carlton wished to write a simple exposition of the doctrine of salvation accessible to everyone. He has succeeded quite well. To ask that he had written it the way someone else might have would be unjustifiable quibbling.

Writing in a popular style, however, can unwittingly lead to superficial, careless expressions which deeper thought or more extensive research would have corrected. We present these minor flaws in an otherwise estimable work.

On page twenty-two, Mr. Carlton states, “In the Bible, a name is much more than a tag to distinguish one thing from another. A name reveals something about the very essence of a thing. Thus to name something implies a deep, personal knowledge of that thing.” Mr. Carlton was not discussing epistemology, so perhaps he overstated himself in trying to make a point; yet the words as they stand are not Orthodox doctrine. They are reminiscent of Western scholasticism and the magical thinking that engendered it. Names are human labels and do not reveal the essence of anything, neither God, man, or beast. St. Gregory of Nyssa, especially in his works against Eunomius, St. Gregory Palamas, and all the Fathers refute such thinking.

On page sixty-six, Mr. Carlton writes, “God is love (1 John 4:8): this is not a description of God but a definition.” Perhaps he was trying for a pithy phrase, but as said, it is wrong or meaningless. First, we can never define God, which is the reason why the Eunomian heresy was condemned. Secondly, what is really the difference between a definition and a description in matters concerning God and creation? The definitions of science are really descriptions of observed phenomena in various conditions and circumstances. A definition which seeks to determine and designate the essence of anything is false, just as much for created things as for the Lord Almighty. Of created things, more subtle and refined observations of properties and characteristics may approach a definition—aside from the given that it is created—but there can never be a definition of God’s uncreated essence.

The points mentioned do not detract from the value of the book on the plane for which it is intended. We mention them for Mr. Carlton’s sake, whose sincerity and

reasonableness illumine this book and who obviously desires ever to progress in the life of theology, and also for the sake of the reader who wishes the same.

Also in this section, there is some discussion upon a subject, which has engendered controversy, but which Mr. Carlton has handled in an even-handed, sensible manner, in spite of the unfortunately impassioned rhetoric and vehemence aroused by the subject. It is the matter of the “toll-houses” as described and defined in Fr. Seraphim Rose’s book *The Soul After Death*. His principal published critics are Fr. Lev (now Bishop Lazar) Puhalo, (*The Soul, the Body and Death*), and Fr. Michael Azkoul.

As Mr. Carlton has shown in his treatment of Nicholas Cabasilas, like terms may have dramatically opposed meanings, depending on fundamental perspectives and definitions. Such is true in the “toll-house” matter, and some clarification is required. Also some historical facts Mr. Carlton is apparently not aware of will be brought forward.

In preliminary, we must mention two general considerations which are fundamental to the entire subject. First, we must consider the origin of the revelations of the toll-houses. Aside from *The Life of Elder Basil the New*, they are mentioned rarely in the hymnody of the Church and other writings, and with little detail. However, in the case of the Church’s writings, they refer to the expiring consciousness of the dying man and also to the devil’s last attempt to shake the man’s trust in God through fear.

The death of the righteous monk Stephen mentioned in the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* by St. John of the Ladder is an excellent example of how the “toll-houses” are understood in the Orthodox Church.

On the day before his death, he went into ecstasy of mind, and with open eyes he looked to the right and left of his bed and, as if he were being called to account by someone, in the hearing of all the bystanders, he said: ‘Yes indeed, that is true; but that is why I fasted for so many years.’ And then again: ‘Yes, it is quite true but I wept and served the brethren.’ And again: ‘No, you are slandering me.’ And sometimes he would say: ‘Yes, it is true. Yes, I do not know what to say to this. But in God there is mercy.’ And it was truly an awful and horrible sight—this invisible and merciless inquisition. And what was most terrible, he was accused of what he had not done. How amazing! Of several of his sins, the hesychast and hermit said: ‘I do not know what to say to this,’ although he had been a monk for nearly forty years and had the gift of tears. Alas, alas! Where then was the voice of Ezekiel to say to the demons: ‘As I find you, I will judge you,’ saith God. Truly he could make no such defence. Why? Glory be to Him who alone knows! And some, as before the Lord, told me that he even fed

a leopard from his hands in the desert. And while being thus called to account, he was parted from his body, leaving us in uncertainty as to his judgment, or end, or sentence, or how the trial ended. (Step 7:50)

