

The Way of Spiritual Transformation

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1. Transformation, Salvation, Deification

The theme of this Conference—"Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind"—is a rather daunting theme to talk about, because it is so vast and all-encompassing. It touches on the whole purpose of our lives as Orthodox Christians. Our Lord Jesus Christ said: *I have chosen you out of the world* (John 15:19). We have been called out of this world in order to become citizens of another world: the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom begins now, in this life, continues after we leave this world, and will reach its consummation at the Second Coming of our Savior. In order to dwell in that Kingdom, to be its citizens, we must be transformed.

Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind (Rom. 12:2). These words from the Epistle of the Holy Apostle Paul to the Romans help to introduce a Divinely inspired teaching on spiritual transformation. In this talk, I will speak first about the theological meaning of transformation in the Orthodox Church. Then I will provide a commentary from the Holy Fathers concerning St. Paul's teaching on transformation. Next, I will offer some practical suggestions concerning the *way* to transformation, with an emphasis on watchfulness and prayer. Finally, I will speak of authentic love as the primary mark of genuine spiritual transformation.

As I said, the theme of transformation points to the purpose of our life. That purpose is unending union with God—deification, *theosis*. But deification is not a static condition: it is a never-ending growth, a process, an ascent toward God. We do not reach the end in this life, nor even in the life to come. St. Symeon the New Theologian, who attained what might be called the highest possible degree of union with God in this life, said: "Over the ages the progress will be endless, for a cessation of this growing toward the end without ending would be nothing but a grasping at the ungraspable." [1]

Our union with God is a continual *transformation* into the likeness of God, which is the likeness of Christ.

I, like many of you, have come to the Orthodox Church from a Protestant background. Every once in a while, a Protestant will ask me the question: "Are you saved?" It is difficult to answer this question in a way that a Protestant would understand, because the Protestant conception of salvation is so different from our Orthodox understanding. Recently I read Clark Carlton's book *The Life*. He is a former Protestant himself, and well understands the Protestant mind. He makes the insightful point that, in Protestantism, salvation means simply changing God's attitude toward you, so that you can go to heaven. According to this understanding, it literally only takes a few minutes to be "saved." [2]

In Orthodoxy, on the other hand, salvation is viewed in *maximal* rather than minimal terms. In his book *Orthodox Spiritual Life according to St. Silouan the Athonite*, Harry Boosalis of St. Tikhon's Seminary writes: "For the Orthodox Church, salvation is more than the pardon of sins and transgressions. It is more than being justified or acquitted for offenses committed against God. According to Orthodox teaching, salvation certainly includes forgiveness and justification, but is by no means limited to them. For the Fathers of the Church, salvation is the acquisition of the Grace of the Holy Spirit. To be saved is to be sanctified and to participate in the life of God—indeed to become *partakers of the Divine Nature* (2 Peter 1:4)." [3]

In Orthodoxy, salvation means not simply changing God's attitude, but changing ourselves and being changed by God. Salvation ultimately means deification; and deification, as we have seen, entails transformation. It is being united with God ever more fully through His Grace, His Uncreated Energy, in which He is fully present. As we participate ever more fully in God's life through His Grace, we become ever more deified, ever more in the likeness of Christ. Then, at the time of our departure from this life, we can dwell forever with Christ in His Kingdom because we "look like Him" spiritually, because we are shining with the Grace of God.

Many years ago, in 1982, I took a trip to the Holy Land. I was still a catechumen then, and was planning to be baptized back in California only a month or so after I returned from the trip. I remember one day when I was in Jerusalem, in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, standing on Golgotha, at the place where Christ was crucified. I was crossing myself. An elderly lady who was standing next to me asked me where I was from. I believe she was Greek. When I told her I was from America, she said, "You're from America, and you're *Orthodox*?" I said I wasn't,

but that I was soon to be, God willing. Then she looked at me piercingly, and emphatically said, "When you are Orthodox, you can become holy."

That was an affirmation for me concerning the life's path I was about to embark on. I heard those words right there on Calvary, where Christ died for my salvation so that I *could* become holy, so that I *could* have the Grace of God within me at Baptism, so that I *could* continue to acquire the Grace of the Holy Spirit, so that I *could* become deified.

With his Incarnation, death and Resurrection, Christ redeemed human nature, opening the path to deification and even to the redemption of the body that will occur at the General Resurrection. That is the *objective* dimension of our salvation. But while our *nature* has already been saved, we have to *personally* appropriate that salvation. That is the *subjective* dimension of our salvation. Christ has already come to us; it is up to us to come to Him and be united with Him.

