

WHY ORTHODOXY?

ORTHODOXY AND DAILY EXPERIENCE OF THE HEAVENLY LIFE

SCHOOL OF HEAVENLY LIFE

Orthodoxy in its core is a divine school, through which the divine Tutor, our Lord Jesus Christ, prepares His believers, by His Holy Spirit for the heavenly life. The Orthodox Church is called an *Eschatological Church*, for she is absorbed in the world to come in her teaching, worship and conduct. She prepares her children to their heavenly conjugal home.

Perhaps someone may attack this attitude, believing that the Church, which is absorbed in the heavenly life, is not fit for those who live on earth. The Church directs the thoughts of the believers far away from their actual life.

On the contrary we are proud of this church's eschatological attitude, because it satisfies the real needs of man in all ages, for the following reasons:

1. Man is a hungry being; he cannot be satisfied by any earthly gift. The more he receives of material things, or social advantages, success and scientific discoveries and degrees, or glories and honors, the more he thirsts and hungers for them. "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing." (Eccl 1:8) It's because man is an icon of the infinite and heavenly God, therefore He alone *can satisfy man's mind, heart, emotions and all his inner emptiness*.

2. The heavenly attitude has the power to solve the two major psychological problems that destroy man's life. I mean *suffering of the feeling of inferiority and that of loneliness*. The believer who is supported with the fellowship of the heavenly Trinity, and with the communion with the heavenly hosts is proud of his new stature and feels that he is not just a creature among billions of other creatures. He is a special child of God, and God is interested in Him. All the heavenly hosts are eager to see him in his glory and to welcome him in his own heavenly home. Therefore, not only does he rejoice unceasingly, but also he becomes a source of joy to others, through Jesus Christ, the Source of the heavenly peace and joy.

3. This attitude turns man's sight from his outward being to his inner man, to discover that he himself is more important than the whole world. He realizes that he is not a weak being nor that he suffers of the hidden feeling of guiltiness as he discovers that *his inner man has been changed from dust to a second heaven*, "for indeed, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:21); and his mind has been turned from a play-place of evil thoughts to be a mind of Christ. "We have the mind of Christ." (1 Cor 2:16)

3. By practicing the heavenly life the believer passes over the temporal events. Thus he *challenges the sufferings, the evil world, sin, Satan and even death. His life becomes a series of victories*.

4. Through this eschatological attitude *the believer never suffers of despair*. He realizes his message in this world, tastes the sweetness of the real life, and succeeds in all aspects of his life.

THE HEAVENLY TUTOR

The Heavenly One descended to our land as the divine Tutor who converts the world into His heavenly Church. Thus, He unites us with Him so that we live with a heavenly heart and high thoughts, participating with the heavenly creatures in their hymns, joy and peace. He teaches us not just by giving commandments and advice, but also by His abiding in us, and our abiding in Him.

❖ Generous is He who gives for us the greatest of all gifts, His own life!

St. Clement of Alexandria

St John says: “And the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us” (1:14). The Heavenly One became Man and lived in our world, to sanctify our daily life and established His Church, as His heavenly Bride on earth. From His conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary and until His ascension to heaven we often hear that angels appeared as a sign of the openness of heaven towards earth and the close relationship between heaven and earth, which has been started. Our Lord reopened Paradise to man after He was crucified (Luke 23: 43).

St. Clement of Alexandria states¹ that the earthly Church is an icon of the heavenly one. That is why we pray that God’s will may be accomplished on earth as it is in heaven. He also says that the perfect gnostic, i.e., the spiritual believer practices heavenly life while he is on earth, for he [will rest on God’s holy mountain, the Church on high, in which we are assembled, the philosophers of God, the authentic Israelites who are pure in heart... giving themselves over to the pure intuition of the unending contemplation.] He also says: [If you enroll yourself as one of God’s people, heaven is your country and God your legislation².]