In addition, the devil also tempts the dying man with the remembrance of former sins so that he might die in the murk of his passions and not in the divine light. Having his thoughts directed to earthly things, he, while clinging to them, might depart unwillingly and with difficulty<sup>1</sup>. Such a death, might, without charity, be considered a rejection of God at the end. For this reason the Church prays in the long prayer to the Virgin Mother at the end of Small Compline: “and in the hour of my departure, to care for my wretched soul, and drive far from it the dark countenances of evil demons.” God’s mercy, however, has declared all whose end is uncertain to be souls under judgment. We might say, in human terms, they have been granted a stay of judgment and a better chance on the Last Day. Then their whole life and the effectual prayers of others will be taken into account.

The toll-houses as described above from texts of the Church are the reason for prescribing that even those excommunicated under penance are granted divine communion at the threat of death. If they should live, the penance is again imposed.

The toll-houses which Fr. Seraphim advocates are taken from a “religious narrative”: *The Life of the Elder Basil the New*, written by Gregory of Thrace in the middle of the tenth century. Three-quarters of this work are filled with the bizarre visions seen by Gregory. Also the verbal portrait of Basil is anomalous, describing many of his strange, irrational actions and words. Theodora, Basil’s servant, also makes statements contrary to Church doctrine. This work was rejected and condemned by the Byzantine Church because of its many errors and delusions, notably about the Second Coming, and its obvious Bogomil influence. It entered Orthodoxy through the Russian Church—which has listed Basil and Theodora among the Saints—after two-thirds of the narrative was deleted and the rest reworked in order to make it less objectionable. Conclusively, this novel description of the toll-houses has no legitimate Church source.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the Life of St. Anthony the Great by St. Athanasius and in the life of St. Euthymius the Great by Cyril Scythopolis, the aerial demons are mentioned in their attempts to hinder the soul’s communion and its departure to God. This is mentioned as being at the point of death and the visions are an obvious metaphor of this truth. There is no possible understanding of a toll-house payment, but only of hindrance as we have described in the text.

Granted, many might say that it is only a literary expression, a metaphor or rhetorical device. Nevertheless—and this is our second point—the metaphor must be analogous to the reality it expresses or it will be meaningless and delusive. The narrative of Theodora speaks of an “excess of virtues” which Basil gives somehow to Theodora and Gregory to pay off and expunge their sins, even though many were not confessed. This not only introduces the doctrine of meritorious works, but the even more heinous doctrine of “works of supererogation.” On account of this vision, Roman Catholic writers have claimed that the Orthodox Church also teaches the doctrine of purgatory but in a somewhat primitive manner, since it has no pope to distribute the merits more efficiently.

This narrative written by Gregory abounds in blasphemous content. For example, Gregory is rescued from the chasm of death by the recitation of names and formulas with which he has been instructed; then he is anointed with Basil’s grace to become a son of God. Furthermore, Gregory is not sure whether the Christians or Jews are right until he looks upon the actual face of God the Father. Leaving aside these self-evident blasphemies in the original, if we interpret the visions as a metaphor, by analogy, they do away with the Last Judgment. Man is judged by the devil and not by God, and he ascends to his reward (or damnation) immediately forty days after his death rather than at the end of time in the Last Day. The question arises: Why keep such a metaphor if its figures present alien doctrines condemned by the Church?

Church doctrine is explicit: Death is the cessation of all labor and striving and the life of each person is sealed for judgment. God is life itself and the source of all life. As Lord, God ordains the hour of death in which the soul is taken from the body and kept by Him Who gave it, while the body returns to the earth from which it was taken. The soul is the life of the body. Indeed, in Scripture, the word ψυχή (soul) occasionally can only mean life and is so translated. At the Last Judgment, both body and soul shall be reunited and all mankind shall stand before the divine throne to receive the recompense of their labors.

“Standing before the divine throne” is also a metaphor for a reality which surpasses our understanding, but at least this metaphor is from the Gospels. The analogy of the foregoing metaphor, however, describes a different reality from that in the visions of Gregory, Basil, and Theodora.

