

Section II
Saints and Mystics
Show the Way

Four

Symeon the New Theologian

It was the year 998 in Constantinople. The Patriarch Sisinnios presided over a meeting of theologians in one of the well-furnished halls of his palace. Those were the days when speculative thinking flourished in the Orthodox Church, with all its ornate oratory, its hairsplitting definitions of terms and subtle reasoning. Some famous men attended the meeting.

Stephen of Nicomedia took the floor. He was the Patriarch's own theologian. The status and influence of this function can be judged from the fact that Stephen had resigned an archbishopric to take it up. With all the weight of his authority, Stephen launched a full-scale attack on the monk Symeon who was also present:

"What are these strange teachings we all hear about, Symeon Abbot of Mamas?! The whole of Constantinople resounds with your bizarre assertions! Do you pretend to be a theologian? Where, tell me, did you make your studies? What learned men were your teachers? You are ignorant of professional theology! How can you presume to speak about things that lie beyond your competence? Stop preaching and writing, remain silent before learned men! Or otherwise prove to us now that you are a theologian. Tell us here in this assembly: within the Blessed Trinity how do you distinguish between Father and Son? Do you maintain a real or a rational distinction?"

Symeon replied:

"You, theologians, are wasting your time by your endless speculations about useless questions. Your highfaluting language and your clever arguments do not bring you nearer to God.

God the Son sent his Holy Spirit, but not to

orators, not to philosophers, not to those who read many books, not to those who give themselves or others titles, not to men who seek influence and fame. No, he sends his Spirit to those who are humble in mentality and in their way of living, to persons who speak simply, who live more simply and whose thinking is simpler still. Such persons will be taught by the Holy Spirit himself. They have no need of human learning. Enlightened by the Spirit they look at the Son, they see the Father and adore the Trinity of Persons.

What use is discussion about God if you are not consciously aware of his presence? What value have theoretical distinctions between the Divine Persons if we do not know the difference between them by experience? You are blind men talking about the type of metal a coin is made of while you are unable to see the coin itself! You have not felt the Divine Light within your hearts, yet you dare to discuss the intricate mysteries of the Trinity! You quote Scripture but remain unaware of its intrinsic meaning. Only persons filled with the Holy Spirit, only those taught by God himself, can teach theology to others."¹

The incident was more than a clash of personalities. With Symeon, the New Theologian, as he was to become known, experiential theology reasserted itself in the face of predominantly academic scholarship. A system based on cold and abstract speculations was being threatened by the appeal to charismatic norms. Although Symeon if properly understood never proclaimed any heresy, he was accused and persecuted till his death.²

Scripture in a New Light

The attacks of established theologians on Symeon's learning were hardly deserved. Symeon was an erudite man. He had probably read and digested more than many of his contemporaries. Even as a young man moving freely in the well-to-do families of Con-

stantinople, Symeon had studied scripture and the writings of the Fathers under the guidance of personal tutors. When he entered the monastery at the age of 27 (in the year 976), he was so well prepared that he could be ordained a priest a year later and become Abbot of Mamas within four years. The reason why Symeon became unpopular with the theological establishment was exactly the opposite of being deficient in learning: He knew his Christian sources so well that he could strike out in a new direction.

In Symeon's day the whole life of a Christian had become dominated by tradition. As Christian faith was officially adhered to by all, its assimilation in teaching and preaching had become a matter of routine. Believing was no longer a personal conquest of truth; it had become part of imbibing the local culture. External liturgy flourished, but real prayer had little chance to develop. Worship had deteriorated into a complicated ritual of which every bow and every formula was carefully prescribed; it was too smooth to appeal to a person wrestling with his living God.

Symeon put his finger on the sore spot when he pointed out that the experiential side of religion was lacking. He found too many glib assertions in theology, too much externalism in prayer, too much dependence on the "*ex-opere-operato*" working of the sacraments. By all this the heart of Christianity was lost. Believing in Christ means a living encounter with him, a discovery of the Holy Spirit in one's life, a growth in personal love for the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity.

This, Symeon saw, was what Christ spoke about in the gospels. In his high-priestly prayer Christ had prayed to the Father, "May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you" (Jn 17:21). But surely the Father and the Son are united in a very personal and conscious union! If Jesus says that we are to be in the Father and the Son as the Father is in the Son and the Son in the Father, doesn't he state that we too will

share in a personal and loving communion? It is obvious from Jesus' words that this communion should start on earth. It follows that even here on earth we shall participate in the intimate knowledge Father and Son have of one another.

