

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND ETHICS: A RESPONSE TO PHILIP S. KEANE

Philip Keane's thoughtful and suggestive paper discusses how pneumatology can address issues in moral theology and vice versa. He begins from the perspective of a rationalistic, philosophical Catholic moral theology and shows how it can be broadened and deepened through a fuller awareness of the Holy Spirit. His reflections reveal paths of thought leading in various directions, all of which invite further fruitful reflection. He discusses the mystery of transcendence in God and at the core of the human person and the presence and activity of the Trinity as a community of persons. He identifies the Holy Spirit as the source of deeper ethical understanding in the following areas: interpretation of the Bible and historical experience; moral insight through artistic creativity and imagination; repentance, asceticism, self-discipline, virtue and character; and prayer, liturgy, spiritual discernment and knowledge of God. I have been asked to make a response based on the theology and spirituality of the Orthodox Church. My impression is that many of Keane's insights resonate remarkably well with major themes in Eastern Christian teaching and practice. Let me suggest briefly how within the Orthodox tradition the Holy Spirit gathers into one the divergent pathways whose starting points Keane has so clearly signposted.

### THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SAINTS

St. Silouan the Athonite, a spiritual teacher of our own century, focuses on the indwelling and activity of the Holy Spirit as central to authentic spiritual life. Very significantly, his criterion for discerning the presence of the Spirit in a person's life and prayer is precisely an ethical one. He writes:

The Holy Spirit is love, and He gives the soul strength to love her enemies. And he who does not love his enemies does not know God. . . .

The Lord is a merciful Creator, having compassion for all. The Lord pities all sinners as a mother is compassionate with her children even when they take the wrong path. Where there is no love for enemies and sinners, the Spirit of the Lord is missing.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Essex, 1991) 105. This fine volume, published privately by the monastery Fr. Sophrony founded, contains expanded versions of his two earlier books on St. Silouan, *The Monk of Mount Athos* (Crestwood NY, 1973), and *Wisdom from Mount Athos* (Crestwood NY, 1974).

Love for enemies is one of the most difficult ethical commandments of Christ, and St. Silouan believes that it can only be fulfilled through the grace of the Holy Spirit. What he envisages is more than a rational determination to wish those who harm or offend us well. It is a deeply personal and heartfelt love for them which moves one to pray fervently with tears that God will grant them forgiveness, complete healing, knowledge of God and eternal participation in divine life with all the saints. Such love for enemies presupposes a profound transformation of the whole person, including intellect, imagination and all the depths of emotional experience, in which all of one's faculties are reoriented around the inmost core of one's being, the "heart" in the biblical and patristic sense.

To understand the magnitude of this transformation, one has only to recall the famous story of the 19th century Russian monk, St. Seraphim of Sarov, who taught that the purpose of Christian life is the "acquisition of the Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup> St. Seraphim appeared to his disciple Motovilov transfigured with divine light, his face more brilliant than the sun. The light was accompanied by an intense experience of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace. Neither of them was carried away by an "ecstasy;" their human faculties still functioned in ordinary ways. They continued their conversation. This revelation came in response to Motovilov's question regarding how one knows one is living in the Holy Spirit. The saint replied that both of them were in the Holy Spirit at that moment, otherwise his disciple could not have seen his transfiguration. Notice that even in this extraordinary account of bodily transfiguration, the Spirit's presence is discerned through the fruit of psychological and ethical wholeness, but something more is also involved, a profound participation in the mystery of divine life.<sup>3</sup>

Transformations such as those of St. Silouan and St. Seraphim can only be the work of the Holy Spirit, though they also require great ascetic and ethical effort and struggle on the part of one so transformed. Such a person's perceptions of everything differ from those of unsanctified fallen humans. He or she is united with Christ in the Holy Spirit and shares in Christ's love for all creation, including enemies and sinners. This entails an intense awareness of ontological communion among all human persons, so that love for neighbor as self arises naturally from an experience of the other's being as in some genuine sense distinct yet continuous with one's own.

Christian ethical conduct is thus a necessary and intrinsic part of a larger whole. The point is made beautifully in John 14. Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments," and again a little later, "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me" (vv. 15, 21). Love for Christ leads to ethical obedience, and ethical obedience leads to love for him.

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<sup>2</sup>Valentine Zander, *St. Seraphim of Sarov*, trans. Sister Gabriel Anne, S.S.C. (Crestwood NY, 1975) 65. See also Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, *St. Seraphim of Sarov: A Spiritual Biography* (Blanco TX, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>Zander, *St. Seraphim of Sarov*, 85-96.