The historical facts which Mr. Carlton could not have been privy to happened before the publication of *The Soul After Death*. Portions of this book had been previously printed in the *Orthodox Word*. Many friends of Fr. Seraphim wrote to advise him that the toll-house doctrine he was espousing was of Bogomil origin and was not consonant with the Church's doctrine. Furthermore, his discussion of near-death experiences and, more particularly, of out-of-body experiences (upon which his toll-house doctrine is founded) are rejected by the Church, for they are incompatible with Christian anthropology. No experience can be outside the body. If it appears to be such, it is either a failure of self-perception or a demonic illusion. Saints Ephraim, Isaac the Syrian, Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory Palamas have most notably written concerning this matter, but all the fathers who taught of imageless and pure prayer, insisted that with sober vigilance we must concentrate our attention and bring it within ourselves, into the heart, and there confine it. "For the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). They specifically warn of the danger arising from allowing our attention and consciousness to be directed outwards, away from our heart. The consequence is demonic delusion and captivity.

Fr. Seraphim, however, stalwartly disregarded their friendly advice and not only proceeded to publish his book but unilaterally declared that what he presented was the only true Orthodox doctrine. A reaction contradicting and correcting him was only natural.

The reason for mentioning another historical fact is found on page 184 of *The Life*, both in the text and in its footnote, no. 18. First, in the text, Mr. Carlton very moderately states, "In short, therefore, the tradition of the Church taken as a whole weighs against the idea that the soul dissolves at death and is recreated at the resurrection." It should have rather been stated that the Church's formulations and the writings of the Holy Fathers always roundly deny such a teaching. It is manifestly condemned in the "Chapters Against John Italus" in the *Synodicon of Orthodoxy*. When the death of the soul is spoken of, it means departure or distance from God, Who is life. It does not mean non-existence. The great need for historical clarification, however, is most plainly revealed in footnote 18 to the text on page 184. The footnote reads: "The same would apply to the notion of 'soul sleep'."

Mr. Carlton, having read *The Soul After Death*, has trustingly accepted that Fr. Seraphim's statements concerning "soul sleep" and its condemnation were founded upon historical Orthodox doctrine and tradition. Yet Fr. Seraphim's claim that such a doctrine is condemned by the Church has no reference or citation. Even though he quotes the Greek word ὑπνοψυχίται, *hypnopsychitai*, (i.e. the condemned followers of the doctrine of "soul sleep"), this word is found in no Greek dictionary or lexicon. It is found in no patristic or liturgical text. This supposed heresy of "soul sleep" is in no ancient listing of heresies, such as St. John Damascene's, or in any modern one. No Father or Church writer has written anything condemning such a heresy. As far as is known, Fr. Seraphim Rose is the first to detect, name, and condemn this heresy. Frank Gavin, an Anglican religious author published in the early twentieth century, was probably the inventor of this term.

In the Old Testament, we find in Deuteronomy, "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Behold, the days of thy death are at hand'" (31:14); and a little later, "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Behold, thou shalt sleep with thy fathers'" (31:16). Again God speaks to King David through the Prophet Nathan, "And it shall come to pass when thy days shall have been fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers" (II Kings 7:12). In III Kings 1:21, "my lord the king shall sleep with his fathers." "And David slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David" (III Kings 2:10). "And Ader heard in Egypt that David slept with his fathers" (III Kings 11:21). "And Solomon slept with his fathers, and they buried in the city of David his father" (III Kings 11:43). "In their heat I will give them a draught, and make them drunk, that they may be stupefied, and sleep an everlasting sleep, and not awake, saith the Lord" (Jeremias 28:39). These examples and many more in the Septuagint are clear evidence that sleep was often a synonym for death, especially for the death of the righteous; "the sleep of the just" is an oft used phrase meaning the repose of the righteous departed.