- ❖ And being joined to God, no longer do we abide upon earth, but as He Himself has said, where He is, there shall we be also³.
- ❖ For in it (the Word’s body) the Lord becomes our guide to the Kingdom of Heaven and to His own Father, saying, “I am the Way” (John 14:6) and “the door” (John 10:9) “through Me all must enter⁴.
- ❖ Whence also, whereas the flesh is born of Mary the Theotokos, He Himself is said to have been born, who furnishes to others an origin of being, in order that He may no longer, as mere earth, return to earth, but as being knit into the Word from heaven, may be carried to heaven by Him⁵.

St. Athanasius of Alexandria

- ❖ O wondrous mystery... Man was cast out of Paradise; and now he receives a reward greater than that of obedience, the reward of Heaven⁶.

St. Clement of Alexandria

THE HEAVENLY LIFE AND DIVINE GRACE

Divine grace makes our hearts very close to heaven, granting us the desire to attain the heavenly kingdom not only in the world to come, but here on earth, by the dwelling of Christ in our souls. **Origen** says: “as long as Jesus Christ, the Divine Logos, that was in the beginning with God, does not dwell in a soul, the kingdom of heaven is not in that soul. However when one is ready to receive that Logos, the kingdom of heaven is nigh at his right hand⁷.”

THE HEAVENLY LIFE AND OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

Our spiritual life is a kind of a new and continuous exodus under the guidance of the New Moses and Joshua. We are freed from the bondage of Pharaoh and receive the Promised Land where we live in Zion, on the holy mountains. There we live with the Highest One on His Mountains. There we have a heavenly citizenship, learn the heavenly language and find our pleasure in the heavenly Law of Christ.

Our life is an ascent with Jesus Christ and accompanied with men of God, of the Old and new Testaments, on the Mount of Tabor, to enjoy the transfiguration of the Heavenly Savior. It is in fact a continuous journey to heaven. Every day the feeling of heaven is at hand increases, and inner renewal by the Holy Spirit is realized gradually. We see the gates of heaven are opened and receive more and more of the knowledge of the divine mysteries.

¹ *Stromata* 4:8:66.

² *Stromata* 6:14.

³ *Contra Arians* 2:69.

⁴ *c. Arians* 2:61.

⁵ *c. Arians* 3:33.

⁶ *Protr.* 11:3

⁷ *Comm. Matt.* 10:14 on 13:52 [B. Drewery]

- ❖ The prophet says, “You brought over a vine from Egypt; you drove out nations and planted it. You made a passable way before it; you planted its roots and it filled the earth. Its shade covered the mountains and its branches the cedars of God.”(Cf. Ps. 79.9-11.)

Do you perceive now how God plants and where he plants? He does not plant in the valleys, but on the mountains on high and lofty places. He does not wish to place again in lowly places those whom he led out of Egypt, whom he led from the world to faith, but he wishes their mode of life to be uplifted. He wishes us to dwell in the mountains, but also in these very mountains no less, does he not wish us to crawl all over the ground, nor does he wish further that his vine have its fruit cast down to the ground, but he wishes its shoots to be led upwards, to be placed aloft. He wishes that there be vine branches, not in just any lowly trees, but in the loftiest and highest cedars of God. I think the “cedars of God” are the prophets and apostles. If we are joined to them as the vine, which “God brought over from Egypt” and our shoots are spread along their branches and resting on them, we become like vine branches bound to one another by bonds of love, we shall no doubt produce very much fruit. For “every tree which does not produce fruit is cut down and cast into the fire.”(Luke 3:10)¹

