A Defense of The Veritable Hesychast Tradition

Both the East and West sought methods of repairing their relationship after the regrettable incident between Cerularius and Leo IX in 1054. The Second Vatican Council reaffirms this attitude of reconciliation in the modern Church per *Unitatis Redintegratio*, “The very rich liturgical and spiritual heritage of the Eastern Churches should be known, venerated, preserved and cherished by all. They must recognize that this is of supreme importance for the faithful preservation of the fullness of Christian tradition, and for bringing about reconciliation between Eastern and Western Christians.”¹ Among the rich spiritual heritages of the Eastern Church is the mysticism of the monastic Hesychast tradition. Although under the accusation of heresy in the fourteenth century, Hesychasm elicited a new appreciation from more recent Roman scholars like Pope John Paul II.² In the following paper, I will defend Hesychasm in five parts: (1) defining the practice, (2) investigating the proceedings at the Fifth Council of Constantinople, and the context of the Byzantine Civil War, (3) categorizing two doctrinal objections posed by Barlaam, (4) analyzing Gregory’s defense of Hesychasm, and (5) understanding the importance of Gregory and Hesychasm today. In doing so I hope to vindicate the Hesychast Tradition from Latin scrutiny and profit the unity of two Churches, not by assimilating Eastern spirituality, but by revealing their complementary beliefs for “The union of the Churches is not made, but we discover it.”³

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³ The Church and the Churches’, Oecumenica, III, No. 2, July 1936.
Dr. Jamie Blosser introduces the figure of Gregory Palamas in his anthology, *Positively Medieval*, as the great defender of Hesychasm which he defines as the practice “of meditative practices carried out by Eastern monks – inner quietness, controlled breathing, chin pressed into the chest, and the constant repetition of the ‘prayer of the heart’… Monks who practiced this routine claimed it allowed them to see the light of God.”4 Blosser’s definition encapsulates the major features of Hesychasm all stemming from the idea the understanding that the human mind “by victory over the passions acquires an angelic form. It too will attain to that light and will become worthy of a supernatural vision of God.”5 Because man is still very much a physical being, a certain inward looking attitude, worthy of a supernatural vision of God, must have a physical manifestation.

Although Barlaam is quick to mock and jab at the monks with their “eyes at their navels,” Gregory hastens to their defense, “For if, as the psalmist says, ‘all the glory of the king’s daughter is within,’” why do we search for it without?”6 Gregory comments on dispersion of the mind during prayer, a common problem among beginners. He notes that this can be solved by controlled breathing, “they should look at themselves and introduce their own mind within themselves through control of breathing.”7 In Gregory’s view, Hesychast practice has origins in what we know scripturally about the nature of who we are, who God is, and how a finite being and an infinite being can meet in prayer.

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6 Ibid., 38.
7 Ibid., 39.
Hesychasm probably would have continued as a normal practice had it not been for the death of Emperor Andronicus III and the beginning of the Byzantine Civil War. The Fifth Council of Constantinople actually included six separate gatherings over the course of roughly ten years, all to discuss the Hesychast practice.\(^8\) The instigator of the Hesychast controversy was initially Barlaam, but his followers, the Barlaamites, carried on the controversy after the initial session. Barlaam was born in Italy, and although a professed member of the Eastern Church, his academic background in Scholasticism shines in his writings of opposition to Hesychasm. In the first session, before Emperor Andronicus III, Barlaam levied accusations of heresy on Gregory. This move proved catastrophic for Barlaam and his followers as the council affirmed Gregory instead and condemned him. Throughout the Byzantine Empire, Barlaam’s books burned. For this reason today, the main writings we possess of Barlaam are the quotes provided in Gregory’s defense.\(^9\) Barlaam converted to the Western tradition, leaving his followers, primarily Akindynos to defend his position.

Andronicus III died and a political war raged for who would have regency over Andronicus’s young son John V. The civil war split into two sides with Empress Anna and her followers and John VI Kantakouzenos and his followers.\(^10\) The two sides split along religious tensions, Kantakouzenos supporting Gregory and Empress Anna, with Western leaning spirituality, in favor of Akindynos. As the war raged, each side’s political triumphs, led to a religious session’s decision in favor of the preferred theology. The volatility of the Hesychast

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\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^10\) Ibid.
system drained the Byzantine Empire religiously and politically. In the end, with the success of Kantakouzenos, Gregory was vindicated and proclaimed saint in the Eastern rite.

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Before proceeding into the third part of my paper, I must make a pressing distinction between East and West so Gregory’s defense and Barlaam’s accusations make sense. I turn particularly to the work of Vladamir Lossky, a prominent 20th century Orthodox scholar and expert on Eastern Mysticism. He analyzes the position of Eastern Mysticism with a damning contrast to Western belief, an opposition which I will later reject.