When we read Orthodox teachings on transformation, holiness, and deification—and even more when we read of people who have reached a high degree of holiness—all of it can seem far beyond us. In one sense, it *should* seem beyond us; that is, we should feel we have a long way to go, because we do. However, we should not feel that holiness and deification are ultimately out of our reach. Each one of us is called to it. When I think back on what that lady told me on Golgotha twenty-three years ago, I think about what I *have not* done to become holy, to be transformed into the likeness of Christ, to be "saved" in the maximal Orthodox sense of the word. I am sure that each one of us here can think of what we have not done, how we could have done more in all the time we have been Orthodox Christians. But that should not lead us to despair. Rather, it should lead us to repentance, to a desire to rededicate our lives to Christ, to the thought of what we *can* do to be saved, to be deified, from this moment forward.

2. Living Sacrifices

With this in mind, let us look more closely at St. Paul's exhortation: *Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind*. This is part of an entire chapter of Scripture that discusses spiritual transformation. In examining this chapter, I will rely first of all on the commentary given by St. John Chrysostom, who might be called the preeminent Orthodox commentator on Scripture. St. John's commentaries on the Epistles of St. Paul are of special

interest because St. John was instructed by St. Paul himself in how to interpret his Epistles. According to St. John's Life, on three occasions his disciple Proclus saw the Apostle Paul standing over St. John's shoulder and speaking into his ear while St. John was writing his commentaries on the Epistles.

St. Paul's teaching on spiritual transformation—Romans, chapter 12—begins by telling us of the preconditions for such transformation. St. Paul writes to the Christians at Rome: *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.*

In his commentary on this passage, St. John Chrysostom asks: "How is the body to become a sacrifice? Let the eye look on no evil thing, and it has become a sacrifice. Let your tongue speak nothing filthy, and it has become an offering. Let your hand do no lawless deed, and it has become a whole burnt offering. But this is not enough. We must have good works, also. Let the hand give alms, the mouth bless those who oppose one, the hearing find solace in Divine teachings. For sacrifice allows no unclean things: sacrifice is a first-fruit of other actions. Let us then from our hands, our feet, our mouths, and all our other members, yield a first-fruit to God." [4]

St. John Chrysostom says that, in the Old Covenant, animals offered in sacrifice were dead after the sacrifice was performed. "Not so," he says, "with our sacrifice. This sacrifice makes the thing sacrificed to be living. For when we have put to death our members, then we shall be able to live." [5] St. John is here referring to Colossians 3:5, where St. Paul says: *Put to death therefore your members which are upon the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.*

So, according to St. Paul's teaching, we are to present ourselves as living sacrifices to God. In so doing, our "old man," our "man of sin" dies, and our "new man" lives (cf. Rom. 6:6; Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9). We put to death our sinful passions, so that Christ can live in us. We die to ourselves, so that we can be reborn in Christ.

Our death and rebirth are first marked at Baptism, when, according to St. Paul, we die with Christ and are resurrected with Him (cf. Rom. 6:3–4). In Baptism, we receive the Grace of the Holy Spirit within us, united with our soul, as Adam and Eve had it within themselves before the Fall. This is the beginning of our salvation and deification in Christ; but it is *only* the beginning. We are to

continually put to death the remnants of our "old man," in order to be continually transformed into the likeness of Christ. That is why St. Paul said: *I die daily* (I Cor. 15:31).

Christ offered Himself on the Cross as a sacrifice for us. In order to truly know Christ, we must enter into His self-emptying and offer a sacrifice in return. An inward sacrifice which is the *act* and *sign* of our love for God and neighbor. It is the sacrifice of our hearts and minds to God. The sacrifice of our egos, our pride, our earthly attachments and our passions. The sacrifice of our time and energy for our fellow human beings, to whom we dedicate ourselves for the sake of Christ.

As we allow Christ to put our egos to death, our fleshly selves are consumed on the altar of love, and the sacrifice rises like incense to God. And as this occurs, we are actually *re-created* by Christ into new beings: spiritual beings with an entirely new way of seeing reality, different from that of lovers of this world.