- ❖ What happens after this? “Go,” the text says, “into the high land, to one of the mountains which I shall show you, and there you shall offer him as a burnt offering” (Gen. 22.2)... He is sent, therefore, “into the high land” and the high land is not sufficient for a patriarch about to accomplish so great a task for the Lord, but he is also ordered to ascend a mountain, of course that, exalted by faith, he might abandon earthly things and ascend to things above².
- ❖ It says, “He went up to the higher place to pray and he saw the heavens open” (Acts 10:9, 11). Does it not yet appear to you that Peter had gone up “to the higher,” not only in the body but also in mind and spirit? It says, “he saw the heaven open and a certain vessel descending to the earth like a sheet in which were all quadrupeds, reptiles, and fowls of the sky. And he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Arise, Peter, kill and eat’ (Acts 10:11-13)³.
- ❖ It is not because of the place where he dwells, but because of his dispositions, that he who is still on earth has his citizenship in heaven and lays up treasures in heaven (Phil. 3:20; Matt. 6:20f.), Having his heart in heaven and bearing the image of the Heavenly One (1 Cor. 15:49), he is no longer of the earth nor of the lower world (John 3: 31; 8:23; 18:36), but of heaven and the heavenly world that is better than this⁴.
- ❖ Believers attain this heavenly life through the work of the cross. For Christ, “through His blood has made peace with things on earth and things in heaven” (Col. 1:20) so that the earthly might have fellowship with the heavenly⁵.
- ❖ Just as the sun and the moon are said to be the great lights in the firmament of heaven, so also are Christ and the Church in us. But since God also placed stars in the firmament, let us see what are stars are in us, that is, in the heaven of our heart⁶.

Origen

Origen comments on the words “...divides the water which is above heaven from the water which is below heaven” Gen. 1:7, saying, [Therefore, by participation in that celestial water which is said to be above the heavens, each of the faithful becomes heavenly, that is, when he applies his mind to lofty and exalted things, thinking nothing about the earth but totally about heavenly things, “seeking the things which are above, where Christ is at the right hand of the Father” (Col. 3:1). For then he also will be considered worthy of that praise from God which is written here when the text says: “And God

¹ In Exodus hom .6:10 (Cf. Ronad E Heine- Frs. of the Church, vol. 71.)

² In Gen. hom. 8:3 (Cf. Heine).

³ Homilies on Leviticus 7:4. (See Frs. of the Church)

⁴ On Prayer 26:5(ACW).

⁵ Homilies on Leviticus 4:4. (See Frs. of the Church)

⁶ In Gen. hom. 1:7.

saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:8)¹.]

THE HEAVENLY LIFE AND THE DIVINE COMMANDMENTS

God as the heavenly Father of mankind does not want to give orders. He grants us His divine commandments so that *we may meet Him through them and enjoy the unity with Him*.

- ❖ The Lord is hidden in His commandments; he who seeks Him finds Him in them.
- ❖ Don't say I fulfilled the commandments and didn't find Him, for he who sincerely seeks Him will find peace².

St. Mark the Recluse

The Heavenly One grants us His commandments so that we may be united with the eternal word of God that lasts forever, even in heaven. The Psalmist says, “So shall I keep Your law continually, forever and ever. (Ps. 119:44)

The purpose of the divine commandments is not to control our behavior, but to discover our weakness and guide us to our Savior, who grants Himself as our heavenly Physician and Medicine.

- ❖ O mystic wonder! The Lord was laid low, and man was raised up!

“Know you not,” says the Apostle, “that you are the temples of God?” (1 Cor. 3:16). The gnostic (a believer who has true spiritual knowledge) is consequently divine, and already holy, God-bearing, and God-borne.

- ❖ The Word of God became man, that you may learn how man may become god!

St. Clement of Alexandria

- ❖ Christ, who is all virtue, has come, and speaks, and on account of this, the kingdom of God is within His disciples.
- ❖ The Son in His kindness generously imparted deification to others... who are transformed through Him into gods, as images of the Prototype... the Word is the Archetype of the many images.

Origen

- ❖ This is the grace of the Lord, and these are the Lord's means of restoration for the children of men.
For He suffered to prepare freedom from suffering, for those who suffer in Him;
He descended that He might raise us up.
He took on Himself the trial of being born, that we might love Him who is Uncreated;
He went down to corruption that corruption might put on immortality.
He became weak for us, that we might rise with power;
He descended to death, that He might bestow on us immortality, and give life to the dead.
Finally, He became Man, that we who die as men might live again, and that death should no more reign over us, for the apostolic word proclaims, “Death shall not have dominion over us” (Rom. 6:9).