After our Lord's resurrection, bodily death no longer induced that terrible fear of man's departing to the eternal dark realm from which there was no return, where the voiceless shades or souls dwelt in unrelenting darkness in that eternal prison whether named Hades, Hell, Tartarus, Avernus, Sheol, Erebus, Gehenna, Abbadon, Topheth, *etc.* Christ had burst the gates of Hades asunder and thrown down the iron bars: the way to

freedom and resurrection was now open. Christians began to understand the meaning of the premonitions and shadows in the Scriptures through the illumination of Christ. Bodily death for mankind is a sleep. “And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after His resurrection” (Matt. 27:52-53). “For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” (II Peter 3:4). “Of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep” (I Cor. 15:6). “For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: and if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished” (I Cor. 15:16-18). “But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept” (I Cor. 15:20). “Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light” (Eph. 5:14). “But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. ... and the dead in Christ shall rise first” (I Thess. 4:13-14, 16). “Whether we wake or sleep” (I Thess. 5:10), that is whether we are alive in the body in this world or dead in the body. Finally, aside from the above selection of passages, the very words of our Lord confirm the word “sleep” as a synonym for death. “After that He saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. Then said His disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well. Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that He had spoken of taking of rest in sleep. Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead” (John 11:11-14).

The Church has been calling death a sleep for thousands of years, but more prominently and with understanding in the New Dispensation. In many prayers we hear the common phrase: “for all our fathers and brethren who have fallen asleep in the hope of resurrection unto life everlasting.” The phrase “gone to their rest before us” is also commonly heard. These phrases are translations of the Greek προκεικοιμημένων or προαναπαυσασμένων which mean sleep or repose and rest, exactly as they are used in the Scriptures when they refer to death.

Furthermore, a graveyard is called a cemetery in English. The word is from the Greek κοιμητήριον, which literally means “a place for sleep” or “a bedroom”. The word

was first applied by the Christians to tombs, or burial places, which were generally known formerly as a necropolis or a graveyard. The word cemetery was widespread from such an early time that it was transliterated into other languages rather than translated. If Latin had been in such widespread use, a cemetery would now be called a dormitory.

Obviously, there can be no objection to saying sleep instead of death, especially for the death of Christians. Thousands of instances in Scripture, in the Fathers, in the hymns and prayers of the Church testify to the continuing life of the soul after death and its sleep, which is inactivity, life in stasis, rest, and a suspension of consciousness. Sleep is not non-existence. The last trump awakes us from sleep for the new day of our Lord. We are speaking in metaphors, but this metaphor of sleeping and waking is given us by the Saints and Scripture. If we are to be awakened, what was sleeping? The body returned to the dust from which it was taken, so it is the soul which sleeps.

St. Isaac the Syrian in his “Ascetical Homily Thirty-seven” (pg. 180), clearly describes the separation of soul and body and the differing states of each. “He suddenly translates us from hence by death and keeps us for no small time in insensibility and motionlessness...[He] permits our structures to dissolve, perish, and melt away, until the human frame completely ceases to be.”

St. Ephraim the Syrian declares that on the day of his death, man falls into a stupor or stillness, a very deep form of sleep.

A man’s thinking, which is  
A wheel of all his motions,  
[That day] binds fast by stupor  
And stills by silence.  
Do Thou deem it worthy of Thy Kingdom!  
Do Thou, my Lord, awake him!

(Nisibean Hymn 72, verse 10)

We need not discuss questions of the degree of repose of the soul during this sleep, or of any comfort or distress the soul may perceive. These are mysteries which “neither have entered into the heart of men” (I Cor. 2:9) and upon which the Church has not dogmatized. Nor have the Saints, whose souls awoke unto the Lord (Canticle 5:2) before the grave, delivered definitions to us. We only know and confess that every man must die into the sleep of death and then awake again alive, *i.e.*, with soul and body conjoined as he was before death, to receive recompense for the deeds in his lifetime.

The anthropology of the Church is founded strictly upon Scripture and the teachings of the Saints. Man exists as an entity with body and soul inextricably joined and mutually dependent. Alone, the soul is a ghost; alone, the body is a corpse. Only together can they be called man.

Few have expounded the nature of man as clearly and graphically as St. Ephraim the Syrian.

The soul by the body's mouth  
Offered up her prayer to the All-hearing One.  
By its hands she lent alms  
To Him that bestows all.  
With its eyes she read Scripture  
And with its ears she heard teaching.  
By its feet she entered the door  
And ministered in the house [of God].  
See by experience that the soul  
Only exists completely in the body!  
Blessed be He that made the soul so needy  
That she will magnify her consort.  
May both body and soul, my Lord,  
Chant hymns in Thy Paradise!

