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Living in grace through the holy Mysteries. The relationship between grace and freedom

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Abstract. The uncreated divine grace is one of the most important chapters for Orthodox theology, because the progress of the human person towards the Absolute depends on its correct understanding. Man is not created to be limited by the standards of materiality, his aspiration is always to the Living, Personal, Absolute God in whom he can find rest. Without man's participation in the communion with the Creator, a communion that is achieved in grace, he comes from nowhere and goes to nowhere, in the sense that the aspiration to the Absolute cannot be deceived by anything from the materiality of the world.

Keywords. God, grace, mysteries, matter, freedom

Introduction

According to Orthodox theology, divine grace is the uncreated energy that has its source in the common being of the three divine Persons. As an uncreated divine energy, grace belongs to God and cannot be conceived as separate from Him. Thus, as the great theologian Dumitru Stăniloae also points out, "according to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Fathers, divine grace is not a good in itself, detached from God"¹, so it cannot in any way be considered as an added gift, necessary for man. The authentic theology of grace as an uncreated divine energy was formulated by several Holy Fathers of the Church, the theologian par excellence of grace being St. Gregory Palamas.

Divine grace, as a sanctifying energy, offered to humanity in the Church of Christ through the Holy Mysteries, offers it the possibility of an intimate approach to Christ, who is present in them, through the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, through grace, man receives two great gifts from God:

- a) The possibility of fulfilling the aspiration towards the Personal Absolute
- b) Acquiring likeness to God

I. Uncreated divine grace – common energy of the Persons of the Holy Trinity

According to Orthodox theology, uncreated divine grace, having its source in the One Being of God, is the common work of the Three divine Persons. Thus, God the Father calls

¹ Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2, second edition, Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1997 p. 199

humanity to Himself by grace, and this call is realized through the Son in the Holy Spirit. Through the hypostatic union, achieved by the Son of God, "at the fullness of time" (Galatians 4, 4), the human nature assumed in the divine hypostasis, was flooded with the uncreated divine grace, thus being raised to the likeness of God. If through the choice of sin man moves away from grace, the free collaboration between the human person and grace can only mean raising man to the state of deification, not according to nature like Christ, but through grace.

After the ascension of the Son of God, the active work in the world is carried out by the Holy Spirit, work through which the human person has access to grace, through the Holy Mysteries. Through the miraculous work of the Holy Mysteries, the Holy Spirit mysteriously unites man with Christ, man thus tending to the state of deification. Man's free collaboration with grace opens for him the possibility of ascension to the state of deification, through an ontological change, a change through which human nature accomplishes good by its own will. "Divine uncreated energies work on human beings in the form of logos, of active reasons, of impulses that lead them to future goals to be fulfilled in their lives and in the world. Thus, even in the reasons-purposes of the Christian, the reasons-purposes of God are active. The divine uncreated energies enter a relationship with the human spirit, taking the form of active reasons. Reasons are virtually inherent in divine energies; the reasons have an energetic character... The uncreated energies lead the believers towards an ever more complete similarity of their reasons with the divine reasons"².

Living in grace for man means living in God, in the sense that when man is in communion with Christ, the Son of God, crucified and risen for us, he is in communion with God, and communion with Him is achieved only through grace. "Grace and all gifts are nothing but the bringing of the goods contained in our deified nature in Christ, within ourselves through the Holy Spirit"³.

Although grace is imperatively necessary for the deification of man, it must be specified that it does not act on man in an irresistible way, because God considers man's freedom, freedom by which the human person chooses or does not choose to collaborate with grace⁴. Depending on the free and fully conscious choice that man makes, he lives or does not live in grace and in communion with God.

II. Imprinting grace in the human person

Being a common work of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, divine grace is perceived by man at the work of God, by which man is lifted from the state oriented towards the materiality of the world and directed to a different way of living, about which even philosophy cannot speak. Thus, through uncreated divine grace, man knows a state of living, different from materiality, which he can experience even in this world. Speaking about the work of divine grace in man, Father Stăniloae distinguishes two stages, namely, first, an imprint of it in man, as the power, presence, and work of the Holy Spirit, and a second stage, in which grace is fully assimilated or constitutive of the person human and as a result his work is felt or experienced by man as his personal work⁵.

² Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Christian Responsibility*, in *Orthodoxy*, Year XXII, No. 2, April-June 1970, p. 189

³ Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2..., p. 202.

⁴ Emil Bartoș, *The concept of deification in the theology of Dumitru Stăniloae*, Christian Publishing House, Oradea, 2002, p. 116-124.

⁵ Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2..., p. 200.

The reception of grace by man, through his own will, has the effect of feeling an ontological power in the human person, a power through which man overcomes the materiality of the world, positioning himself in the climb that leads to deification. Practically, the power received by man through grace, delimits him from material things, making him alive in Christ.

