

"The Mystery of Knowledge": Fr. Justin Popovich



Fr. Justin Popovich (1894-1979)

Photo Source: <http://www.orthodoxwitness.org/articles/Lives-of-Saints.html>

St. Justin Popovich: On The Mystery of Knowledge

[Man has always been fascinated by ultimate things--life, death, the origin of the world--and his discoveries in other fields of knowledge have given him confidence to assume that some day these mysteries will also yield to the power of his intellect. Such pride of mind, however, can only lead away from the truth, which, according to Orthodox teaching, is the aim and foundation of all true knowledge. How is such knowledge acquired? Here we have part of a longer essay by the renowned Serbian theologian of blessed memory, Archimandrite Justin Popovich (+1979), in which he distills the writings of Saint Isaac the Syrian on the Orthodox theology of knowledge. Briefly, he explains that because man's understanding became darkened through sin, through consorting with evil, he

became incapable of true knowledge. Man can come to this knowledge only when his soul (the seat of understanding) is healed. This is made possible by means of the virtues, and the primary virtue in this remedial process is faith. 'Through faith, the mind, which was previously dispersed among the passions, is concentrated, freed from sensuality, and endowed with peace and humility of thought It is by the asceticism of faith that a man conquers egotism, steps beyond the bounds of self, and enters into a new, transcendent reality which also transcends subjectivity.' In separate sections, Fr. Justin discusses prayer, humility, love and grace, all requisite companions of faith, before leading the reader into "The Mystery of Knowledge," which we have reprinted below with slight abbreviations.]

According to the teaching of St. Isaac the Syrian, there are two sorts of knowledge: that which precedes faith and that which is born of faith. The former is natural knowledge and involves the discernment of good and evil. The latter is spiritual knowledge and is "the perception of the mysteries," "the perception of what is hidden," "the contemplation of the invisible."

There are also two sorts of faith: the first comes through hearing and is confirmed and proven by the second, "the faith of contemplation," "the faith that is based on what has been seen." In order to acquire spiritual knowledge, a man must first be freed from natural knowledge. This is the work of faith. It is by the asceticism of faith that there comes to man that "unknown power" that makes him capable of spiritual knowledge. If a man allows himself to be caught in the web of natural knowledge, it is more difficult for him to free himself from it than to cast off iron bonds, and his life is lived "against the edge of a sword."

When a man begins to follow the path of faith, he must lay aside once and for all his old methods of knowing, for faith has its own methods. Then natural knowledge ceases and spiritual knowledge takes its place. Natural

knowledge is contrary to faith, for faith, and all that comes from faith, is "the destruction of the laws of knowledge"--though not of spiritual, but of natural knowledge.

The chief characteristic of natural knowledge is its approach by examination and experimentation. This is in itself "a sign of uncertainty about the truth." Faith, on the contrary, follows a pure and simple way of thought that is far removed from all guile and methodical examination. These two paths lead in opposite directions. The house of faith is "childlike thoughts and simplicity of heart," for it is said, "Glorify God in simplicity of heart" (cf. Col. 3:22), and: Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:3). Natural knowledge stands opposed both to simplicity of heart and simplicity of thought. This knowledge only works within the limits of nature, "but faith has its own path beyond nature."

The more a man devotes himself to the ways of natural knowledge, the more he is seized on by fear and the less can he free himself from it. But if he follows faith, he is immediately freed and "as a son of God, has the power to make free use of all things." "The man who loves this faith acts like God in the use of all created things," for to faith is given the power "to be like God in making a new creation." Thus it is written: "Thou desiredst, and all things are presented before thee" (cf. Job 23:13). Faith can often "bring forth all things out of nothing," while knowledge can do nothing "without the help of matter." Knowledge has no power over nature, but faith has such power. Armed with faith, men have entered into the fire and quenched the flames, being untouched by them. Others have walked on the waters as on dry land. All these things are "beyond nature"; they go against the modes of natural knowledge and reveal the vanity of such modes. Faith "moves about above nature." The ways of natural knowledge ruled the world for more than 5,000 years, and man was unable to "lift his gaze from the earth and understand the might of his Creator" until "our faith arose and delivered us from the shadows of the works of this world" and from a fragmented mind. He who has faith "will lack nothing," and, when he has

nothing, "he possesses all things by faith," as it is written: All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive (Matt. 21:22); and also; The Lord is near; be anxious for nothing (Phil. 4:6).