The sacrifice is painful. Our "old man," our "man of sin" does not want to die on the altar of sacrifice. The pull of our fallen nature is strong. The Holy Fathers teach that the Fall of man resulted from two motives. The first is self-esteem or self-love (*in the day ye eat [of the fruit of the tree] ye shall be as gods—Gen. 3:5*), and the second is love of sensual pleasure (*the tree was good for food, and pleasant to the eyes—Gen. 3:6*). All sins in the world, the Fathers say, stem from these two causes. We do not inherit the guilt of Adam's sin, but we do inherit the *tendency* or *inclination* toward sin. That inclination belongs to our "old man," the man of ego, the fleshly man, whom we have indulged over the years. When we try to put him to death, he will fight for his right to exist. That is why the sacrifice is so painful.

The pain of this sacrifice is powerfully expressed in the autobiography of Abbess Thaisia, one of the great abbesses of nineteenth-century Russia. Once she had a dream in which one of the great abbots of Russia, Damascene, appeared to her. Abbot Damascene had died one year before, and Abbess Thaisia was now enduring great tribulation in her life. In the dream Abbot Damascene asked her, "Do you know what the meaning is of the rending in two of the veil of the Temple in Jerusalem at the time of our Savior's death on the Cross?" Abbess Thaisia replied that this signified the division between the Old and New Testaments.

"That is good," the Abbot said, "that is correct according to the books. But think yourself: doesn't this refer somehow to our Christian life?"

Abbess Thaisia began to contemplate, and then replied, "I think that this signifies how the human soul is torn as it strives toward God and toward pleasing God. It is rent in two, becoming spiritual but not ceasing to belong to the fleshly man that dwells in it; it is torn, cutting off and tearing away from itself the will of the outward man, which is sweet, but inclined to sin. Its poor heart is torn, tearing itself in half, into pieces. Some of these pieces, as unfit but nonetheless akin to it, it tears and throws into the world, but the others it carries like pure incense to its Christ. Oh, how difficult it sometimes is for the poor heart; how it is tormented and suffers, literally being torn in half!"

In her dream, Abbess Thaisia said this with such fervor that she was covered with tears. Abbot Damascene said to her, "Yes, the Lord has not deprived you of His Grace. Is it for you to grow fainthearted and despondent in sorrows? Take courage, and may your heart be strengthened with hope in the Lord." With these words the Abbot stood up and blessed Abbess Thaisia. She awoke all in tears, but tears no longer of sorrow but of inexpressible joy. [6]

Abbess Thaisia's words provide us with an exact image of the sacrifice that is required of us who would know Christ and be united to God. It is a sacrifice most painful to the ego—for in it the ego dies a slow death—but it is a sacrifice that brings the greatest joy, courage and freedom to the spirit, which unites in love with its Creator. We must "give blood," said the Desert Father St. Longinus of Egypt, in order to "receive Spirit."

Speaking further of the sacrifice we are to offer God, St. John Chrysostom again likens it to the sacrifices of the Hebrews in the Old Testament. Just as the Hebrews examined carefully the animals they were to offer in sacrifice, to make sure there they had no spots and blemishes and were whole and healthy, so likewise should we examine ourselves strictly, so as to be pure in all respects. Then, says St. John, "we will also be able to say as did Paul, *I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand* (II Tim. 4:6).... But this will be brought about if we kill the old man, if we put to death our members which are on the earth, if we crucify the world to ourselves.... If, when Elias offered the visible sacrifice, a flame came down from above and consumed the whole water, wood and stones, much more will this be done for you. And if you have anything in

yourselves which is relaxed and worldly, and yet you offer the sacrifice with a good intention, the fire of the Spirit will come down, and both wear away the worldliness, and perfect the whole sacrifice." [7]

Here we see the basis, the foundation, of spiritual transformation: We have to offer our whole lives to Christ in sacrifice, so that He can burn off the dross and re-create us in His likeness.

3. Not Conformity but Transformation

Now we are ready to look at today's theme in its full context. First comes sacrifice, then comes transformation. That is why, in Romans chapter 12, the first precedes the other in direct sequence: *Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God ... and be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.*

If we have put to death our "old man" on the altar of sacrifice, it follows that we will not be conformed to this world.