(Nisibean Hymn 47, verse 4)

In that place of joy an anxiety overcame me,  
For it is not profitable to delve into mysteries.  
With respect to the thief a question came to me:  
If the soul were able to see and to hear  
Bereft of the body, then why would she be enclosed therein?  
And if she could live without the body, why should she die with the body?  
Deem me worthy, that in Thy Kingdom, we should have an inheritance!

That the soul is unable to see without the body  
The body itself gives the proof; for when it is blind,  
With it the soul is also blind, and she with it feels her way.  
Behold how both the soul and the body look and attest to one another:  
Even as the body must have the soul so as to live,  
So must the soul have the body to see and hear.  
Deem me worthy, that in Thy Kingdom, we should have an inheritance!

If the body is deprived of speech, with it the soul is also dumb:  
And furthermore she grows delirious when the body reels with sickness.  
Even though the soul exists of herself and by herself,  
Yet without her companion, she lacks her full existence.  
She is, then, in truth like unto an embryo within the maternal womb:  
Possessing life, she is bereft of word and thought.  
Deem me worthy, that in Thy Kingdom, we should have an inheritance!

If, therefore, whilst abiding in the body, the soul is like unto an embryo,  
And she can know neither herself nor her companion,  
How much more feeble shall she be when she has taken leave of the body!  
For then she no longer has either by herself [alone] or in herself  
Any sense perceptions that she might utilize as implements,  
Because it is by the senses of her companion that she manifests herself and  
becomes visible.  
Deem me worthy, that in Thy Kingdom, we should have an inheritance!

That blessed dwelling knows no deficiency,  
For that land of plenitude is in every wise perfect.  
The soul, therefore, cannot enter therein alone,  
Since she is found lacking in both perception and knowledge.  
But on the day of the Resurrection  
The body with all its senses shall in its perfection enter into Paradise.  
Deem me worthy, that in Thy Kingdom, we should have an inheritance!  
(Eighth Hymn on Paradise, verses 3-7)

The Christian doctrine of man's nature summed up in the above two quotations maintains the inextricable unity of man's compound nature: a nature composed of two created substances, matter and spirit. Death which sunders this indissoluble bond is an economy, an extreme dispensation of God for our benefit; a dispensation only the Creator could grant "in order that evil might not become immortal" in the words of St. Gregory the Theologian and all the Fathers. "Thou, O God, in Thy love for man, hast decreed this dissolution and that this indissoluble bond be severed by Thy divine will in order that evil not become immortal." (Εὐχὴ εἰς Ψυχοῦρῶγαοῦντα, [Prayer for the Departure of a Tormented Soul] Ἀγιασματάριον, τοῦ Φοίνικος, Phoenix Press, Venice, 1853). In the first prayer for forgiveness in the monastic funeral service, shortly before the last kiss, "Thou gavest command, as the God of our Fathers, in order to prevent evil from becoming immortal, and didst decree that this composite and mixture, this bond which Thou madest for joining soul and body inseparably, should be sundered by Thy divine will and be dissolved." The teaching that death prevents the eternal rule of evil is a commonplace in patristic literature and is continuous down to Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

The unity of man is such that only when he is complete—body and soul together—can he perceive the higher realities, the good things promised us by God. All of our Lord's promises, the rewards promised the Just, are granted fully only after the General Resurrection and the Judgment. When the Saints receive their full recompense, when the Righteous enter the Kingdom, and the Virgins awake and enter the Bridal

Chamber, only then is our joy complete and entire when body and soul have been joined. Indeed, the Virgin Mother is called most blessed because she has transcended time and created nature and is now, body and soul, in paradise as the first fruits of resurrected mankind. If her soul were sufficient, her bodily assumption after her dormition would not have taken place. If the soul is released at death from the prison of the body, why reimprison her who is more honorable than the cherubim?

