

ORTHODOX GNOSEOLOGY REFLECTED IN THE HOLY GOSPEL OF SAINT JOHN THE APOSTLE AND EVANGELIST

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ABSTRACT

In order to get to the knowledge of God, we must first know ourselves and the purpose that God has for each individual human person. Those who had the sense of spiritual knowledge knew God, but pretended not to know Him, perverting their consciences and freely preferring lies instead of Truth. Knowing God is done through prayer, through knowing the reasons planted by Him in creatures, and after that, according to the fulfillment of His commandments. Love is the perfect way to get to the knowledge of God.

Keywords: *Knowledge of God; gnoseology; orthodox; contemplation; Logos;*

INTRODUCTION

Regarding the knowledge of the divine relationships between the Persons of the Most Holy Trinity, and especially about the knowledge of the Person of the Son, of the incarnate Logos, the prologue of the Gospel of the Holy Apostle and Evangelist John is of great significance. The first verse, "*In the beginning was The Word and The Word was with God and The Word was God*"¹ (John 1: 1), has a deep dogmatic character (meaning/significance).

Saint Basil the Great would ask why Christ is called *Word, Logos*? The answer is also presented by him in an admirable way, thus: "*For what is called Word?*" *To show you He came out from the mind! Why is it called Word? Because He was born without suffering! Why is it called Word? Because He is the image of The One who had begotten Him, showing in Himself, entirely, The One who had begotten Him; and without being separated in any way from The One who had begotten Him, He nevertheless has a perfect existence in Himself, just as our word fully expresses our thought; those that we have thought in our hearts, those we speak with our words; thus, our speech is the expression of the thought of our heart, because from the abundance of the heart the word is spoken (...)* Saint John called Him *Word* to show you the birth without suffering from the Father, to theologize to you the perfect existence of the Son, and thereby show the connection outside of time, of the Son with the Father. That even our word, born of the mind, is born without suffering; it neither cuts, nor divides, nor flows; but the mind, remaining whole in its own being, gives birth to a

¹ *Sfânta Evanghelie*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2013, p. 13.

whole and perfect word; and the word, going forth, has in it all the power of the mind that gave birth to it."²

1. SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE AND RATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

So we see that Saint Basil the Great makes an analogy, likening God - The Word (The Logos of the Father) to the human word. The Son - The Word is born without suffering from the Father, as the word *is born*, from the mind. Here it must be understood both as *nous*, meaning, the most profound part of the human being, but also as mind in the sense of reason or logic, from which the human word, thought or spoken, is born. Just as the human word expresses the spiritual background of the one who utters it, so God - The Word that is born from the Father, expresses something from the Father.

In this sense, the affirmation of The Lord Christ at the Last Supper must be understood, according to which "*He who has seen Me has seen the Father*" (John 14: 9). Christ is also called *Word* in order to show the manner of His Birth, that is, *without pain*, both from the Father, before all ages, as God according to divine nature, and from the Virgin Mary, in time, according to human nature. Just as the word of our speech is born without pain from our mind or logic, so Christ - The Word was born without pain from the Father, and then also without pain from the Virgin Mary.

In order to eliminate any doubt regarding the Person of the Son and especially not to give the Arians the opportunity to learn wrongly about Christ, Saint Basil continues the idea of the Son's birth without suffering, confessing: "*In the beginning was The Word. If the evangelist John had said: In the beginning was The Son, he would have introduced the idea of suffering along with the designation of Son, because with us humans, everything that is born is born in time and is born as a result of suffering; therefore John, anticipating this, said Word, correcting in advance the improper opinions, so that you may keep your soul unwounded.*"³

If in human births the joy of birth is doubled by physical pain, in the case of the Son of God things did not happen in that manner. His birth before time from the Father was without any suffering, and His birth in time from the Virgin Mary was also without suffering, without the pains of creation. This was possible, since it was fitting that She who gave birth to Christ should not suffer the pains of birth since She did not even taste the sweetness of human marriage, being ever Virgin and unmarried.

Interpreting the verse "*And The Word was with God*", Saint Basil testifies that the Son was not in any place, because Christ who is boundless and whom the Heavens cannot contain, how can He be circumscribed by a defined space? The Word was with God, because "*neither the Father is in a certain place nor the Son; nor can it be understood as contained by place (space): the Father is boundless, the Son is also boundless. Whatever you may think and wherever you may go with the spirit, you will find that everything is filled with God; and everywhere you will also find the Hypostasis of the Son.*"⁴ From here emerges the teaching about God being everywhere, or omnipresence of God. The Son, although He was with The Father, and is with The Father before all eternity, this does not refer to the presence of the Son in a circumscribed place, and which can therefore be measured, but refers to *the way of being* of Persons of the Most Holy Trinity. The dogma of the Most Holy Trinity cannot be

2 Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Omilii și cuvântări*, colecția "Părinți și scriitori bisericești", Serie nouă, vol. 1, Editura Basilica a Patriarhiei Române, București, 2009, pp. 262-263.

3 Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Omilii și cuvântări*, p. 263

4 Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Omilii și cuvântări*, p. 263

fully understood by our mind, no matter how spiritual it may be, only to the extent that we widen our *vessel* of spiritual understanding, by shunning of passions.

John's Prologue is very important because it reveals to us the main directions in the knowledge of the Son of God, as a hypostasis different from that of The Father, but also in terms of the relationship with The Father. By following the path of knowledge about Christ, we learn that His Birth, as God, from The Father was passion-free (without pain), just as the Birth from the Virgin Mary, according to human nature, was also passion-free, the Virgin suffering no corruption. Saint John Chrysostom therefore states the following: *"That's why he called Him Word, because he wanted to show that This Word is the Son of God, The Only-Begotten. Lest any should think that this birth was with passion, he prevented it and removed all evil suspicion by calling Him Word and clearly showing that The Son is from The Father and that His Birth is without passion."*⁵ Here we see the consensus of the Holy Fathers regarding the spiritual understanding of the first verse from the Saint John's Gospel. Both Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Basil the Great emphasize the fact that Christ was called *Word - Logos*, so that, among other things, can also be shown the Birth without pain or without any corruption of The Son from The Father.