Jesus said that whoever sees him sees his Father (Jn 14:7). Seeing is important in life. We cannot speak adequately of what we have not seen. And we cannot speak about God unless we have seen him. Jesus promised that we would "see" him. It is the kind of seeing that reveals to us his divinity, his relationship with the Father. Jesus did not mean seeing in a physical sense, otherwise those who crucified him would have seen the Father!

Jesus had exclaimed, "Who is my mother? . . . Whoever does what my Father in heaven wants him to do is . . . my mother!" (Mt 12:48-50). Yes, Symeon said, when we become Christians we conceived Christ. Christ is born in us not corporeally, as in Mary the Mother of God, but in a spiritual sense. We become like a woman carrying a child. But surely we should then become aware of this divine life moving in us just as a pregnant woman becomes aware that new life stirs within her!

Jesus came "to set the earth on fire" (Lk 12:49). Jesus was referring to the fire of the Holy Spirit which he would infuse into our souls. If this is so, Symeon argues, it cannot happen in an invisible and unconscious manner. For the essence of the soul is knowing and feeling. It must notice the divine flame that soars up in itself and consumes everything.

Paul tells us that we have put on Christ (Gal 3:27). Whoever puts on clothes, knows what he is doing. A Christian worthy of the name has put on Christ consciously and knowingly. As he feels his clothes with his naked body, so he is aware of Christ acting upon him. Only a corpse feels nothing. Likewise a Christian who is "dead" is unaware of Christ's presence within.

The more Symeon studied scripture, the more confirmation he found for believing that a Christian should be able to experience Christ in a conscious manner. Without denying the validity of external rites and sacraments, Symeon set his heart on proclaiming again the inner, spiritual principle of Christian life. A Christian lives in Christ, has become bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh (Eph 5:30). But it is a true communion only if we are aware of it!

Baptism of the Spirit

More than any other theologian before or after him, Symeon put conscious awareness of Christ at the center of Christian doctrine. For him, knowing God in a direct way is no luxury, nor a privilege reserved to a select few. The following statements speak for themselves:

Whoever is known by God, knows he is known and knows that he sees God.

God shows himself openly and makes himself known very consciously.

The Son of God, God himself, has come to earth to reunite us to himself consciously through his Spirit.

The greatest misfortune that can befall a Christian is not to know consciously that God lives within him.

Persons who do not realize God's presence in a conscious way, have no right to be called spiritual.³

When a child is baptized, grace is given and the Blessed Trinity make their indwelling. Yet for full Christian maturity this is not enough. The growing child should become more and more aware of the Three Persons acting within him or her. Becoming consciously aware of this divine action is another kind of baptism, a "baptism in the Holy Spirit." Symeon points out that scripture too distinguishes such a baptism of the Spirit from sacramental baptism. Cornelius and his family were baptized in the Holy Spirit even

before they were baptized with water (Acts 10:44-48). Baptism in the Holy Spirit can and should be experienced by every Christian.

Be fully assured that even here below the sealing by the Holy Spirit will be given to us in a conscious manner.

God gives us the same certitude that he gave to the apostles, thanks to his giving us the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit.

If the Holy Spirit is in you, you cannot fail to notice his action within you.

Those who do not possess the Spirit as one who acts and speaks in them, cannot be reckoned to be "faithful."⁴

Symeon's Own Experience

People often objected to Symeon: "What you talk about no one has ever experienced!" To meet this objection, Symeon would talk about his own inner spiritual life. He would supplement his theological teaching with reports of what he had seen happening to others or to himself. His instructions and hymns thus afford us valuable insights into the experiences of a genuine mystic.

Symeon speaks of two forms of awareness: moments of ecstasy which occur rarely; a state of awareness that remains with us all the time. The abiding state can be recognized by feelings of peace and joy, by surrendering to the gentle inspirations of the Holy Spirit, by a subtle persuasion of God's all-pervasive presence. This state of general awareness is strengthened and clarified by the peak experiences we have during ecstatic prayer.

Symeon left us clear descriptions of what happened to him during such peak experiences. He called

them visions of light. Symeon had been struck by the fact that scripture often uses images derived from light.

God is light (1 Jn 1:5).