Natural laws do not exist for faith. St. Isaac emphasizes this very strongly: All things are possible to him that believeth (Mark 9:23), for with God nothing is impossible To step beyond the limits of nature and to enter into the realm of the supernatural is considered to be against nature, as something irrational and impossible Nevertheless, this natural knowledge, according to St. Isaac, is not at fault. It is not to be rejected. It is just that faith is higher than it is. This knowledge is only to be condemned in so far as, by the different means it uses, it turns against faith. But when this knowledge "is joined with faith, becoming one with her, clothing itself in her burning thoughts," when it "acquires wings of passionlessness," then, using other means than natural ones, it rises up from the earth "into the realm of its Creator," into the supernatural. This knowledge is then fulfilled by faith and receives the power to "rise to the heights," to perceive him who is beyond all perception and to "see the brightness that is incomprehensible to the mind and knowledge of created beings." Knowledge is the level from which a man rises up to the heights of faith. When he reaches these heights, he has no more need of it - for it is written: We know in part, but when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away (I Cor. 13:9-10). Faith reveals to us now the truth of perfection, as if it were before our eyes. It is by faith that we learn that which is beyond our grasp -by faith and not by enquiry and the power of knowledge.

There are three spiritual modes in which knowledge rises and falls, and by which it moves and changes. These are the body, the soul, and the spirit At its lowest level, knowledge "follows the desires of the flesh," concerning itself with riches, vainglory, dress, repose of body, and the search for rational wisdom. This knowledge invents the arts and sciences and all that adorns the body in this visible world. But in all this, such knowledge is contrary to faith. It is known as "mere knowledge, for it is deprived of all

thought of the divine and, by its fleshly character, brings to the mind an irrational weakness, because in it the mind is overcome by the body and its entire concern is for the things of this world." It is puffed up and filled with pride, for it refers every good work to itself and not to God. That which the Apostle said, knowledge puffeth up (I Cor. 8:1), was obviously said of this knowledge, which is not linked with faith and hope in God, and not of true knowledge.

Faith presents a new way of thinking, through which is effected all the work of knowing in the believing man. This new way of thinking is humility It is by humility that the intellect is healed and made whole... The humble man is the fount of the mysteries of the new age.

True, spiritual knowledge, linked with humility, brings to perfection the soul of those who have acquired it, as is seen in Moses, David, Isaiah, Peter, Paul, and all those who, within the limits of human nature, were counted worthy of this perfect knowledge. With them, knowledge is always immersed in pondering things strange to this world, in divine revelations and lofty contemplation of spiritual things and ineffable mysteries. In their eyes, their own souls are but dust and ashes." Knowledge that comes of the flesh is criticized by Christians, who see it as opposed not only to faith but to every act of virtue.

It is not difficult to see that in this first and lowest degree of knowledge of which St. Isaac speaks is included virtually the whole of European philosophy, from naive realism to idealism--and all science from the atomism of Democritus to Einstein's relativity.

From the first and lowest degree of knowledge, man moves on to the second, when he begins both in body and soul to practice the virtues: fasting, prayer, almsgiving, the reading of Holy Scripture, the struggle with the passions, and so forth. Every good work, every goodly disposition of the soul in this second degree of knowledge, is begun and performed by the Holy Spirit through the working of this particular knowledge. The

heart is shown the paths that lead to faith, even though this knowledge remains "bodily and composite."

