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Concerning Faith. In the *Homilies* of Saint Gregory Palamas

Abstract: There are questions whose answer is yourself. One of them would be this: “What is faith?”... I thought to put myself this question indirectly, turning to Saint Gregory Palamas. However, starting from the distinction itself, that he makes in one of his homilies between the ways in which we should think about faith, I have tried to see to what extent what we call “faith” implies what we call “reflection” (in the sense of “meditation”); that is the way in which our reason participates in the act of faith.

Keywords: Saint Gregory Palamas, homily, faith, meditation, freedom.

There are many ways by which we can say what we understand by “faith”, but only from within. What should be noticed is the fact that faith is a divine *gift* and, especially, is the *only* way by which one has “access” to God. Any man, faithful or not, begins to reason on the account of a faithful act. In other words, “to believe” (here not in a religious manner) requires first and foremost “to be confident in” somebody, and then, “to believe in yourself”. The articulated language, as a sign of our rationality, by means of which we *understand* that we are *somebody* (at some time) develops *together with* what we call “faith”. The words of a child, through which he acknowledges himself as “somebody”, that is expresses his “rationality”, are images of “faith” in that “some-body” who taught him how to speak. The child “believes in himself”, (that is) to the one who *knows* the meaning of words by which he has access to himself, to the other and the world. From “to believe in *oneself*” to “to believe *in*” is what we call *freedom*. “Believer” is first and foremost the *child* from within us. His evolution, the manner of his *growth* depends on his/her “faith”, which is intrinsically bound to his “rationality”, which is consequently expressed by his “freedom”. In order to understand the faith, we should understand in what manner is the freedom expressed, in its turn, by rationality. In order not to depart too much from our subject, I should add one single thing: “the faith *in* God (to believe in God)” shall always imply “the faith *of* God (to believe God)”. All Christian believers know that nobody will enter the Kingdom of Heavens unless they become (live) *like* “children”.

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I wanted to stress the fact that, until we came to talk about *Christian faith*, we should meditate on the way in which our “rationality” gets consistency. “To believe” that you are born as a “rational being”, in the sense of an “autonomous being”, is perhaps the most serious mistake that a man can do. *The faith* is the Creator’s *gift* for His highest creation – man. Man is able to *understand* God, because to him only was given the power to speak, i.e. to reason. For this motive, man is an image of the Image of God that is *logos* through *Logos*. “After image and likeness” of God is not only a Christian expression with a cultural sense, but it is the Truth of Whom we *partake of* more or less conscious, more or less pure.

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I think the distinction between “to *believe* God”¹ and “to believe *in* God” is assumed by the man’s *freedom*. Freedom is the *man* who is “what it is” from the “word” to “deed”. “Knowledge” means listening to “the commandments” of God. This “knowledge” means total *submission*, which means transposing all divine commandments into facts, that is the *confirmation* of “to believe God” through “to believe *in* God”. The distance between “to *believe* God” and “to *believe in* God” represents/constitutes *the free man*. And freedom should be learned! Our Savior is also our Teacher, for He is the One Who mediates the return of the “prodigal son” through learning to live freely. Our entire life develops under the sign of this teaching, the task of being a true *Man*. So it is vital to learn to believe in God! Of course, faith cannot be “defined” in a univocal manner (as nothing else of what is related to the spiritual ones). Moreover, regarding the spiritual matters, any “definition” is nothing else than a terminological *delimitation* of what can we make significant, in a certain context, regarding to some experience “in spirit and truth”.

In this sense, the distinction between “the faith *of* God (to believe God)” and “faith *in* God (to believe in God)” has subsidiarily the understanding of faith as being one, but two-way specified, i.e. in agreement with man’s *freedom*, who can say “yes” or “no” even to God. In order to be much clearer, I say that man’s *deification* – that it his becoming after God’s *likeness*, but not “in being/*ousia*”, but “in grace/*energeia* (gr.)” – requires one to understand the fact that only by means of the faith achieved, consummated through hope and culminating in love can man become Man-God (without being God-Man). The mysterious union between God and man will remain *incomprehensible* for ages, but comprehensible *through* love! Only by means of love can man “get to know” God and the true knowledge can be achieved only by following the “commandment” of love.