Herein is the great divide between Christian anthropology and worldly philosophy. While both may believe in matter and spirit, only Christians believe that man's existence is the nexus of the two states of being. Only at that point is he truly man, as we have said, since this is how God created him. Platonism, (and Greek philosophy in general), Hinduism, Buddhism, the Gnostics and Manicheans, all believed that only the soul or spirit was really the essential man (true man in himself) but trapped in a material body. According to them, man would be able to perceive and understand the real world only when he was released from his enmeshment with matter, most particularly at death. This dualistic anthropology represents the response of every religion and philosophy in the world to the Christian revelation. Even materialism, which declares that what is called spirit is merely an epiphenomenon of matter and ceases to exist in man at the disorganization of death, yet preserves the prejudices and beliefs of its predecessors in philosophy. In refuting them, they simply go to the other extreme and say that man is essentially matter. The world's religions are in agreement with the philosophers, being inspired by the same spirit and founded upon man's reasoning and intellect. The Church's doctrine is unique and founded upon the revelation of God.<sup>2</sup>

The soul is not the definition of man; man is more than the soul. "Let us make man," said the Lord, and He created man body and soul. We repeat: man exists when body and soul are united. The above quotations from St. Ephraim and the funeral services prove it. In Scripture, the word "soul", ψυχή often can only be understood as meaning "life", as we have said, and it is so translated in the phrase πᾶσα ψυχή (all life). The root

---

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the composition of man according to the Euchologion and proof that the Church has founded her beliefs upon a Hebraic—that is, a Biblical—and not a Hellenistic anthropology, see "Man and His True Life," John S. Romanides, *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Greek Orthodox Theological Institute Press, [now Holy Cross School of Theology], Brookline, Mass., Vol. 1, no 1, August, 1954, pp. 63-83.

meaning of ψυχή is breath. From there it developed into meaning life. When Scripture speaks of the soul of grass and vegetation, and of animals, it can only mean “life.” Through the ages, the word soul has gathered many meanings and connotations, but all have sprung from its base meaning of life. It is not the whole man, but the life of the man. “Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matt. 22:37). St. Gregory of Nyssa interprets the above Scripture to mean that man is blended of every form of ψυχή or life. Man is nourished by the vegetative soul or life. In the corporeal existence of his body, which is indicated by the word heart, he perceives with the sensitive or sensory part, which is termed soul, and reasons by the intellectual power, indicated by the word spirit. The same division is found in I Thessalonians 5:23. “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” For St. Gregory, man is whole only when he is a unity of body and soul; certainly from the above we can see that he does not identify the essential man as being the soul. Indeed, he says that the hands are part of the rational nature. If we did not have hands we would not be reasoning creatures (*On the Making of Man*, chap. 8, 9, 10).

Furthermore, the quotations from the Apostle Paul have shown that the soul is not the complete man, indeed it might even be called a lower part since our life arises from our animal nature: what St. Gregory called our vegetative soul. In any case, the soul is not man in himself. St. Paul uses the word ψυχικός, which is an adjectival form of ψυχή. It refers to his division of mankind into carnal man, natural, and spiritual (I Cor. 2:6ff). The word “natural” here is ψυχικός, and would be translated as animal, but for English readers that would tend to deny the reasoning ability of man. It means the man who lives for this life, the life of this created world, and does not acknowledge, perceive, or understand the things of the Spirit. The carnal man is given over to the life of the senses and the passions and pleasures and does not exhibit a rational behavior. The point is, that the word “soul” refers to the life of the man, but not necessarily to the higher perceptions and manifestations. “But the natural man (ψυχικός) receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (I Cor. 2:14ff).

From all that we have said, Scripture does not define man as being his soul; rather the soul is more often associated with the lower parts of nature or, at best, the intermediate. In any case, the true man is to be considered a living whole, compounded of body, soul, and spirit. The important matter is the living unity or whole. The indicated divisions are helpful more as aids to understanding rather than actual description of a reality which St. John Damascene declares as being beyond our comprehension.

When St. Paul says “whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;” (II Cor. 12:2), the premises of philosophy force the assumption that St. Paul’s soul must have been freed from the chains of his flesh and was then able to perceive heavenly and divine visions. Such a conclusion is unwarranted, however, since the words must be interpreted rather on the premises of Scripture. Grace imbued the Apostle, refined and strengthened his spiritual perceptions so that he surpassed what mankind normally experiences. Grace so lightened the quotidian burden of man’s fallen nature that he felt light and disembodied, for the demands of the fallen, carnal or earthly man were expunged by grace. He clarifies this matter further when he states, “For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life” (II Cor. 5:4).

St. Symeon the New Theologian, in his first great rapture in the Holy Spirit, wrote that he knew not if he were in the body or out. At the third experience, however, after he had been more refined and his perceptions were sharpened, he declared firmly that he was in the body and the perception was within. He taught so throughout his life.