St. Athanasius of Alexandria

THE HEAVENLY LIFE AND VIRTUES

Virtues, in our Orthodox concept, are sharing in the divine nature. It is the daily supernatural experience of the heavenly life. Possessing virtues in fact is establishing the heavenly kingdom of God within us, a revelation of heaven in our depth³.

Every day, in the early morning, the orthodox believer prays the “prime hymn,” which reminds him of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ so that he may be **supported with the new risen life** as a virtuous life. St. John Chrysostom states that as we wait for the future resurrection we have to ask to attain another resurrection, which precedes the future one, in which the deeds of the old man are destroyed, and the new angelic life is revived⁴.

¹ In Gen. hom. 1:2.

² The author: *The Christian and Passing to Heaven*, 1998, p. 294 (in Arabic).

³ The author: *The Christian and Passing to Heaven*, 1998, p. 306 (in Arabic).

⁴ Cf. in Rom. Hom 10. PG 60:480 B-C.

In another place St. John Chrysostom states that while our bodies become old, the youthfulness of our souls lasts. He says that we grow up spiritually from childhood to manhood, but never suffer the weakness and feebleness of senility¹. We remain in a spiritual renewal of our youthfulness. This in fact is a pledge of our heavenly status.

On the other hand, meditating in the heavenly life supports us to grow in virtues and to tread upon the vices

THE HEAVENLY LIFE AND OUR SPIRITUAL BATTLE

St. John Cassian urges us to enter the spiritual battle, trusting that we will be considered as victorious in the highest on our entrance into the holy city, the heavenly Jerusalem².

THE HEAVENLY LIFE AND LOVE

According to St. John Chrysostom, Love for God and neighbor is the passport that permits believer to enter haven and pass through all its gates, without any obstacle, until he reaches the throne of God, and finds a place on His right hand. Love is the language of heaven; he who has not the experience of this language can't be in communication with the heavenly One and the heavenly hosts.

On his speech concerning love for enemies, as the highest degree of the heavenly virtue, St. John Chrysostom says, "Do you see how the Lord raises us up step by step to the entrances of heaven? (Mat. 5:46)³

THE HEAVENLY LIFE AND ALMSGIVING

THE HEAVENLY LIFE AND THE JOYFUL LIFE

Orthodoxy is a call for attaining the joy of heaven. St. Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" (Phil 4:4) St Anthony the Great states that joy is the food of the soul, without it she becomes hungry and dies. He also says, the souls who receive the Spirit and the heavenly joy can ascend towards the highest... For the mysteries of the heavenly kingdom are revealed to them while they are in their bodies, and they find intimacy and boldness before God in every thing, and all their demands are accepted⁴."

❖ Wherever the kingdom of heaven is, the eternal life surely will be in joy. And wherever the kingdom of Satan is, death and the grave are surely there⁵.

Abbot Moses

❖ "The kingdom of God within you" means that the joy, which the Holy Spirit cultivates in your hearts, is an icon and pledge of the eternal joy, which the souls of the saints, enjoy.

St. Gregory of Nyssa

❖ It is unfit for man to laugh at all times... for the foolish man makes his voice loud when he laughs (Sirach 21:23). The wise man smiles without attracting the attention of others... Smiling is one of the principles in education⁶.

St. Clement of Alexandria

Abbot Chearemon advices those who are attacked by passions, that they can throw them away by accepting the spiritual joys, for the spiritual joy has the power to abolish the carnal and worldly desires⁷.

I notice many young people are conquered by lusts just for their lack of the spiritual joy.