What is meant by "the world"? There are several meanings of the term "world" in Holy Scripture. It can mean the material universe, or the inhabited world. In its negative connotation, it can mean those who are opposed to God, and, according to some Holy Fathers, it can refer to the passions or to attachment to the things of the senses. St. Isaac the Syrian writes: "The world' is the general name for all the passions. When we call the passions by a common name, we call them the world. But when we wish to distinguish them by their special names, we call them passions. The passions are the following: love of riches, desire for possessions, bodily pleasure from which comes sexual passion, love of honor which gives rise to envy, lust for power, arrogance and pride of position, the craving to adorn oneself with luxurious clothes and vain ornaments, the itch for human glory which is a source of anger and resentment, and physical fear. Where these passions cease to be active, there the world is dead.... Someone has said of the saints that while alive they were dead; for though living *in* the flesh, they did not live *for* the flesh. See for which of these passions you are alive. Then you will know how far you are alive to the world, and how far you are dead to it." [8]

With this Patristic teaching in mind, the words "Be not conformed to the world" can be understood to mean "Be not conformed to the passions." The Fathers say that all of us have our own favorite passions: our first favorite, our second

favorite, etc. We are to examine ourselves to see what our favorite passions are, so that we can confess them in the Sacrament of Confession and root them out with God's help.

Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed.... St. John Chrysostom, in commenting on this verse, points out the different roots of the words "conform" and "transform." In the English translation, the roots are the same, but in Greek they are very different. The word for "conform" comes from the root *schema*, which means an external pose, an appearance, an outward image, the putting on of an outward habit. It denotes not something lasting and fixed, but something unsubstantial that passes away. Another translation for this word might be "fashion," as in another passage of St. Paul, where he uses the same word: *The fashion of this world passeth away* (I Cor. 7:31). This translation has the connotation that our English word "fashion" has: that is, something that changes all the time, like fashions in clothing, etc.

According to St. John Chrysostom, when St. Paul says, "Be not fashioned according to this world," he chooses the word "fashion" in order to indicate the fleetingness of this world of passions. "Be not fashioned according to the passions," one might say. Also, the word St. Paul uses for "world" is *aeon*, which can also be translated as "age" or "the world according to time"—once again to indicate the fleetingness of worldly delights. St. John Chrysostom explains: "If you speak of riches, or of glory, or beauty of person, or of luxury, or of whatever other of the world's seemingly great things, it is a fashion only, not reality, a show and a mask, not any abiding substance." [9]

Think of the images that the entertainment media puts before us as worthy of admiration and emulation: the rich, the famous, the beautiful. Are not these what St. John is speaking of: "a fashion only, not reality, a show and a mask"? It all passes away.

Not so with spiritual transformation. St. Paul says, "Be *transformed* by the renewal of your mind." The word for "transformed" is *metamorphosis* in the original Greek. This denotes something lasting and enduring: not the change of one's appearance or image, as in worldly fashions, but the change of one's organic and substantial form. St. Paul is saying not that we are to change our fashion or appearance, but that we are to change *who we are*. According to St. John Chrysostom, St. Paul chooses his words to show that "the world's ways are a fashion, but

virtue's ways are not a fashion, but a kind of real form with a natural beauty of its own, lacking the trickeries and fashions of outward things, which no sooner appear than they end up as nothing. If, then, you throw the fashion aside, you will speedily come to the form." [10]

In other words, do not live for what passes away, but for what endures for ever. Our Lord Jesus Christ said: *Labor not for the food which perisheth, but for the food which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of Man shall give unto you: for Him hath God the Father sealed* (John 6:27).

In the world—the world of the passions—much emphasis is placed on "image": you have to have the right outward "image" in order to be successful in this world. Our aim as Christians is entirely different. We are to be wholly *transformed* in order to be fit citizens for *another* world.

4. The Renewal of the Mind

Be transformed by the renewal of your mind. What does St. Paul mean by renewing the mind? According to St. John Chrysostom, he means *repentance*. We are told to be transformed, but, as we look at ourselves, we see that we sin every day. This could lead us to despair, to the thought, "I'm not transformed, and I never will be." That is why St. Paul adds the words "by the renewal of your mind": so that we will *not* despair. St. John Chrysostom writes: "Since it is likely that, being men, they would sin every day, St. Paul consoles his hearers by saying 'renew yourselves' from day to day. This is what we do with houses: we keep constantly repairing them as they wear old. You should do the same thing to yourself. Have you sinned today? Have you made your soul old? Do not despair, do not despond, but renew your soul by repentance, and tears, and Confession, and by doing good things. And never cease doing this." [11]