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Moreover, I would like to add that what I shall do is only an *interpretation* of some ideas that are very precious to my *soul*, a meditation on palamite homilies. So, it is not about *theologizing*, but personal confession of some “reading facts”. On the other hand, if we read something from the Cappadocian Holy Fathers, we can discover what the condition of the theologian is, and particularly from Saint Gregory the Theologian (see for instance “The Twelfth Homily”). Consequently, only in my capacity as a *believer*, I would try speak about the manner in which Saint Gregory Palamas speaks about faith.

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Πιστεύομεν εἰς τὸν Θεόν, καὶ πιστεύομεν τῷ θεῷ ἕτερον ἐστὶν ἐκότερον τούτων. Πιστεῦειν μὲν γὰρ ἐστὶ τῷ θεῷ τὸ τὰς παρ’ αὐτοῦ πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἐπαγγελίας βεβαίας καὶ ἀληθεῖς ἠγέσθαι, πιστεῦειν δὲ εἰς τὸν Θεόν το περὶ αὐτοῦ φρονεῖν ὀρθῶς (Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμά 1985, 212).

“Believing in God is different from believing God. To believe God is to regard His promises to us as sure and true, but to believe *in* Him is to have a right understanding of Him” (Saint Gregory Palamas 2014, *Homily 8, 1 – On Faith*).

Nevertheless, the Saint explicitly says that “both are necessary for us and we must speak correctly in both respects”, considering both as true and we should behave “in such a way that people with correct understanding can be confident that we are faithful before the God to Whom our faith is directed” (*Homily 8, 1*). So it is clear, even *literally*, that we *should learn* from other people what the faith in God is, i.e. from those who have “the correct understanding”². This matter can be more easily seen in the way in which Saint Gregory Palamas builds his “arguments” on which he backs up his statements. It is easily noticed, even in the letter of the text, that the terms’ polarity – belief-nonbelief – is mirrored by the polarity of the terms virtue-sin. It is not hard to understand that all that is said in the text is a remembrance of what is *written* in the Old and the New Testament. No less “literal” is “that we confess the same faith as our God-bearing Fathers...”, and “what proof is there that we have a right belief *in* God, that we have a trustworthy and devout understanding of Him?” (*Homily 8, 5*). It is no less clear “the fact that we truly *believe* God, that we understand that His promises and warnings to us are true and sure, even though they have not happened yet, is shown by our good works and by our keeping of His commandments” (*Homily 8, 5*).

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But if „to believe God” is *different* than “to believe *in* God”, it does mean that we have two *types* of faith! Saint Gregory Palamas does not do anything but distinguishes between *oikonomy* and *theology*, stating the ways through which man can *believe* using his “reason”, his reflective thinking on faith. Starting here, I shall try and *interpretation* of what I believe the Saint wished to “transmit” beyond the *letter* of the homiletic text by means of the “two thoughts” which we should have concerning faith.

“Consequences” of this distinction (not separation) we shall meet in all Saint Gregory’s homilies, which is explicitly made only in *The Eight Homily* and which clearly reveals the significance of the term “faith” in the palamite vocabulary. Worthy of notice as well is the fact that Saint Gregory Palamas has always in view the *context* in which he speaks and especially the one in which the Savior, Holy Apostles or Holy Fathers have spoken and still *speak*. Truly, only by using a precise “addressing” of word can somebody understand what he is told (without being obliged “to listen”). Accordingly, any intelligible and expressible human truth means *participation* in Truth (partially in this world – “we know only in part”, as we learn from Saint Paul). So, in all his homilies, Saint Gregory Palamas shares us as much each of us can receive for soul benefit making use of what he received on his spiritual measure.

As we well know, it matters very much the context in which something is said to somebody and especially for what purpose. Every homily is a whole, every word gets new meanings function of the context in which is received. Nevertheless, we can see, “in the spirit” of palamite sayings, what is the real faith, resorting to a few statements of the Saint. We know that the “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (see *Romans* 10, 17), because, says Saint Gregory Palamas, “(...) He spoke to them a saving word. For this was His main work, which He cleared up, interpreting it by means of parables” (*Homily* 10, 5). Hence we can easily understand that the true Teacher is God Himself, and salvation is only through faith, and does not belong only to those who hear it, but who also carry out what they hear by making *deeds* of the things heard. Faith “can be learned” not out of making research into something, but by *listening to* “the word of Christ”. This statement should be always understood function of the context. What we call today “learning” is in great extent only a studying of *something* (even in the case of “human sciences”, in which man becomes and “object” of research). The divine research though implies *listening to the Truth*, which is by making *deeds* of the things heard (See “the Parable of the Sower”). “To learn” means to understand that the Truth is “visible” by this agreement between word and deed.

