

Holiness and Healing: Rejoicing in our Creatureliness¹

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Holiness and healing are clearly interconnected concepts within the Christian tradition. In a certain sense we would not see ourselves entering on the path of holiness without first undergoing spiritual healing. Yet, would we be willing to see healing as integral to holiness? Do we recognize our brokenness and thus our need for God as the very stuff of who we are as beings on the road of divinization? Are we willing to see the essence of humanity in its brokenness, weakness, createdness, and thus in its utter dependence upon God? To investigate such questions and the relationship between holiness and healing, I propose that we turn to the beginning of the Christian story.

Christians are called to divine life. Does that begin with the Incarnation? Or perhaps, that invitation rightly begins, according to Scripture, with creation? Maximus the Confessor observes that there is a self-revelation of God in the very act of Creation. And inasmuch as God reveals Himself in creation, it (along with humanity) is already formed with a *telos* or goal in mind.² In fact Maximus, along with others, speaks about the act of creation as *constitutive* of who we (and all that is created) are: radically different from God – marked by *diaphora* or difference and diversity.³ We have then a fundamental distinction which will be very important for the development

¹ This is an edited version of a lecture originally given in Ottawa in July 2010 at the Sheptytsky Institute's Study Days.

² Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Byzantine Gospel: Maximus the Confessor in Modern Scholarship* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 121.

³ *Ibid.*, 122.

of Eastern theology: the distinction between the divine, or uncreated, and the created. I will return to this later, but for now note that *diaphora* or difference is not a negative characteristic of creation; it is simply that which allows us to move freely from our point of creation by discovering the inherent nature of things, or *logoi*, to a personal union in divine life.⁴ But if we are radically other than the uncreated, how is it possible for the created to transcend its createdness? Once more, the answer lies in the beginning, or rather where there is no beginning.

We can begin our understanding of “Holiness and Healing” by reminding ourselves about a critical insight into the divine nature. Maximus affirms,⁵ (and in the last century Sergei Bulgakov further develops), that the divine act of creation reveals the divine nature as a God who wills to create out of divine benevolence, or as we say in reference to the Cross: life-creating love. Here is the true beginning of the story: God is a benevolent, self-giving God. As Paul writes:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross (Phil. 2:5–8).

This self-emptying, kenotic love is not unique to the Son; it reflects the very self-emptying and giving love of the divine nature which is “given, returned, circulated eternally between Father, Son, and Spirit.”⁶ This Tri-unity is magnificently portrayed in Rublev’s icon. The Father, who is *arche*, eternally

⁴ Ibid., 209.

⁵ Ibid., 124-125.

⁶ Williams, “Creation, Creativity and Creatureliness: the Wisdom of Finite Existence” (lecture presented at Study Day organized by the St. Theosevia Centre for Christian Spirituality, Oxford, U.K. April, 2005): <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2106/creation-creativity-and-creatureliness-the-wisdom-of-finite-existence>.

begets the Son – the full and true image of the Father. From all eternity, the Father breathes the Spirit, who rests upon the Son and in time receives the mission from the Son.⁷ It is this God, and no other, who perpetually engages in self-giving creative love. Gavriilyuk synthesizes Bulgakov’s perspective: “the essential point to be grasped here is that all three persons of the Trinity become kenotically transparent to each other and lose their own selves only to find them in the other.”⁸ Thus this self-emptying (kenotic) and self-giving God “makes room” for that which is not God, by creating out of nothingness. Sergius Bulgakov speaks of God creating by “implanting” seeds in “nothing” and “these seeds belong to the self-revelation of divinity in the Holy Trinity.”⁹ Creation is born of the very being of God: God calls creation into existence out of God’s very kenotic Trinitarian essence. It is “an act of God’s own self-determination, God’s action in Himself.”¹⁰ This is a self-emptying act because the uncreated and unlimited creates that which is not uncreated and that which is limited. By so doing God accepts a limit and this limit is manifested most clearly in human freedom. God never imposes His will upon humanity: rather He calls humanity to understand and respond freely. The kenotic God calls humanity to understand its origins, its relationships, and to respond freely and kenotically. It is also this divine kenotic love which shows creation that difference need not mean division. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are unique, different persons, yet undivided and completely mutually indwelling (*perichoresis*).¹¹ God accepts other limits as well through the Incarnation: frailty, physicality, suffering. The Incarnation demonstrates the extent to which humanity can embody divine

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Paul L. Gavriilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 256.

⁹ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 17.

¹⁰ Ibid., 48.

¹¹ For Bulgakov difference lies at the very core of Trinitarian being: “God is love, and love is God’s ontological self-determination, a self-determination that is not monotonously impoverished but multifariously diverse. Different in its mode is the love of each of the hypostases for the other hypostases.” Ibid., 48.