¹ *De Res. Dom. PG 50 :441-442.*

² *The author: The Christian and Passing to Heaven, 1998, p. 297 (in Arabic).*

³ *In Matt. Hom. 18:8.*

⁴ *The author: The Christian and Passing to Heaven, 1998, p. 327 (in Arabic).*

⁵ *St. Cassian: Conferences 1:14.*

⁶ *Paedagogus 2:5.*

⁷ *St. Cassian: Conferences, 12:4.*

THE HEAVENLY LIFE AND HUMBLENESS

- ❖ The humbleness of the heart is the most effective means for lifting the mind to God¹.
- ❖ He who exalts himself descends to Hell, and he who humbles himself becomes in the likeness of his Lord².
- ❖ The treasure of the humble is within him, which is the Lord³.

St. John Saba

- ❖ Humbleness is the heavenly ladder that has the power to lift up the soul from the abyss of transgressions to heaven.

St. John Climacus

THE HEAVENLY LIFE AND OBEDIENCE

THE HEAVENLY LIFE AND SUFFERING

St. John the apostle beheld an opened gate in heaven (Rev. 4:1) while he was in exile. Jacob saw the ladder that guides to heaven, while he was escaping from Esau, his brother. Ezekiel saw the throne of God in heaven while he was in captivity (Ezek. 1:1). Stephen, the archdeacon, beheld Jesus Christ in heaven while he was being stoned (Acts 7). St. Paul ascended often to the Paradise while he was being stoned in Lystra.

Thus amidst sufferings and tribulations, God grants believers heavenly visions for their consolations. In other words, when we are crucified with our Lord Jesus Christ, we participate in His joyful and glorious resurrection.

- ❖ May the cross on which you sacrificed yourself as a perfect, burnt offering to God, be changed into the delight of the resurrection.
- ❖ “*He makes my feet like the feet of deer.*” (Ps. 18:33) He made my love perfect so that I can float above the evil, prickly thorns of this world. “*And sets me on my high places*”, that is, He attracts my sight upon the heavenly dwelling place until I attain the fullness of God (Eph. 3:19)

St. Augustine

- ❖ He who struggles (and are in troubles) for God’s sake, and because he is afraid of sin, becomes worthy to see God’s wonders within himself⁴.
- ❖ Without tribulations we cannot attain the kingdom of heaven⁵.

St. Isaac the Syrian

- ❖ The labors of the long years of the present life are concealed when you see the future glory of eternity. Our grief will vanish by contemplating the great blessings while becoming like vapor that fades away as if it were nil. Lastly, the grief in our life becomes like the lightning that disappears⁶.

St. John Cassian

THE HEAVENLY LIFE AND MONASTIC LIFE

The true monk finds his pleasure not in his separation from men, but in his unity with his heavenly Groom.

St. Philoxinus says, “The exodus from the world is the way that leads us to imitate Christ, to be in His fellowship and to be adorned by Him!”⁷

- ❖ The hermit is a man who lives alone in quiescence, surrounded by the grace of the Lord, and

¹ Letter 51 (Appendix 7).

² Letter 8:2

³ Mymer on “Warning... from the slack men.

⁴ Part 1, Mymer 4.

⁵ Part 1, Mymer 2.

⁶ Institutions, 12:12.

⁷ Homily 9.

guarded by his angel who comforts him and accompanies him. Then from what he may be afraid?¹

St. Isaac the Syrian

- ❖ Admitting to monastery, for the saint, is an escape from earth to heaven².
- ❖ The monk resides in another world, in heaven itself. He does not speak except in the heavenly things, such as the bosom of Abraham, the crown of the saints, and the hosts who surrounds Christ³.
- ❖ Come to the wilderness of Egypt, to see that it is better than any paradise⁴.

St. John Chrysostom

THE HEAVENLY LIFE AND THE HEAVENLY HOSTS

Believers become equal to angels

- ❖ When we are somewhat more advanced, we shall be equal to the angels (Matt. 22:30)⁵.

Origen

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¹ *Part 1, Mymer 5.*

² *In 1 Tim. PG 62:575.*

³ *In Matt. PG. 58:643*

⁴ *In Matt. Hom 8:6.*

⁵ *Comm. on John, book 2:16.*