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The honouring of the Holy Spirit

Most will agree that the Church which through the centuries has most fully honoured the Holy Spirit, and brought Him most fully into its worship, life and ministry has been the Orthodox. Let us look briefly at five areas where this is clear:

First, there has been the strong emphasis in the whole life of the Church on the Trinity, which sees the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as co-equal. The Church has also condemned the insertion by the Western Church of the *filioque* clause into the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, which weakens the co-equality of the Persons of the Trinity.

Secondly, the Orthodox Church has always emphasised the Incarnation and thus the work of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Christ in the womb of the Theotokos, the God-bearer.

Thirdly, the Orthodox Church has been the only Church to continue the practice of Christian baptism as the three-fold immersion of the candidate in water, followed immediately by chrismation symbolising the reception of the Holy Spirit and followed then by the candidate receiving their first communion. Again the Holy Spirit is active in the whole Baptism process.

Fourthly, in the Orthodox Eucharist (of St John Chrysostom), which is seen by the Orthodox as the heart of the Church, the service is interspersed with many references to the Holy Spirit. It begins, for example, with a prayer to the Holy Spirit which is unique in liturgical practices:

O heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who art everywhere present and fillest all things, Treasury of good things and Giver of life: come, and abide in us, and cleanse us from every stain, and save our souls, O good One.

In the Russian tradition the following words are spoken by the Priest just before the *Epiclisis*: “O Lord, who at the third hour didst send down upon thine apostles thy Holy Spirit: take not the same from us, O good One, but renew him in us who pray unto Thee.”

Then follows the important *epiclesis* prayer which the Priest says, “send down thy Holy Spirit *upon us* and upon these gifts spread forth.” Notice it is a prayer for the Holy Spirit to come upon the people as well as the bread and the wine. Earlier in the service, if there is more than one Priest at the service, a dialogue takes place:

Pray for me, brother(s) and concelebrant(s)
 May the Holy Spirit descend upon thee and the power of the
 Most High overshadow thee
 May the same Spirit serve with us all the days of our life.

In another place the Priest prays that “the power of the Holy Spirit” will enable him.

Fifthly, there are the Feasts of Theophany and the Transfiguration of Christ, both of which have a very prominent place in the Orthodox Church. Theophany is the name given to what in the West is called Epiphany. In the West the liturgical focus is on the visit of the Magi to Christ after his birth in Bethlehem. But in the East the focus is on the Baptism of Christ in the river Jordan, which is an event which has never been given the same emphasis in the West. The importance of Christ’s Baptism is the manifestation of the Trinity – the voice of the Father *and* the coming of the Holy Spirit as a dove on Christ. In the Early Church this was seen as the pattern for Christian Baptisms, at least until the heresy of Adoptionism caused the emphasis to shift.

As far as the Feast of the Transfiguration is concerned – the Orthodox Church has given it great prominence from the 4th century, whereas in the West it appeared first in the 9th century and only fully in the 15th. The late Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, once wrote, “Orthodoxy has a much greater grasp than we in the West of the significance and meaning of the Transfiguration”. The Orthodox see again in this incident the Trinity – the voice of the Father and the cloud that overshadowed them signifying the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps this is the right place to leave our study – with Christ on mount Tabor. This is where we all can share. This is where our journey can take in Aldersgate Street (the sanctifying Spirit) and Azusa Street (the empowering Spirit). It is a pity that the Wesleys and so many others have tended to limit the sources on this subject mostly to the ante-Nicene period. The Emperor Constantine is seen as a cut off point. So the Early Methodists did not seem to know the writings of the most charismatic of

all the Church Fathers: St Symeon, the New Theologian (949-1022)¹ and later the immensely important contribution of St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359).