From the theological point of view, it is important to point out that the "renewal of the mind" that St. Paul speaks about is actually the "renewal of the *nous*." In the original Greek, the word for mind here is *nous*. In Orthodox theology, the *nous* is the highest faculty or power of the human soul. It is the faculty that knows God directly; it is the seat of our personhood, which experiences the Person of God in a communion of love. St. Gregory Palamas and other Holy Fathers say that it most precisely defines what is the "image of God" in us. [12]

At the Fall of man, the *nous* was darkened and became sick. The Uncreated Energy, Light or Grace of God became foreign to it. As I mentioned earlier, through Christ's work of redemption man receives the Grace of God within him once again in Holy Baptism. But every time a baptized Christian commits sin, he soils his baptismal garment, as it were. He dampens the Light of Grace inside of him; he once again darkens or sickens his *nous*. Instead of turning to and uniting with God, his *nous* turns aside to the passions, to self-love and love of sensual pleasure. By turning to the passions, the *nous* repels the Grace of God; it prevents the Christian from continuing on the path to deification in Christ.

The sickness of the *nous* leads to spiritual death. The darkness of the *nous* leads to spiritual darkness, in which we cannot see things clearly and soberly. We cannot see things as God sees them; instead, we see them through the filter of our passions. Thus we grope about blindly in life, hurting ourselves and hurting others, either wittingly or unwittingly. We stray far from our purpose in life, which is union with God. Although we might think we have lots of important things to do, we wander aimlessly through life; and all our busyness only serves to distract us from our diseased spiritual state, from the fact that we are *not* fulfilling our life's true purpose. Our *nous* is sick because we have separated ourselves from God, because we have sought after our passions rather than Him.

5. Watchfulness and Prayer

The healing of our sick *nous* begins with what we have just been discussing: the sacrifice of our "old man," the cutting off of the passions, repentance. In speaking of the healing of the *nous*, the Holy Fathers place much emphasis on the practice of *watchfulness*. We must at all times watch over our thoughts so as to reject—to cut off—sinful and impassioned thoughts. When a sinful thought comes to us and we cut it off at once, it is not a sin. But when we *entertain* a sinful thought, when we cherish it and develop it because we are attracted to it, then it becomes sin, then it separates us from God. When we entertain impassioned thoughts, our *nous* becomes darkened, deprived of the Light of Divine Grace. These thoughts lead to impassioned feelings, and the feelings fuel more thoughts. Soon we are caught in a passion, and the passion becomes habitual. That is why we must cut off the sickness where it starts, in our thoughts.

To cut off sinful thoughts, we first must recognize such thoughts as our enemy. We must realize that they can separate us from God. For example, when we have

a resentful or judgmental thought against our neighbor, we must recognize that entertaining this thought will put us at enmity with God. So we *refuse* to entertain it. We just let it go. And if it comes back again an hour later, or even (as often happens) a few minutes later, we again cut it off.

In the Orthodox Church, we have a special means of cutting off thoughts: the Jesus Prayer. The effects of this Prayer are twofold. In the first place the Prayer helps us to cut off and turn away from impassioned thoughts. And in the second place the Prayer helps us to turn and keep turning to Christ our Savior at all times.

When we practice watchfulness with the help of the Jesus Prayer, we make our soul open to receive the Grace of the Holy Spirit, which transforms us and deifies us. We are no longer repelling Grace, but attracting it. We are calling upon Christ to have mercy on our darkened souls, to dwell within us more fully, to fill us with His unending Life, with the Light of the Holy Spirit Whom He has sent from the Father (cf. John 15:26). Thus our darkened *nous* is illumined by the Light of the Uncreated Grace of God. "Only the Holy Spirit can purify the *nous*," writes St. Diadochos of Photiki in *The Philokalia*. "... In every way, therefore, and especially through peace of soul, we must make ourselves a dwelling-place for the Holy Spirit. Then we shall have the lamp of spiritual knowledge burning always within us." [13]

In addition to saying the Jesus Prayer, we should cultivate the habit of calling out to God in our own words. This should be done throughout the day. The Fathers counsel us against trying to make long, eloquent speeches to God; rather, we should pray simply, from the heart. We can call out to Him either verbally or mentally, depending on the situation. Of course, we should call out to Him when temptations assail us, but we should by no means wait for such moments before we speak to Him. Archimandrite Sophrony, the disciple of St. Silouan of Mount Athos, had the practice of praying to God each time he was about to see and speak to someone. He prayed that God would bless the encounter that was about to take place, so that God's Grace would be upon it. If we were to follow this very simple practice, just think how our daily encounters with people would be *transformed*, and how our lives would be different.

