

St. Symeon Metaphrastes: The Struggle for Purification



St. Symeon Metaphrastes (11th century), Royal Court administrator, monk, and author/compiler of the Lives of the Saints (a famous 10 volume Greek Menologion)

From "Paraphrase of the Homilies of St. Makarios of Egypt", Homily 4:
4: "The Raising of the Intellect," by St. Symeon Metaphrastes
in

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The Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, Vol. 3., Faber & Faber, Inc., Winchester, MA, 1984, pp. 318-319, 321-2.

74....For grace, once it has been conferred as a result of the purification of the intellect and the inner being, completely removes

the veil in which man was wrapped by Satan after the fall, expelling every defilement and every sordid thought from the soul. Its aim is to cleanse the soul, so enabling it to recover its original nature and to contemplate the glory of the true light with clear, unimpeded eyes. Once this is achieved, man is here and now raised to the eternal world and perceives its beauty and its wonder. Just as the physical eye, as long as it is sound and healthy, gazes confidently at the sun's rays, so such a man, his intellect illumined and purified, always contemplates the never-setting light of the Lord.

75. It is not easy for men to reach this level. It requires much toil, struggle and suffering. In many, although grace is active, evil is still present together with it, lying hidden: the two spirits, that of light and that of darkness, are at work in the same heart. naturally you will ask what communion light can have with darkness, or what concord can God's temple have with idols (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14,16). I will answer you with the same words: what communion can light have with darkness? Pure and unsullied as it is, in what way is the divine light darkened, obscured or sullied? 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not grasp it' (John 1:5). Thus things must not be interpreted in isolation or in a single way. Some repose in God's grace only for as long as they can keep a hold over themselves and can avoid being vanquished by the sinfulness dwelling within them: for a time they can pray diligently and are at rest, but then unclean thoughts become active within them and they are taken captive by sin, which in their case clearly coexists with grace. Those who are superficial, and who have not yet grasped the precise degree to which divine energy is active in them, think they have been delivered once and for all from sin; but those who are intelligent and possess discrimination would not deny that, though God's grace dwells within them, they may also be harassed by shameful and

unnatural thoughts.

76. We have known brethren who have enjoyed such richness of grace that all sinful desire has completely dried up and been extinguished in them for five or six years. Then, just when they thought they had reached a haven and found peace, evil has leapt upon them as though from an ambush so savagely and with such hostility that they have been thrown into confusion and doubt. No one, therefore, who possesses understanding would dare to say that once grace dwells in him he is thereafter free from sin. As we said, both grace and sin may be active in the same intellect, even if the gullible and ignorant, after having had some slight spiritual experience, claim that they have already won the battle. This, in my opinion, is how things are: dark air or mist suddenly rising may obscure the sun's light even when it is shining brightly; in a similar manner those who, although enjoying God's grace, have not yet been completely purified and in their depths are still under the sway of sin, may also be suddenly overcome by darkness. Truly, it needs great discrimination to perceive these things in one's actual experience in a foolproof way..

82....For perfection consists not in abstention from outward sins, but in the total cleansing of the mind.

83. Understanding these things, enter within yourself by keeping watch over your thoughts, and scrutinize closely your intellect, captive and slave to sin as it is. Then discover, still more deeply within you than this, the serpent that nestles in the inner chambers of your soul and destroys you by attacking the most sensitive aspects

of your soul. For truly the heart is an immeasurable abyss. If you have destroyed that serpent, have cleansed yourself of all inner lawlessness, and have repelled sin, you may boast in God of your purity; but if not, you should humble yourself because you are still a sinner and in need, and ask Christ to come to you on account of your secret sins. The whole Old Testament and New Testament speaks of purity, and everyone, whether Jew or Greek, should long for purity even though not all can attain it. Purity of heart can be brought about only by Jesus; for He is authentic and absolute Truth, and without this Truth it is impossible to know the truth or to achieve salvation.