Also, the New Martyr St. James the Elder (Feastday Nov. 1) reports that his visions, which finally led to his perception of all creation, were in the body.

St. Gregory Palamas states categorically that any vision or movement of the soul “outside” the body is a deception of the devil. Only what is perceived within (“the kingdom of God is within you” Luke 17:21), only what is perceived by the whole man, is of God.

Any true experience is perceived by the whole man, even if it should appear to be only mental or of the soul, for a man must function as a whole or a unity. No part will be in isolation but will affect or be affected by everything it is part of.

The dualistic philosophy of the West has now become so extreme that they often dismiss any physical influence upon things considered to be spiritual. For example, ascetical struggle has now no connection with prayer. Chastity or other physical considerations of a moral and ethical nature are deemed of little importance for the spiritual life. Occasionally, there are Christian remnants which some people try to insist upon as being important, but these are for them legalistic imperatives rather than integral requirements of the life in God. Even when some dualists deem it necessary to be “fulfilled” physically, to have a full natural life in the body so that one can progress spiritually, there yet remains a division. They believe that first one gives the body its due, and then one proceeds to spiritual endeavors. Each realm is separate with no interdependence or interaction. Any material consideration in spiritual development is ruled out: the spirit is all. Generally speaking, these men do not understand the absolute and definitive necessity, arising from the body’s intrinsic union with the soul, for a combined physical and spiritual striving: man must be purified soul and body if he should desire to achieve some spiritual goal.

The ascetical striving demanded of the Church is viewed by these new dualists as being primitive and gross, as an undeveloped understanding which has not yet progressed to the heights of the spirit but is still mired in the material. Such “spiritual” people do not accept that ascetical, physical struggle is necessary and not an option, that this is the way of the Cross, the pattern given us by Christ. Believing the philosophic assumption that the essence of man is his soul results only in a completely distorted understanding of man, salvation, Scripture and the Church. The Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches with the various modern schools of scientific thought, and diverse fads and cults are a living demonstration that the foregoing statements are true.

Our holy Fathers established themselves upon the revealed Faith by grace and do not stray from the Biblical understanding of man. On account of their audience, they might often use philosophic terms, but the definition of these terms was always from the Scriptures and not from dialectical reasoning. As St. John Damascene declared: the body is contained in the soul (*Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 1:13), thus refuting the pagan idea that the body is the prison of the soul.

Father Seraphim Rose was fascinated with Out of Body Experiences. He thought that they were a vindication of an anthropology which he considered to be Christian, but was actually scholastic philosophy. Unfortunately, whether the Aristotelian or Platonic school is preferred, it is still pagan Greek thought. This opinion that such experiences are valid and true rests on the premise that the soul when liberated from the prison of the body has a broader perception unhindered by the veil of the flesh. This clearer vision of the soul is supposedly enjoyed by everyone when separated from the flesh, whether by death or ecstatic trance. This assumption of Father Seraphim led him to credit many visions from dubious sources.

Any vision, apparition, revelation or whatever spiritual experience a man might have is undergone in the body; it is experienced by the whole man, according to Orthodox teaching. No one has creditably died and then returned to the body after several days, except St. Lazarus, the Seven Martyred Youths of Ephesus (Feastday August 4), and, of course, our Lord. St. Lazarus even underwent decomposition, showing that he had really died, whereas our Lord remained without decay since His body was joined indissolubly with the source of life. The Seven Youths of Ephesus were suffocated when walled up in a cave. They arose after 194 years, having suffered no decomposition. It seemed to them that they had slept for one night. None of the above reported on their experiences after death. Nor have those who were raised by our Lord, Elias, Elisseus, or other Saints left any word of their experiences. Some of the visions after death described in religious literature were recorded by people who were supposedly dead but were really in a coma, as we would say today. Their life or soul had not left them, since they did not decay, even though they may have remained in a deathlike state for many days or weeks. Therefore what they had experienced was experienced by the soul while in the body.