Jesus Christ is the One Who *speaks humanly*, but not the earthy ones, but the divine. For this reason, “to *believe* God”, is other than “to believe *in* God”; but, nevertheless, not something else (because faith is *one*, not something different). The words that “affirm” the faith, for those who “have ears to hear” (see “The Parable of the Sower”), are heard by everybody, but they are “listened to” as much as the commandments are being accomplished. “But wisdom is needed and good will in order to transform these saving words into facts and to gather from them the crop of the beneficial faith” (*Homily 10, 6*).

So wisdom is not only a noetic understanding of the Savior’s words, one with the soul unbound from the body. The fact that Jesus Christ, The Son of God, *became flesh* means also that body deserves a special attention, which body is what it is only together with the mind. Hence the importance of the distinction that Saint Gregory Palamas makes between *the two thoughts* regarding „faith”. For although we represent a whole, we are body *and* soul alike. So, we should understand that even though faith is *one*, we face a double reference to its “subject”; it is “double” because man as well is made to be both “earthly/psychic” and “spiritual”, as we acknowledged from Saint Paul. This is a truth Saint Gregory Palamas acknowledges fully especially in *Homily 24, 1*:

A short while ago, with the strong eyes of faith, we beheld Christ ascending, no less clearly than those accounted worthy to be eye-witnesses. Nor are we less favoured than they. “Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed”, says the Lord (*John 20, 29*), referring to those who have found assurance through hearing, and see by faith.

Moreover, in *Homily 24* (“On how the Holy Spirit was Manifested and Shared out at Pentecost. Also about Repentance”) we probably have the clearest “working presence” *in spirit* of the distinction made between “*believing* God” and “*believing in* God”. This is also the reason on the ground of which I shall insist on this text, considering it as a landmark for the understanding of the way in which Saint Gregory Palamas makes reference to the “two thoughts” on faith.

The distinction made between *divine being* and *uncreated divine energies*, as it appears in the homilies (which neither suppose that it is more easily understood, nor that it needs to be “explained”, because it is showed as self-understood by the faithful) help us to better understand the meaning of the “two thoughts” on faith from the *Homily 8*. Of course, we should not put in parallel, in a simplifying manner, “the two thoughts” on faith with the being/energy distinction. Of course, neither their drawing near is possible, except by using strong precautions, and not in a mechanical sense. Nevertheless, the palamite distinction between divine being and uncreated energies is closely related to the manner in which we actually come to believe. “To

believe God” and “to believe in God” are *two ways of understanding* the unique true faith. I think that the mystery of the true faith is closely related to the mystery of the uncreated divine energies. Though I will not offer a theological explanation, yet I shall confine myself to a personal interpretation of some palamite statements.

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We see through faith Who is God, for “God Himself confessed: these are the ones who, having heard, were fully assured and have seen through faith” (Homily 24, 1). Actually, faith means hearing *understood as seeing* and seeing *understood as hearing*. Faith is a *spiritual seeing* of God.

The Holy Spirit, “although divided in His various powers and energies, in each of His works the Holy Spirit is wholly present and active, undividedly divided, partaken of while remaining complete, like the sun’s ray” (Homily 24, 8), “lest anyone should suppose the grace given to the saints by the Holy Spirit was theirs by nature” (Homily 24, 7), made the disciples worthy of speaking

as the Spirit gave them utterance. They became instruments of the divine Spirit (...). Anything taken hold of by somebody outside itself, sharing in the *energy* but not the *essence* of the one acting through it, is his instrument. As David declared through the Holy Spirit, “My tongue is the pen of a swiftly writing scribe” (Psalms 44, 1). The pen is the writer’s instrument, sharing in the *energy*, though obviously not the *essence* of the writer, and inscribing whatever he wishes and is able to write” (Homily 24, 8).

I have underlined some words in order to lay an emphasis on the manner in which should be understood the connection between the Descent of the Holy Spirit and faith. As we know, by “enlightening the holy disciples”, i.e. “enlightening/teaching them” fully “the faith *in* God”, the Holy Spirit consummates the Savior’s work, Whose “teaching/enlightenment” through words meant “listening to” the commandments (which does not mean we should dissociate between the two divine uncreated works by placing them in time. The uncreated divine works/*energeias* does not relate to time and, though specific to each Person of the Holy Trinity, should be only distinguished, not separated).