Also, together with praying throughout the day as we go about our daily tasks, it is important to devote certain times of the day to prayer, that is, to a rule of

prayer. The content of this prayer rule varies with each person, and sometimes it changes. It is good to have the blessing of one's priest or spiritual father on one's prayer rule. The rule may consist of prayers from the Orthodox Prayer Book, or the Jesus Prayer, or a combination thereof, together with prayer in one's own words and the reading of the daily Gospel and Epistle verses. St. Theophan the Recluse notes that, while we are reading prayers from a prayer book or saying the Jesus Prayer, there may come times when we are moved to just stand silently before God with heartfelt yearning. He recommends that we stop reading or reciting prayers at such times, and then resume a little later. [14] "It is better to perform a small number of prayers properly than to hurry through a large number of prayers," he writes. "After you have recited each prayer, make prostrations, as many as you like, accompanied by a prayer for any necessity you feel, or by a usual short prayer.... You may limit the entire prayer rule just to prostrations with short prayers and prayer in your own words. Stand and make prostrations, saying, 'Lord have mercy,' or some other prayer, expressing your need or giving praise and thanks to God. You should establish either a *number of prayers*, or a *length of time* for prayer, so that you do not become lazy.... You should pray a little longer on your own especially at the end of your prayers, asking forgiveness for unintentional straying of the mind, and placing yourself in God's hands for the entire day." [15]

Setting aside time for daily prayer is an indispensable part of spiritual life. In families there should be daily common prayer before the family icon corner. Even if only a little time is set aside for this, it can make a huge difference in the life of a family. But in order for it to make a difference, it should be *regular*, not sporadic.

The key to prayer rules is *constancy*. If we skip our prayer rule, our Scripture readings and our spiritual readings for one day, we will find that already the world will start to invade us: the world of the passions, the world of distractions. If we skip our prayers for two days, we will be invaded even more, and so on. As time goes on, we will have less of the mind of Christ and more of the mind of the world. We will find ourselves more and more "conformed to this world." [16]

In order to grow in the Orthodox spiritual life and bear fruit, we need to put down roots, as in Christ's parable of the sower. And in order to put down roots, we need to have *constancy*, *consistency*, in our daily prayer and spiritual reading. In this

practice, too, we can "renew ourselves from day to day," as St. John Chrysostom puts it.

The daily, continual practice of watchfulness and prayer, of course, cannot take the place of the Sacraments of the Church. But this practice can *prepare* us for receiving the Sacraments, and can deepen our experience of them. St. Symeon the New Theologian says that receiving Holy Communion is in itself a kind of deification—because we are receiving the deified Body and Blood of our Savior. Our practice of watchfulness and prayer, together with our repentance, can help us to partake of that deification more fully.

6. The Primary Mark of Spiritual Transformation

Now, having looked at the nature of spiritual transformation and the way *to* that transformation, let us examine more closely the marks of transformation in a Christian.

We have already discussed in some detail the first two verses of Romans, chapter 12. St. Paul devotes the remainder of this chapter precisely to the marks of transformation. Continuing his exhortation, he tells us what we are to be transformed *into*. He tells us we are to *show mercy with cheerfulness, to let love be without hypocrisy, to be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Then the Apostle goes on to say: Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Set not your mind on high things, but associate with the lowly. Be not wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men... Be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good* (Rom. 12:8–18, 21).

What a profound and beautiful blueprint of the Christian life! It is the blueprint of a life not conformed to this world, but transformed and renewed in Christ. Each point in St. Paul's exhortation deserves a discourse of its own, but here I will only discuss all the points generally. What is it that all of them have in common? Clearly, it is that we are *to have love* for one another, and even for our enemies. St. Paul is only expounding on the great commandments of Christ.

The most essential mark of spiritual transformation is that we have love. Our Lord tells us: *By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another* (John 13:35).

In November of 2002, a friend of ours—Abbot Jonah of the [Monastery of St. John](#) in Point Reyes, California—visited Valaam Monastery in northern Russia. While on Valaam, Fr. Jonah had a wonderful conversation with a hermit, Fr. Isaaky, on a small island off the main Valaam island. Fr. Jonah asked Fr. Isaaky about how we grow to spiritual maturity: in other words, how we are transformed in Christ. In answering this question, Fr. Isaaky drew from the teaching of Archimandrite Sophrony, which he had obviously internalized and which he now lived out in practice. Here I would like to quote from Fr. Isaaky's words, which Fr. Jonah recorded in the journal *Divine Ascent*, because they go to the heart of spiritual transformation. For Fr. Isaaky, as for St. Paul, transformation means being able to love in the most authentic way.