Man's first contact with grace is made in the Mystery of Holy Baptism, this mystery being the beginning of the collaboration between man and the uncreated divine energy. In Baptism, through the human person's non-rejection of grace, future possibilities for fully conscious collaboration are opened. The work of objective salvation carried out by the incarnate Son of God is what opens the human nature to the possibility of collaboration with divine grace. Through the incarnation, sacrifice and resurrection of the Son of God, human nature is raised from disobedience and death, being made conformable to collaboration with divine grace, which is why we can look at grace as "bringing the goods contained in our deified nature in Christ, within us by the Holy Spirit"⁶.

The divine grace present in man represents his power to engage in a permanent dialogue with God, a dialogue through which man receives the power of Christ through his deified humanity accessible to us. At the same time, this dialogic state between God and man also represents a state of permanent perfection of human nature. This state is defined by father Stăniloae as "the chenuosis of the Spirit, which descends to raise us to the level of partners of Christ"⁷.

III. The relation between uncreated divine grace and the freedom of the human person

The greatest gift given to man by creation is freedom. For this reason, God never restricts man's freedom because he would contradict himself⁸. Through grace man never feels a constraint, but on the contrary a form of freedom that overcomes any limitation. Moreover, man's authentic freedom, the one stabilized in good, can only be experienced by him through the freely consented collaboration with the uncreated divine grace. "For you, brothers, have been called to freedom; only do not use freedom as an opportunity to serve the flesh, but serve one another through love" (Galatians 5, 13).

Human nature was created by God to live in grace. The disobedience of the progenitors Adam and Eve resulted in the loss of grace and implicitly the distortion of human nature, a nature restored through the sacrifice and resurrection of the Son of God. If through the first disobedience, the Image of God in man has been darkened, and in man the will is inclined to sin, through the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ, human nature is objectively restored and restored to the state of grace. This restoration to grace means for the human nature to live in God, free from sin. "In sin and passion there is no freedom, but slavery to sin, selfish closure in the repetition of the same passions that offer nothing but monotony without a horizon"⁹.

The true freedom of the human person is in direct dependence on his Source God. In other words, true freedom is known only through the correct relationship of man to God, a fact

⁶ Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2..., p. 201.

⁷ Prof. Dr. Boris Bobrinskoy, *Prayer of the Heart and the Eucharist* (respectful tribute to Father Dumitru Stăniloae), translated by Măriuca Alexandrescu in *Orthodoxia* (Academic priest Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993). A theology for the contemporary world), year XLV no. 3-4 July-December 1993, p. 118-119

⁸ Vladimir Lossky, *Ocerk misticeskoe Bogoslovie vostochnoi tzerkvi*, in *Bogoslovie Trudí*, vol. 8, ed. Quad. Moscow, 1972, p. 88

⁹ Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2..., p. 208.

highlighted by Saint Peter who says: "Live as free men, but not as if you had freedom as a cover for evil, but as slaves of God" (I Peter 2, 16).

IV. Grace in Protestant theology

From the analysis of Protestant writings, we understand that salvation is only the work of God, and man is incapable of working in this regard. From this it follows that, the man who has fallen into disobedience, totally loses the divine grace, hence the inability to work for his own salvation. It also follows from this that, with the disobedience of the forefathers, the Image of God in man was destroyed, and humanity is dependent only on the mercy of God, who arbitrarily saves those predestined to eternal life.

This concept is based by Protestants on the words of the Holy Apostle Paul from Romans 8, 29-30: "For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he decided before, these he also called; and whom he called, these he also directed; and those whom he corrected, these he also increased". Of course, Saint Paul does not affirm an unconditional predestination, here God's foreknowledge is highlighted. Knowing everyone's life, through His foreknowledge, He always knows each person's place, but He is not the One who predetermines salvation or damnation.

Other protestants such as Jean Calvin emphasize predestination, thus man's total exit from grace¹⁰, concluding that all humanity is worthy of eternal damnation, and the fact that some are saved is only due to God's mercy and judgment totally incomprehensible to human nature. Of course, all Protestant views, not being properly argued, cannot be considered.

Conclusions

From what has been highlighted, it follows that grace is the uncreated divine energy that springs from the unique being of the Holy Trinity, it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of man, in the sense that, through free collaboration with grace, every human person enters into communion with God and works for his own salvation, starting from the appropriation of the fruits of the objective salvation achieved by Christ through sacrifice and resurrection. Through the only sacrifice of the Son of God, man is objectively restored to grace, can collaborate with him, experience him in this life and work to preserve the authentic relationship with God.

Man's presence in grace is preserved through the Holy Mysteries, which visibly share the unseen divine grace. Thus, humanity is called to collaborate with divine grace to be able to advance on the road that leads to salvation, satisfying its thirst for the Absolute and at the same time acquiring the likeness of God.

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¹⁰ Associate Professor Dr. Ștefan Buchiu, *Creation and restoration in Orthodox dogmatics*, in *Orthodoxy*, no. 1-2, Year LVIII, Jun. - Jul., Bucharest, p. 52.

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