“The gift and the grace of God and the light of the Divine Spirit that comes through the Gospel (...)” (Homily 24, 11) is shared in all times to the bishops ordained forever. Holy Spirit has spoken through the prophets and the wise of the ages. “To believe God” means to believe Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as well, Moses and Isaiah... This fact does not mean that “the light” received from the obeying the commandments would be incomplete, but “earthy/psychic man” is imperfect. This one, though aided permanently by the *grace* of the Holy Spirit, cannot fully receive/understand it and *at once*.

Hardly on the Pentecost shall he receive power, when the Holy Spirit has come upon him, making him witness of Him in Jerusalem and to the end of the earth (see *Acts* 1, 8). A “witness” of God can be only “the saint” (the one who strives unceasingly for his spiritual consummation) that lives in a “material body” in order to become a *model* for the earthy people, but who is *dead* for this world. He is *always* prepared to become a “spiritual body”... “It is sown”, says the Apostle (meaning buried and committed to the earth), “a dead natural body”, that is to say, an ordinary created body with a created soul, stable and capable of movement. “It is raised” (that is, comes back to life), “a spiritual body” (see *1 Cor.* 15, 44), which means a supernatural body, framed and ordered by the Holy Spirit, and clothed in immortality, glory and incorruption by the Spirit’s power (see *1 Cor.* 15, 53). “The first man, Adam”, he says, “was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly” (see *1 Cor.* 15, 45, 47-48) (*Homily* 24, 13).

We see God imperfectly as far as in “the earthy body” we make incessant efforts, having the aid of the Holy Spirit, to carry out the divine commandments, and we see it in as having a perfect image, when the Holy Spirit is felt as *the mediator* that only the Saints can acquire only in a “spiritual body”, in order to be fully seen. We can say that faith only can make *visible* the relation between “the teaching word of Christ” and “the tongues, as of fire”, by means of which Holy Spirit is shown, both “the light” of the Savior’s teaching and the “light” of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (see also “the Transfiguration”). Faith is a *spiritual seeing* as much is the “light” made possible by “the Christ’s teachings”, as well as the “light/seeing” in the Holy Spirit received by the disciples on His Descent. Through the next statement we are *assured* that “the promise was now fulfilled and the Holy Spirit, given and sent by both the Father and the Son, descended. He shone round about the holy disciples and with divine power kindled them all like lamps or, rather, He revealed them as heavenly lights set above the whole world, who had the word of eternal life, and through them He illuminated all the earth. If from one burning lamp someone lights another, then another from that one, and so on in succession, he has light continuously. In the same way, through the apostles ordaining their successors, and these successors ordaining others, and so on, the grace of the Holy Spirit is handed down through all generations and enlightens all who obey their spiritual shepherds and teachers” (*Homily* 24, 10). This fragment seems very relevant for the understanding of the palamite distinction, and especially in the light of the following one:

Who are these heavenly people? Those who are steadfast and immovable in their faith, who always abound in the Lord’s work and bear the image of the heavenly Adam through their obedience to Him. “He that obeyeth not the

Son”, says John, the Lord’s Forerunner, through John the Evangelist, “shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him”. (*John* 3, 36) (*Homily* 24, 14)

So, “to believe God” is not essentially other than “to believe *in* God”, the fulfillment of His “commandments” being thus the *seal* of the “submission” *in* Holy Spirit. The palamite distinction, or better said, “the two thoughts”, upholds the “double” of man (body and soul), as a possible dangerous “duality” (good and evil). After “the fall”, it is neither the body that is “evil” in itself, nor “the soul” is “good” in itself. Starting from the “earthly/psychic” body and trying to attain the “heavenly” body, man achieve this only by doing good/choosing the good (certainly, each man according to his strength, that is after his will; for unless give your will you cannot gain power) through free will.

It can be easily seen that without the Holy Spirit we cannot truly *believe* in God. It is equally clear that without believing the words of the Word, we cannot *believe* in God. Much clearer is that without these Comforters, Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit, we cannot *believe* in God the Father. Actually, without believing in God-Trinity as One God, we cannot say we *truly believe*. If we do not make a distinction between *the divine being* and *the uncreated divine energies* a true faith in God becomes impossible.