Western opposition to Hesychasm is best understood in the context of the Great Schism. As Vladamir Lossky notes, “The *filioque* was the primordial cause, the only dogmatic cause, of the breach between East and West. The other doctrinal disputes *were but its consequences*… western thought most frequently took as its starting point the one nature, and thence passed to the consideration of the three persons, while the Greeks followed the opposite course -from the three persons to the one nature.”\(^{11}\) Lossky correctly pinpoints the two variant focuses of each tradition’s writings. The Western emphasis on the monotheistic God, His unity, plays a large part in the rejection of Hesychasm and its distinction between energies and essences. The Eastern emphasis, while not heretical, appeared as a claim of polytheism to the Western trained eye.

Second to the problem of variant emphases in Trinitarian doctrine is the difference in each tradition’s approach to knowing God. Following the tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Latin Church incorporated the writings of the ancient philosophers, using technical language and fine distinction to understand God and our relationship to Him. Lossky notes the sharp contrast:

“The theology of the Orthodox Church… has never entered into alliance with philosophy in any attempt at a doctrinal synthesis: despite all its richness, the religious thought of the East has never had a scholasticism.” \(^{12}\) Lossky’s strong analysis of the East’s reluctance to adopt philosophy also seems to indicate the irreconcilability of the Hesychast belief in encountering God in a visible, personal, and regular method. Such differences led Yves M.J. Congar to conclude, “We have become different men. We have the same God, but before him we are different men, unable to agree as to the nature of our relationship with him.” \(^{13}\) Both the problem of philosophical approach to God and Trinitarian doctrine lay the foundation for Barlaam’s opposition to Hesychasm. Gregory Palamas, in his writings, attempted to assuage such vehement cries of heresy with Trinitarian distinctions and methodological clarifications.

Out of these differences between the East and West, two of Barlaam’s criticisms against Hesychasm arise. Latin theology seems to be in direct opposition to the theological suppositions of Gregory and the Hesychasts. First, Palamas makes a distinction between the essence and energies of God, specifically manifest in the uncreated light, triggering the Scholastic reaction against the disunity attributed to the Divine Being. Second, Palamas asserts that man can really perceive the uncreated light, challenging Western understanding of how man comes to know God. In the remaining paragraphs of this section, I will set up Barlaam’s major arguments against Hesychasm and what he perceives to be the heresy in Palamas’s assertions.

Defining terms is a marked characteristic of Latin Theology. To Barlaam, the terms essence and energy are particularly important. The essence of God is who He is – one, actus purus. The understanding of actus purus is best identified by St. Thomas Aquinas who will

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 104.

assert the simplicity of God and make no distinction between God’s being and his actions. As Constantinos Athanasopoulos notes, “The Latin Tradition does not conceive of a real difference between God’s essentia and operatio on the grounds of his simplicity… [there is] the apparent irreconcilability between the Palamistic and Thomistic concepts of God.”\textsuperscript{14} In this understanding, the East criticizes the West for rejecting the possibility of participating in the Divine.

The West, presupposing the oneness of essence and energy, criticizes the East as the concept of participation in God’s energy is synonymous to claiming that one can join with the essence of God. Joining with the essence of God has two implications. First, it implies a multiplicity in God, a direct attack on the Latin’s treasured emphasis on the oneness of God. Second, it implies a potency because scholastics like Aquinas will claim that any thing which implies an active addition (a participation) in the Divine essence, is said to be in potency to the other. Barlaam defends the Scholastic position which “conceives of God’s proper activity as entirely contained in God, who acts without instrument besides His Essence, and is in virtual contact with His effects, namely the being of His creatures.”\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, Gregory claims that the energy of the Divine Light is uncreated. God alone is uncreated, and yet Gregory claims that energy and essence are separate. Thus, Hesychasm also incurs the criticism of being ditheist. Thus we are presented with the first criticism in three parts: Hesychasm promotes multiplicity within God, potency within God, and multiple gods.

Western critics like Barlaam use this underlying principle to attack the Hesychast perception of “divine light.” What is the Divine Light? To the Eastern Tradition, the Divine


\textsuperscript{15} Daniel J. Castellanos, Reconciling Hesychasm and Scholasticism in the Triads of Gregory Palamas 2.1.
Light is the energy of God. The Latin scholastics object to this claim because they perceive it as a claim to seeing the essence of God. Yet “the Divine Light” is a common phrase used in both traditions. How does the Western Church understand the Divine light? Gregory notes Barlaam’s definition of the Divine light, “‘this light was a sensible light, visible through the medium of air, appearing to the amazement of all and then at once disappearing. One calls it ‘divinity’ because it is a symbol of divinity.’” Simply put, Barlaam wishes to preserve the unity of God while asserting that man can participate in God by using the language of the symbol of Divine light. This calls Hesychast practice into question. What is the aim of Hesychast practice if only to see a symbol of Divine light?