Spirituality and ethics are thus joined together in the same hermeneutical circle. As the context in John 14 shows, it is a circle in which the Holy Spirit also dwells together with the Father and the Son. Genuinely Christlike ethical praxis is perhaps the surest evidence of one's presence within this circle of grace and glory, where experiential knowledge of God and participation in divine life are present together with love and obedience.

In Orthodox ascetic practice, the struggle to achieve better and better ethical praxis, that is virtue and good character, always remains central. Moreover, the virtues themselves are ultimately divine energies in which humans come to participate. Because Christ's saving work is already accomplished and we share in his life through the sacraments, the only thing separating us from the divine in our sinfulness is that our wills and actions are at variance with those of God. One is united to God by willing and doing what God wills. Of course, much prayer, which flows naturally from love for Christ and in turn strengthens that love, is also essential in enabling this ethical praxis, and the Holy Spirit is its source and foundation.

Keane suggests that Scripture and historical experience are sources of ethical insight, but he also believes that we need hermeneutical criteria for interpreting and applying the "text" of the Bible and history and suggests that such criteria are linked to the Holy Spirit. Orthodox tradition would certainly agree with this, adding that the experience and examples of the saints, in whom the Spirit dwells, are the surest criteria by which to discern ethical truth. They also disclose God's judgment on the sinfulness and error woven into so much of history's fabric. Hence the episode of Newt Gingrich's now fading popularity need not be seen as disclosing authentic ethical values.

#### THE DIMENSION OF MYSTERY

As Keane suggests, it is important to recognize that our ethical and theological principles, however true, reasonable, or logical, must never become self-contained or self-enclosed. They must always be open to the presence of the apophatic dimension which surpasses our understanding, to "the more" which eludes our grasp. This includes the divine mystery and also the inmost mystery of the human person who, as St. Gregory of Nyssa says, bears the image and likeness of God and therefore shares in God's incomprehensibility.<sup>4</sup>

The *imago Dei* is also an image of the Holy Trinity, a point to which Keane also alludes. Many Orthodox theologians have emphasized that what is most essential to humanity is personhood and thus interrelatedness, following the pattern of the three divine persons. Orthodox Christian anthropology and ethics therefore stress personalism and relationality. In our tradition these characteristics are seen as defining features of humanness as such. Some of our theologians

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<sup>4</sup>*De hominis opificio* 11, PG 44.156A-B.

would perhaps be astonished to see them linked to the feminine and feminist theology, as Keane suggests. After all, men too are made in the image of the Triune God. But perhaps this can provide an unexpected opportunity for further fruitful dialogue.

The presence of God as apophatic mystery also challenges us to acknowledge the limitations of our human perceptions, in ethics as well as in doctrine. Truth is genuinely articulated, formulated and expressed through intellectual means, for instance in the dogmas of the Church. What we know of these dogmas is limited by our finite mind's capacity, but the Church confesses our knowledge of them as a genuine apprehension of truth revealed to the extent of our capacity to receive it. Yet the infinite divine mystery always lies within, around and beyond all that we can know.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as Keane recognizes, our intellects need to be purified and transformed by the Holy Spirit so they can rightly receive and understand revealed truth.

Given our intellect's limitations, Keane points to art and poetry, human creativity and imagination, as providing ethical insights not attainable by reason alone. An Orthodox theologian would perhaps agree but add that like all human faculties including intellect, imagination is in need of ascetic purification and transformation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. At least as much as our intellects, our imaginations need to be trained, reconfigured and imprinted with divine truth through long participation in spiritual practice. In the Orthodox understanding, the media of human self-expression are capable of acquiring an iconic character. When used rightly, they can come to contain and manifest divine presence and truth, including ethical insight, while at the same time serving as windows through which divine incomprehensibility is perceived. Thus, as Georges Florovsky has said, dogma itself, the fruit of sanctified intellectual argumentation, is the "logical icon."<sup>6</sup> Scripture and patristic writings frequently convey divine truth through the verbal iconography of poetic language. The visual icons, too, are understood as teaching dogma, and according to the Seventh Ecumenical Council their function in the Church parallels that of Holy Scripture.<sup>7</sup> However, the art of the iconographer is guided by disciplines and rules as strict and specific as the dogmatic principles guiding the reflection of the theologian. Poetry and art can sometimes be misleading, as can philosophy. Significantly, the ascetic fathers express grave reservations about *any* use of imagination, since it is so susceptible to delusion. However, these reservations need to be balanced against the abundant uses of poetic hymns and icons in Orthodox worship, which engages all the senses. The apophatic renunciation of

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<sup>5</sup>See my article: Verna E. F. Harrison, "The Relationship between Apophatic and Kataphatic Theology," *Pro Ecclesia* 4 (1995): 318-32.