An expression of what I have stated above “in the spirit” of the distinction between “the two thoughts” on faith, can be seen in the following statements of Saint Gregory Palamas:

As the gracious will of the Father and His promise are one and the same as the Son’s, Christ told those who believed *in* Him, “Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him, it shall be to him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (see *John* 4, 14) and, “He that believeth on Me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water” (see *John* 7, 38). By way of explanation, the evangelist says, “This spake He of the Spirit, which they that believe on Him should receive” (*John* 7, 39)”. Reading “in the spirit” of this statement, we can easily see that “the promise of the Father and of the Son”, acknowledged as “*believing* God” consummates *in* the Spirit as “believing *in* God”, within one “gracious will” through “*the same faith* in the One-God in Three Persons”.

Instead of a conclusion, I add that this distinction which Saint Gregory Palamas makes in the *Homily* 8 has also as its underlying meaning featuring *the role* of our power of *reason*. He clearly says that “having a right belief in the one true God provokes opposition not only from *ignorance* and the enemy’s promptings, but also from godless men” (*Homily* 8, 5). As for the capacity “to *believe* God”, the believer faces resistance “from the physical passions and the evil one’s snares, but also from people in the grip of passions” (*Homily* 8, 5). Lo, “the two thoughts” allow also the distinction between the types of *attack* supported by the believer function of the man’s

constitution, as a whole, body and soul. This basically means that after the fall of Adam, after putting on “the leather clothes”, when the *snares* and *enemy's promptings* arise, the soul proves weak with regard to thinking, on the account of “our *ignorance*” and the body, weak, with regard to its *passions*, as a result of choosing the earthy pleasures (of course, Devil does what he knows: *divides*; that is separates the soul from the body and, implicitly, from God). “But what proof is there that we have a right belief *in God*, that we have a trustworthy and devout understanding of Him?”, but not in an individualized manner, but by “confessing the same faith as our God-bearing Father” (*Homily* 8, 5). So, it is about *understanding* what our deified “God-bearing Fathers” have *received*, having completely descended their minds into the heart of a purified body. So the palamite distinction has the role of drawing the attention on the types of attack that the believer is facing, because of his spiritual death, which is the separation from God. For this reason, The Resurrection of the Lord have happened *here*, on earth, in order to show us that only by following Him, *freed of sin* (or at least engaged in a continuous fight with sin), through the earthy death we shall be alive in the *afterlife*. “Believing *in God*” implies this *understanding* with the mind as well of the meaning of the mystery of Resurrection. As “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (*Hebrews* 11, 1), the faith is an “eye” of the living soul that thoroughly understands the faith *in* the Resurrection of the Savior. This consummation is *sealed* by the Descent of the Holy Spirit. Hardly at Pentecost would the Holy Apostles *understand* completely what means “orthodox faith” and only thus would have been able to preach the Truth.

As a matter of fact, in the *Eight Homily* we have a direct reference to the distinction between the divine *uncreated* energies and Divine Being. “To believe *in God*” means to have a *right/Orthodox faith* that is to *understand* both the *distinction* between the Divine Being and Divine Hypostases (see paragraphs 6-9), and the distinction between the Divine Being and the *uncreated* Divine Energies (see paragraph 10), but not by making a separation. “The Father, Son and Spirit, each has His own hypostasis”, and “They have in common not only Their undisclosed essence, which is above all names and in which we cannot share, but also the grace, power, energy, radiance, incorruption, kingdom, and everything else by which God has communion with the holy angels and with men” (*Homily* 8, 10).

In what follows we have a clear reference to his dispute with Varlaam: “So we believe in one God, in one tri-hypostatic and all-powerful Godhead, we celebrate those who have pleased God with such a faith, and we reject those who, instead of holding this faith, either started their own heresies or followed others who started them. You should be aware, brethren, that evil passions and godless doctrines open the door to one another, finding their place once God has had reason to depart” (*Homily* 8, 10). Also through the

following it is clear to whom is directed the reference: “There are, however, people who teach that we can also share in God’s supraessential essence and proclaim that this essence can be authoritatively named. They imitate the serpent, the originator of evil, by misinterpreting and distorting the words of the saints just as he did to the words of God” (*Homily 8, 13*).

So, nobody can have an *orthodox faith* if he/she does not confess that the divine energies are *uncreated*.

Notes

¹ The expression is to be found also in the *New Testament*, in Acts 17, 25, πιστεύω γὰρ τῷ θεῷ, the same as in the text of St. Gregory Palamas bellow.

² Gr. ἀσφαλῶς ὁρώντων, more exactly: “the unquestionable seeing/contemplation/experience”.

References

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