"At the beginning of our spiritual journey," Fr. Isaaky said, "when we are spiritually immature, our entire religious attitude is ego-centered, emotional, and rational. The deeper level of awareness, the noetic consciousness [that is, the consciousness of the *nous*], has not yet been fully opened.... We are our egos, defined by our passions. We are far from being authentic *persons* because we are caught up in our isolated individualism. [But] as we grow, and gain more control over our passions, and our souls become purified, Grace illumines our noetic consciousness. We become more aware of God's presence, and more aware of the *other*. We move away from self-centeredness. The focus of our attention is on God. As this happens, our own personal 'I' expands and encompasses others, so that we cannot conceive of ourselves in isolation from God and our brothers.... This is the bond of authentic spiritual love, empowered by Grace. The more we grow in this noetic consciousness, the more our love embraces all of those around us. We pray from the heart for them, and for the whole world. We are purified by Grace, so that we can authentically love in a purely unselfish way. This is the essence of what it means to be a Christian: to authentically love.

"By truly loving God and our neighbor ... we are purified, illumined, and deified. We are restored from our fallen state, from our ego/self-centeredness, and from the tyranny of our rational and emotional consciousness. The passions come under control, subordinated to the love of the *Other*. We become purified of all that focuses us on ourselves and of all barriers to love." [17]

7. On Getting Out of Ruts

How can Fr. Isaaky's words not inspire us toward spiritual transformation? What hinders us from growing *unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*, as St. Paul says (Eph. 4:13)? It is our egos, our passions, that hinder us.

Many of us get stuck in a rut in our spiritual lives. Usually this comes down to one thing: we have our central sins, our favorite passions that we just do not want to give up. These passions have become so much a part of us that we think it is impossible to be rid of them. But it is not impossible. Christ said, *Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world* (John 16:33). With His Grace-filled help, we can overcome the passions—which, as we have seen, comprise one of the meanings of the term "the world" in Holy Scripture.

The problem lies with us. The problem is that, deep down, we feel that we have a "right" to our favorite passions. "I have a right to be angry," "I have a right to be resentful," "I have a right to this sinful little pleasure," or whatever it is. Deep down, we do not want to give up our passions.

So the question comes down to this: What do we really want? Do we want to stay in our ruts, so that we can freely indulge our pride, our self-love, our self-righteousness, our desire to be right, our anger and resentments, our sinful pleasures? Are they so important to us that for their sake we will abandon the possibility of an authentic life in Christ, as Fr. Isaaky has so beautifully described?

What do we want? Do we want to be fashioned after the passions of this world, which pass away, or do we want to have Christ dwelling within us, re-creating us into new beings who will dwell with Him and in Him forever?

To get out of our ruts and get back on the path of transformation and deification, we must cast off everything that separates us from God. Spiritual life is like traveling upstream in a rowboat. The world, the flesh and the devil push against us and against our progress. If our boat is burdened with the weight of our cherished sins and passions, we will not get anywhere. In fact, we will go backwards, and we might even sink. So, what we have to do is to jettison the cargo which we cherish so much but which is holding us back. Then we will be able go forward, toward that which we were created for: union with God.

8. On Not Measuring One's Progress

In conclusion, I would like to make one more point concerning the theme of transformation. The Holy Fathers counsel us that we are not to try to measure our spiritual progress. Trying to measure our progress can lead to pride on the one hand, and to despair on the other. If we think, "I'm making great progress, I'm becoming holy," we can be sure that we are *not* making progress, because we are being prideful, and pride separates us from God. On the other hand, if we despair about what seems to be our lack of progress, this despair also separates us from God.

So, let God do the measuring of our progress. Let God be the judge, both of ourselves and of others.