"I am the light of the world" (Jn 8:12).

"Wake up, sleeper,
and rise from death
and Christ will shine on you" (Eph 5:14).

How can light and darkness live together? (2 Cor 6:14).

Symeon was fond of these metaphors because he too had seen God as a light, not an external, visible light, but a light that illumined the mind.

When trying to explain this light, Symeon is often at a loss for words. Perhaps what he is saying could be paraphrased in the following way. When at prayer he would occasionally become distinctly aware of Christ as a light surrounding him on all sides. This light was not something that he could see with his bodily eyes; it had no shape, no form, no precise image. Rather, he felt a sensation in his mind of enlargement, of space, of radiance, of weightlessness and joy, a sensation that could best be expressed by "seeing an inner light." The reality of it was overwhelming; the "how," difficult to understand or to express in words.

Symeon says he is convinced that many beginners are granted visions of this light, but they lose them by not being sensitive to them. Becoming aware of Christ's light in such an unspeakable fashion requires adopting the frame of mind Jesus prescribed in the gospel. Only the humble, the poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for God, those who are pure of heart, will see Christ clearly. Unfortunately, many Christians fall short of these requirements; few develop their spiritual eyes to the full. In one realistic passage Symeon laments that, although every Christian could partake of the divine light in a conscious manner, "only one in a thousand, no, one in ten thousand" arrives at mystical contemplation.

Light in the Midst of Darkness

I can conclude this sketch of Symeon in no better way than by reproducing here his own account of a vision. The text is a free translation of Hymn 25:1-66. In this unique testimony we get a rare glimpse of what a true mystic experienced. We see how from meditating on scripture he passed into ecstasy and what prayers came to his mind. Although it may seem extraordinary at first sight, further consideration of the details will bring the realization that the whole event lies within the scope of every praying Christian. Leaving personal differences aside, what Symeon described could be our own experience.

Master, I saw your face, how shall I describe it?
I looked upon your beauty, how shall I speak of what is
unspeakable. . . .

I was sitting in the light of a lamp.
Its light shone on me, it lit up the darkness and the
shadow of night.

I was reading in the light of the lamp,
reflecting on words, examining statements.
Then, Master, as I was meditating on these things,
suddenly you appeared from above,
much larger than the sun.
As a ray of brilliant light you shone from heaven into
my heart.

Everything else I saw as shadow.
Except that in the middle there was a column of light
that cut through the air
passing from heaven down to me. . . .

At once I forgot the light of the lamp.
I was no longer aware of being inside the house.
I seemed to sit surrounded by darkness.
I lost contact with my body.
But I said to you and I say it again from the bottom of
my heart:
"Have mercy on me, Master
have mercy on me, my All. . . ."

But oh what intoxication of light,
oh what movements of fire!
Oh what swirlings of the flame in me
coming from you and your glory!
And all this in spite of my nothingness!

I recognize the glory.
I know it is your Holy Spirit,
who shares the same nature with you, who shares your
honor,
O Word!

He possesses the same kinship, the same glory, the
same essence,
he alone with your Father and with you, O Christ,
Oh God of the universe!

In adoration I fall down before you.
I thank you for making me experience the power of
your divinity,
however small this experience may have been.
I thank you for revealing yourself to me.
Though I was sitting in darkness, you enlightened me.
You granted me to see the light of your face,
a light no man can endure.

I know I was sitting in the middle of darkness,
but while I was there surrounded by darkness, you
appeared as light.
You lit me up completely by your light.
I became light in the night,
I who found myself in total darkness.
The darkness did not extinguish your light,
nor did the light dispel the visible darkness.
The two were together, yet completely separate, with-
out confusion,
at a distance from each other,
not at all mixed except in the same spot where they
filled everything
so it seems to me.

I am in the light, though I am in the middle of darkness.
I am in the darkness, yet in the middle of light.

How can darkness receive within itself a light,
how can it remain in the middle of the light,
without being dissipated by it?

Oh what a marvellous thing I see with my double vision,
with my two sets of eyes,
with the eyes of my body and the eyes of my soul!
What I am talking to you about are the wonderful
mysteries of
a double God, a God who came to me in a twofold
manner.

He took upon himself my human nature
and he gave me his Spirit.
So I too became god by divine grace,
a true son of God but a son by adoption.
Oh what dignity, what glory!⁵