<sup>6</sup>"Revelation, Philosophy, and Theology," in Georges Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption* (Belmont MA, 1978) 29.

<sup>7</sup>See "Apophatic and Kataphatic Theology," and Verna E. F. Harrison, "Word as Icon in Greek Patristic Theology," *Sobornost* 10 (1988): 38-49.



imagination in silent prayer thus combines with the positive uses of imaginative imagery in liturgical life. The reading of Scripture, patristic texts and saints' lives, all rich in imaginative content, is another important spiritual practice. Long experience of silent prayer, spiritual reading and prescribed liturgical forms trains and refashions human imagination, imprinting divine truth deeply in our conscious and subconscious minds. The truths apprehended certainly pertain to ethics as much as to doctrine.

### THE HOLY SPIRIT AND LITURGY

The liturgical life of the Orthodox Church abounds in hymns, prayers and rites rich in theological and ethical content. The vast bulk of this material dates from early Christian and Byzantine times. The liturgical life bears within itself the theological heritage, historical memory, ethical precepts, and shared spiritual experience of the Orthodox Christian community. This is one of the primary vehicles that convey from each generation to the next the holy tradition, that is the life of the Holy Spirit present in the Church and known in lived experience.

Liturgical prayer unites Orthodox Christians with the faithful of all generations. Through it the sense of shared spiritual experience is very tangible. This is why liturgical modifications occur slowly and as a rule utilize traditional materials. The services are full of biblical and patristic imagery and concepts. For the Orthodox, they provide a coherent and all-encompassing theological and ethical framework wherein Scripture and historical experience are interpreted for us under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Through liturgy the faithful participate personally and communally in the hermeneutical process whereby holy tradition is handed on within the Church. Their minds and hearts, their ideas and perceptions are refashioned as they receive the liturgical experience into the core of their being. This is one of the primary ways in which the Holy Spirit fashions our identity as members of Christ's Body and members of one another and thereby continually constitutes and preserves the identity of the Church in the world.

Liturgy can play a large role in teaching virtue and forming character, as Keane indicates. It may also provide one answer to his question about how the Holy Spirit can guide our interpretation and ethical application of Scripture and history. However, as an Orthodox Christian I have to suggest caution regarding the ways liturgy connects with the Holy Spirit and ethics in today's Roman Catholic context where there have been so many radical and diverse changes in liturgical texts and rituals. The Orthodox are acutely aware of the power of symbolism and ritual, a power that can be misused with devastating consequences. The Nazi party in Germany also had its rituals, no doubt conveying demonic instead of divine energy. So the construction of new liturgies and the selection of hymns, prayers and readings when "planning worship services" should be approached with awe and self-restraint. There is a danger that ritual can be used for propaganda or psychological manipulation, to push the political agenda currently fashionable or build a cult of personality around a particular minister

instead of glorifying God. Maybe liturgy can best help Catholics to preserve and live Christian faith and ethical praxis when it draws on the rich body of prayer and hymnody in Western (as well as Eastern) patristic and medieval sources.

The traditional teaching about prayer and ascetic and ethical practice embodied in the *Philokalia* is known as the "art of arts and science of sciences." This phrase actually originates in discourse 2 of St. Gregory Nazianzen, which is about pastoral care.<sup>8</sup> It refers to the pastor's task, that high and exceedingly difficult calling of guiding others toward life in the Spirit. Much of this task is ethical. It involves discerning right from wrong motives, choices and actions, often with great subtlety; teaching people in practice to avoid evil and do good; patiently guiding them as they slowly learn through many moral failures and false starts to practice virtue; aiding Christ as he fashions their characters into his own likeness. Surely this work is at the heart of Christian ethics. It can only bear fruit with the help of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>8</sup>*Oratio* 2.16, Jean Bernardi, ed., *Grégoire de Nazianze. Discours 1-3*, SC 247 (Paris, 1978) 110; *The Philokalia*, 5 vols., ed. and trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London and Boston, 1979) 1:13. The *Philokalia* is the classic collection of Greek patristic and Byzantine writings about spiritual life. Thus far, four volumes of the English translation have been published.