The provenance of these visions is another matter. They can either be from God or a delusion of the devil. There can be no other source since these visions claim to speak truly of matters beyond gross material affairs, of God's providence and ineffable operations, of our frame and constituent nature, and of heavenly natures. We might accept some natural perception of things distant in space from the perceiver—clairvoyance and clairaudience—because of a residual faculty from the creation of our pure nature. Yet even here diabolical influence can distort the understanding if we have

not been freed from our passions. In any case, only our God can give us a true revelation if He should will it. There is certainly no automatic extension of perception when the soul is “freed” from the body by death or by a supposed temporary separation. No one who has ever really died has left us any narration. Any supposed temporary death is an illusion of the deceiver for we cannot learn or perceive anything true if we are outside the body.

As we have seen, the Scriptures and the Saints have delivered to us two verities which must be accepted as axioms in our understanding of death. All men must die; and the manner of death is that the soul is sundered from the body and suffers a loss of perception, falling into a kind of sleep, but it is kept safe by God. The body then dissolves into its constituent elements, which are not lost or annihilated, but scattered. They continue to exist in scattered form, each particle known by God and bearing the seal of that human soul upon it, according to St. Gregory of Nyssa. Even the physicists believe that no energy is ever lost. The second axiom is that at the end of time every soul will be reunited with its body and stand before the Lord to receive its reward after an assessment of its life when alive. Of course, we preclude any gross literalism of the images given. For example, there will be no great books made of paper or whatnot in which our deeds were recorded, nonetheless it is certain that everything we have thought or done will be known and nothing will be hidden. In conclusion, these two verities cannot be ignored and must be fundamental in any discussion of the body, the soul, and death.

Death is the cessation of effort, a stasis of the will, an end of progress and change for a man since he has been sundered into his constituent elements. The body decomposes and is scattered, the soul becomes inert. Man awaits the resurrection, when he will again be whole—body and soul together—alive to progress in the way he has chosen; to progress no longer with effort, but by grace. He is at rest, laboring no longer, whether in blessedness or damnation. The prayers of the Church for the dead speak of giving rest to the departed in the land of the living or among the Saints, or in Paradise, etc. However, the intervention of the Last Judgment is always understood. The souls are waiting, in expectation of that day as they sleep. They cannot enter the land of the living, that is, receive their reward, until the general resurrection. Even the Saints have not fully received their reward and they long for that day. “I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they

cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, worthy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled” (Rev. 6:9-11). “And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect” (Heb. 11:39-40).

We have many indications, aside from the foregoing Scriptures, that the Saints after bodily death are yet truly alive and awake in God, although not yet in perfection. The relics of the Saints are also a powerful witness. They struggled and achieved their martyrdom for Christ, and He received them as purified servants and friends into His kingdom. The spiritual senses of their souls were purified and awake; their noetic senses were developed, becoming fully functional through their death for Christ. They died to Christ and so became alive in Him, whether through the perfect baptism of blood in martyrdom or through the lengthy baptism of tears in the struggles for longsuffering patience in asceticism and trials and temptations. “In your patience possess ye your souls” (Luke 21:19). “That ye not be slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (Heb. 6:12). “But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (Jas. 1:4). “Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him” (Jas. 1:12).

Funeral hymns are not used in the memorials of the Saints who are at rest. Although they have yet to achieve perfection, they are awake in full consciousness and anticipation of Paradise since they have received the earnest, the betrothal, of eternal life. Notwithstanding that we are under judgment, we also have received Christ’s promise; yet, unlike the Saints, we have not fully accepted and realized it in ourselves. Therefore we are awaiting our final disposition. Our prayer for ourselves and for all “those who have fallen asleep in the hope of the Resurrection and life everlasting” is that all may be

forgiven and that our awaiting for our final reward be a rest and sleep in peace and anticipation of vindication and not one of turmoil from insatiable passions and fear<sup>3</sup>.

Aside from the inadvertencies indicated in the foregoing, *The Life* can be recommended as an accessible introduction to the doctrine of salvation according to the Fathers of the Church. It is written clearly, and certainly not beyond the level suitable for serious high school students, and any adult who cannot devote a great deal of time for religious reading. It is short yet hits upon every important point.

---

<sup>3</sup> In the 22<sup>nd</sup> Homily of St. Macarius' *Spiritual Homilies*, he describes simply the seal which death imposes on man's life. If a man is guilty of sins, the demons and the powers of darkness are the company of his soul after death just as they were in life. Likewise, God's servants, who had angels and holy spirits as company in life, after death are surrounded by them and are brought to the Lord.