St Gregory argued that Christians can and do experience the divine light. He sought to answer the question – how can humans know God and the God who is by nature unknowable? He answered this by teaching that we know the *energies* of God, but not his *essence*. Metropolitan Kallistos writes, “God is Light, and, therefore, the experience of God’s energies takes the form of Light. The vision... is not a vision of some created radiance, but of the Light of the Godhead itself – the same light of the Godhead which surrounded Christ on Mount Tabor.”²

Thus the Orthodox see the Transfiguration not only as an experience that Christ received – but as something we can experience ourselves. One immediately thinks of the story of St Seraphim of Sarov and his encounter with Nicholas Motovilov. St Seraphim taught that the true aim of the Christian life was the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God, and this was the subject of their discussion in the forest. They were both to be transfigured:

Then Father Seraphim took me very firmly by the shoulders and said “my son, we are both at this moment in the Spirit of God.

Why don’t you look at me?”

“I cannot look, Father” I replied – “because your eyes are flashing like lightning – your face has become brighter than the sun, and it hurts my eyes to look at you.”

“Don’t be afraid” he said, “at this very moment you yourself have become as bright as I am. You yourself are now in the fullness of the Spirit of God; otherwise you would not be able to see me as you do.”

Then – bending his head toward me, he whispered softly in my ear: “thank the Lord God for his infinite goodness toward us... But

¹Metropolitan Kallistos in his lecture *Personal Experience of the Holy Spirit according to the Greek Fathers* focuses on the writings of St Symeon.

²Metropolitan Kallistos *The Orthodox Church*, Penguin pages 68-69

why, my son, do you not look me in the eyes? Just look and do not be afraid; the Lord is with us.”³

Motovilov then described a blinding light that spread for several yards lighting up not only St Seraphim, but the whole snow covered landscape. The reported conversation ends with these words from St Seraphim, which are deeply charismatic in their essence, “when the Spirit of God comes down on a man and overshadows him with the fullness of his presence, then that man’s soul overflows with unspeakable joy, for the Holy Spirit fills with joy whatever He touches...” Metropolitan Kallistos describes this experience as “the brightness which is nothing less than the uncreated energies of God – the light which spreads round them is identical with the divine light which shone around our Lord at his Transfiguration on Mount Tabor.”

In the Orthodox Church there are numerous instances of this in the experience of the dead bodies of saints. For example the death of St Sergius of Radonezh “the saint’s face gleamed like snow, not as the face of a dead man, but with a living radiance, or as the face of an angel....”

We also see this in the days of the Wesleys. Charles Wesley wrote this verse about the death of Mrs Mary Horton:

The grace that saved our happy friend,
Which made her faithful to the end,
And decked her head with rays,
We shall for us sufficient prove,
And strive, in humble fear and love,
To perfect holiness.

One of Charles Wesley’s most famous hymns was based on the Transfiguration::

Christ whose glory fills the skies
Christ the true the only Light
Sun of righteousness arise
Triumph over all the shades of night;
Dayspring from on high, be near;
Day-star in my heart appear.

³ Op. cit. pages 119-120 The conversation in the forest is recalled in Fedotov’s *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality* pages 273-5

Dark and cheerless is the morn
Unaccompanied by Thee
Joyless is the day's return,
Till Thy mercy's beams I see,
Till Thou inward light impart,
Glad my eyes and warm my heart.

Visit then this soul of mine;
Pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
Fill me, Radiance divine;
Scatter all my unbelief;
More and more Thyself display,
Shining to the perfect day.

So let me summarise and look in general at the map of where our journey has taken us. All our journey is about the restoration of elements of the revelation of Christ to the world through His Body, the Church. We have seen how, through God becoming Man and through the action of the Holy Spirit, we can become holy people – as we become partakers of the divine nature. We have also seen that Pentecost was essentially the empowering of the people of God that they could not only be like Christ in his nature, but do the works that He did. Both are made possible by the moving of what is in the head to the heart, which is at the centre of the life and practice of the Eastern Orthodox Church. As the 4th century Desert Father Evagrius has put it, “one who prays truly will be a theologian, and one who is a theologian will pray truly”. This is often quoted today as putting into words the patristic ideal of how theology relates to the spiritual life.

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