Under the persistent attack of Barlaam and the escalating circumstances of the Byzantine Civil War, Gregory Palamas put his reputation on the line and wrote the Triads to defend Hesychasm. The Triads are three sets of three treatises (nine writings total) which define and defend Hesychasm. The excerpts from the Triads in this section stem from the Third Triad, treatises one and two. In the first two Triads, Gregory treated the practice itself and defended general objections. By the third Triad, Gregory directly attacked Barlaam and his particular statements. All of Barlaam’s main criticisms are quoted in Gregory’s treatment of them. In each of his responses, he is careful to refute the title of heretic and use scripture and a common appeal to the saints and other Church Fathers in his case. The Triads must be read in the context of a defense given at a series of councils which would have been held in the form of a trial.

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To understand the separation of essence and energy, Gregory uses his famous sun and rays analogy which address Barlaam’s three part accusation against the distinction of essence, energy and the created light.

“In the first place, the essence is one, even though the rays are many, and are sent out in a manner appropriate to those participating in them, being multiplied according to the varying capacity of those receiving them. This is what Paul means when he speaks of the ‘parts of the Holy Spirit.’ Furthermore, the essence is superessential, and I believe no one would deny that these rays are its energies or energy, and that one may participate in them, even though the essence remains beyond participation.”

In this analogy, the sun is equivalent to God’s essence and the rays to God’s energies. The first part of Barlaam’s attack is the claim of multiplicity within God. Gregory refers to the words of Paul taken from Hebrews 2:4 which speaks of the parts, as in “gifts” of the Holy Spirit. God is one, but the multiplicity occurs in the way God relates to us, allowing us to participate in Him. This avoids the scandal of the Western Church by preserving the essential unity of God. The concern about potency subsides in this analogy too as God’s essence is not fulfilled in our participation with Him, but rather God accommodates his energy to our participation with Him. Our participation in not an addition but a fundamental reception on our part. Gregory finally addresses the objection of ditheism with his doctrine of superessence. God and His energy are distinct to us, but not in Him. Without His essence, the rays do not exist and as the existence of

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17 Ibid., 81.
one relies on the existence of the other, so too He is uncreated, and the rays too must be uncreated.

Of all Barlaam’s more intellectual attacks, none angers Gregory more than when Barlaam denounces as impossible the Hesychasts’ claim to see the Divine light. He does not mince words, “Yet this quibbler… accuses us falsely of regarding God as a sensible reality. Do you not understand that the men who are united to God and deified… do not see as we do?… they see with the sense that exceeds the senses, and with the mind that exceeds the mind.”18 Gregory uses the Biblical examples of Moses and the saints as examples. More subtly, he makes the jab at Western scholasticism which focuses more on the ideas and philosophies than the experience of God Himself. Gregory uses more than sentiment and theological example. He responds to Barlaam with a clever analogy for meeting the Divine light. “If the emperor wished to do a soldier the honour of speaking to him personally, the soldier would not immediately become general… He says, ‘a man can only meet God through the mediation of an angel, for we are subordinate to the angelic hierarchy.’ Are you trying to make subject to necessity Him Who is Master of necessity?”19 Gregory’s refutation legitimizes the monk’s search to encounter the Divine light’s search to encounter the Divine light.

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The decisions of the Hesychast Councils, although temporarily painful for Gregory, ended in the vindication of Hesychasm in the Eastern Church. Gregory’s works allowed the monks on Mt. Athos to continue their Hesychast mysticism. Gregory of Palamas’ *Triads*, more than defenses of Hesychast practice, lay the foundation for Eastern theology. *The Triads* offer

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18 Ibid., 87.
19 Ibid. 84.
insight into the differences between the Latin Church and the Eastern Church. It is unfortunate that Barlaam’s writings do not exist in their entirety. The dialogue about the differences in Eastern spirituality and Western scholasticism are made possible by Gregory’s careful preservation of Barlaam’s criticisms. In proper light of the teachings of Vatican II, the highlighted differences, noted in Gregory’s treatment allow for a new conversation to begin, one of reconciliation and appreciation.

On August 11, 1996, John Paul II spoke at the Angelus reading a text he prepared entitled “Eastern Theology has Enriched the Whole Church,” saying “How many things we have in common! It is time for Catholics and Orthodox to make an extra effort to understand each other better and to recognize with the renewed wonder of brotherhood what the Spirit is accomplishing in their respective traditions towards a new Christian springtime.” Continuing further, the Pontiff remarked specifically on the gift of the Hesychast practice which inspires the entire Church to a faithful aspiration of unity with the Trinity. Although Hesychasm remains a controversial practice, more and more Western scholars have come to accept Gregory’s defense.

Barlaam’s attack on Hesychasm, the unique and obscure practice of Eastern monks on Mt. Athos, led to one of the greatest Eastern spiritual treatises, Gregory’s Triads. Beside defending Hesychasm, Gregory upholds a unique Trinitarian and spiritual doctrine. In investigating Barlaam’s objections, the discrepancies between Western scholasticism and Eastern spirituality appear. Gregory’s defense against Barlaam offers insight into the riches of Eastern spirituality. Following the recent rise in Western scholarship and appreciation for the Eastern

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20 John Paul II, Eastern Theology has Enriched the Whole Church, 3.
tradition, an analysis of Gregory’s theology reveals a rich variant, but compatible theology to that of the Western Church.
Bibliography


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