Benjamin Franklin had the practice of counting up and recording all the good deeds he did every day. From a worldly point of view, this might seem to be a good practice; but this is not what we are to do as Orthodox Christians. We are not supposed to count up our virtues and good deeds and then congratulate ourselves, for Christ said, *Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth* (Matt. 6:3). In fact, we are supposed to do the opposite: we are to look at our own sins. "Grant me to see my own sins, and not to judge my brother," as we say in the Prayer of St. Ephraim. We need to accuse ourselves of our sins, but we should not judge ourselves in the sense of passing a sentence of condemnation. This is an important distinction. Godly self-accusation leads to taking responsibility for our sins so that we can repent of them, make amends when necessary, and ultimately become free of them. Self-condemnation, on the other hand, leads to despair—because, in passing final judgment on ourselves, we are playing God just as surely as when we pass final judgment on our neighbor.

Spiritual transformation, as we have seen, cannot occur without the Grace of the Holy Spirit. *The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit* (John 3:8). Transformation by the Grace of God is imperceptible at the time that it occurs. We are being changed, but we do not know it. Therefore, we should not attempt to experience states or moments of transformation. Such an attempt can, after all, only lead to pride and delusion. It is ours only to leave behind all that separates us from God, to turn to God with our whole being, and to let God do the rest.

Spiritual transformation is only perceptible in hindsight. One day we may be able to look back and consider how things have become different. Perhaps we will notice that we are no longer enslaved to a particular passion that once held us tightly. Perhaps, although the circumstances of our lives might be even more difficult than they were in the past, we will notice that we are not reacting to them as negatively as we used to, and that we have a greater sense of trust that our lives are in God's hands. If we notice such things, let us give thanks to God and not take credit ourselves, remembering the words of St. Diadochos: "Only the Holy Spirit can purify the *nous*." Then, continuing to practice inner watchfulness, let us look more deeply into ourselves, there to discover more hidden and subtle passions, which we must also put to death on the altar of sacrifice for the sake of Christ.

It is a difficult path, this path of continual re-creation into the likeness of Christ, this path of sacrifice that leads to deification. Our Lord has told us: *Narrow is the gate, and difficult is the way, which leadeth unto life* (Matt. 7:14). But this is the only way we can follow in order to fulfill the true designation of our existence.

Therefore, following the exhortation of the Apostle Paul, let us not be conformed to this age, let us not follow after the fashions of this world, let us not fashion ourselves according to the passions. Rather, let us be transformed, transfigured into new beings through repentance, through the healing and purification of our *nous*. Through this transformation, may we come to genuinely love God and our neighbor, may we be united with God through His Grace, and may we dwell forever in perfect love with Christ and His saints. Amen.

Endnotes

1. Quoted in Archbishop Basil Krivocheine, *In the Light of Christ* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), p. 386.
2. Clark Carlton, *The Life: The Orthodox Doctrine of Salvation* (Salisbury, Mass.: Regina Orthodox Press, 2000), pp. 163–64.
3. Harry M. Boosalis, *Orthodox Spiritual Life according to St. Silouan the Athonite* (South Canaan, Pa.: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2000), p. 19.
4. St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), First Series, vol. 11, Homily 20, p. 496.
5. *Ibid*.
6. *Abbess Thaisia: An Autobiography* (Platina, Calif.: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1989), pp. 167–69.
7. St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, Homily 20, p. 497.
8. St. Isaac the Syrian, *Ascetical Homilies*, Homily 2, quoted in St. Ignatius Brianchaninov, *The Arena: An Offering to Contemporary Monasticism* (Jordanville, N.Y., Holy Trinity Monastery, 1983), pp. 169–70.

9. St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, Homily 20, pp. 497–98.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 498.
11. *Ibid.*
12. See, for example, St. Gregory Palamas, "Topics of Natural and Theological Science," and Nikitas Stithatos, "On Spiritual Knowledge," in *The Philokalia*, vol. 4 (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), pp. 357, 139–40).
13. St. Diadochos of Photiki, "On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination," in *The Philokalia*, vol. 1 (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 260.
14. St. Theophan the Recluse, *The Path of Prayer* (Newbury, Mass.: Praxis Institute Press, 1992), pp. 6–7.
15. St. Theophan the Recluse, *The Spiritual Life and How to Be Attuned to It*, third edition (Safford, Arizona: St. Paisius Serbian Orthodox Monastery, 2003), pp. 191–93.
16. Cf. Fr. Seraphim Rose, "[In Step with Sts. Patrick and Gregory of Tours](#)," *The Orthodox Word*, no. 136 (1987), pp. 272–73.
17. Abbot Jonah (Paffhausen), "A Vision of Contemporary Monasticism: Valaam and Fr. Sophrony, from Psychology to Spirituality," *Divine Ascent*, no. 9 (2004), pp. 9–10.

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