The third degree of knowledge is that of perfection. "When knowledge rises up above the earth and the care for earthly things and begins to examine its own interior and hidden thoughts, scorning that from which the evil of the passions springs and rising up to follow the way of faith in concern for the lift-' to come ...'

It is very difficult, and often impossible, to express in words the mystery and nature of knowledge. In the realm of human thought, there is no ready definition that can explain it completely. St. Isaac therefore gives many different definitions of knowledge. He is continually exercised in this matter, and the problem stands like a burning question mark before the eyes of this holy ascetic. The saint presents answers from his rich and blessed experience, achieved through long and hard asceticism. But the most profound, and to my mind the most exhaustive answer that man can give to this question is that given by St. Isaac in the form of a dialogue:

"Question: What is knowledge? "Answer: The perception of eternal life.

"Question: And what is eternal life? Answer: "To perceive all things in God. For love comes through understanding, and the knowledge of God is ruler over all desires. To the heart that receives this knowledge every delight that exists on earth is superfluous, for there is nothing that can compare with the delight of the knowledge of God.

Knowledge is therefore victory over death, the linking of this life with immortal life and the uniting of man with God. The very act of knowledge touches on the immortal, for it is by knowledge that man passes beyond the limits of the subjective and enters the realm of the trans-subjective. And when the trans-subjective object is God, then the mystery of knowledge becomes the mystery of mysteries and the enigma of enigmas. Such knowledge is a mystical fabric woven on the loom of the soul by the man who is united with God.

For human knowledge the most vital problem is that of truth. Knowledge bears within itself an irresistible pull towards the infinite mystery, and this hunger for truth that is instinctive to human knowledge is never satisfied until eternal and absolute Truth itself becomes the substance of human knowledge until knowledge, in its own self-perception, acquires the perception of God, and in its own self knowledge comes to the knowledge of God. But this is given to man only by Christ, the God-Man, he who is the only incarnation and personification of eternal truth in the world of human realities. When a man has received the God-Man into himself, as the soul of his soul and the life of his life, then that man is constantly filled with the knowledge of eternal truth. . . .

It is the man who restores and transforms his organs of knowledge by the practice of the virtues that comes to the perception and knowledge of the truth. For him faith and knowledge, and all that goes with them, are one indivisible and organic whole. They fulfill and are fulfilled by one another, and each confirms and supports the other. "The light of the mind gives birth to faith," says St. Isaac, "and faith gives birth to the consolation of hope, while hope fortifies the heart. Faith is the enlightenment of the understanding. Faith, which bathes the understanding in light, frees man from pride and doubt, and is known as "the knowledge and manifestation of the truth."

Holy knowledge comes from a holy life, but pride darkens that holy knowledge. The light of truth increases and decreases according to a man's way of life. Terrible temptations fall upon those who seek to live a spiritual life. The ascetic of faith must therefore pass through great sufferings and misfortunes in order to come to knowledge of the truth.

A troubled mind and chaotic thoughts are the fruit of a disordered life, and these darken the soul. When the passions are driven from the soul with the help of the virtues, when "the curtain of the passions is drawn back from the eyes of the mind," then the intellect can perceive the glory of the other world. The soul grows by means of the virtues, the mind is confirmed in the truth and becomes unshakable, "girded for encountering and slaying

every passion." Freedom from the passions is brought about by crucifying of both the intellect and the flesh. This makes a man capable of contemplating God. The intellect is crucified when unclean thoughts are driven out of it, and the body when the passions are up-rooted. "A body given over to pleasure cannot be the abode of the knowledge of God."

True knowledge "the revelation of the mysteries"--is attained by means of the virtues, and this is "the knowledge that saves."

--[The Mystery of Knowledge](#)

Posted by Clifton at [06:30 AM](#) | [TrackBack](#)

Source: http://chattablogs.com/bagioipateres/archives/cat_st_justin_popovich.html