Saint John the Evangelist nowhere in the Gospel uses the term "essence", *ousia*, speaking about God, thus wanting to make Him known to us through His works. The Savior is called *Light, The Light of the World* (John ch. 8). Saint John Chrysostom explains this appointment of Christ our Lord, emphasizing the fact that light clears the horizon of knowledge, removes the veil of darkness for the purpose of contemplative vision of God. Christ reveals to us The Father as He is, and as only He alone knows Him. Interpreting the word of the Savior who says: *"All that I have heard from the Father, I have made known to you"* (John 15: 15), the great hierarch affirms that the Apostle calls Christ *Life and Light* because *"through knowledge, He gave us given light, and through this life. A single name, or two or three or more, is by no means sufficient to teach us about God. But it is enough if even so, that through many names, we can come to know Him, even if not in a fully intelligible (distinguishable) manner."*⁶ According to apophatic theology, God is the One called by many names, but at the same time the One who cannot be named. All the names by which we call God, such as: *Love, Light, Wisdom*, are good, but they do not exhaust the depth of meanings and cannot fully define God and His being, which can only be partially comprehended by the human mind.

2. KNOWING CHRIST AS THE SON OF THE FATHER

Regarding the relationship between Christ and The Father, chapters 5 and 14 of Saint John's Gospel are of great significance. We know The Savior as of the same essence with The Father and co-worker with Him in the great plan of providence. Thus, the Savior affirms: *"I am in The Father and The Father in Me"* (John 14: 11); and *"I have been with you for so long and you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen The Father"* (John 14: 9); *Here is presented the mutual essence of The Father and The Son; and "That all may honor The Son as they honor The Father"* (John 5: 23); From this we learn that the honor due to The Father must not be greater than that due to The Son, but all three Trinitarian Persons must be honored and loved equally. *"As The Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also The Son gives life to whom He wills"* (John 5: 21); *"My Father works*

5 Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilia la Evanghelia după Ioan*, vol. 1, Colecția "Părinți și Scriitori bisericești", Serie nouă, tom. 15, Editura Basilica, București, 2016, pp. 43-44.

6 Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilia la Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 44

until now, and I work" (John 5, 17); "As The Father knows Me, I also know The Father. And I lay down my soul for the sheep" (John 10, 15); "I and The Father are One" (John 10: 30)." From all these verses we understand the intrinsic connection between The Persons of The Holy Trinity, by virtue of perichoresis (mutual interpenetration or conpenetration) which defines Their way of being.

The pure in heart will see God (Matthew 5: 8), that is, they will know Him as He is. Saint John Chrysostom, in his exposition of the Gospel of the Apostle John, inculcates a passion that stops man on the way to knowing God, this passion being *vain glory*. He affirms that the jews did not crucify The Lord of glory out of ignorance, but out of arrogance, out of pride, because they preferred the glory of men to the imperishable glory that comes from God. Vain glory was the original sin into which our forefathers, Adam and Eve, fell, and with them all the human race, respectively all Adam. From the passion of vain glory are born all the passions such as lustful love of the flesh (*filautia*), pride, gluttony, fornication, sloth, envy, murder and others. *"Vain glory is a dreadful thing, for those who fall into its nets, it enslaves their minds even in regard to things that are as clear as possible and convinces them to oppose the confessed truth."*⁷

Interpreting verse 10 of chapter 1: *"He was in the world and through Him the world was made, but the world did not know Him", the great Chrysostom states, "Here he calls the world, the corrupt crowd, enslaved by worldly things, the lowly people, disturbed and out of their mind. But the wonderful friends of God, they all knew Him even before His appearance in the flesh. Christ Himself, calling him by name, speaks of the patriarch: «Abraham, our father, was glad to see My day; and he saw it and rejoiced" (John 8: 56)"*⁸. Those who had the sense of spiritual knowledge knew God, *but pretended not to know Him*, perverting their consciences and freely preferring lies instead of the Truth. Moreover, Christ, even before the Birth of the Virgin Mary, was known in the Spirit, through the visions of the Prophets of the Old Testament.

It is interesting that even in the Old Testament the One who spoke to mankind and the Prophets was not The Father, but also Christ - The Word, but at that time as The Word not yet incarnate. Christ revealed to the Prophets details about Himself such as His Birth, the place of His Birth, the manner of His Birth (in a miraculous way and without harming the virginity of His Mother), or details related to His life and Holy Passions (Isaiah, ch. 53), making these things known to mankind, hundreds of years before He was born of the Virgin.

Next, we learn that God The Son makes God The Father known to the world. Explaining the words, *"No one has ever seen God." The Only-Begotten Son, Who is in the bosom of The Father, He made Him known" (John 1: 18)*, Saint John Chrysostom emphasizes the universality of the Gospel message, as well as the necessity of spreading it to everyone. Therefore, the Saint states: *"The words made known show the teaching clearer and limpid, that He gave and directed not only to the jews but also to the whole world. Not even the jews took the Prophets into account, but to the Only-Begotten of God, the whole world bowed down and obeyed Him. So to make known shows in this case, the greater clarity of His teaching. This is why He is called Word (John 1: 1) and Angel of great counsel (Isaiah 9, 5)."*⁹

Christ did not do any extra deed, but only what the Father entrusted Him to do or say. In this sense, The Lord Christ never did his own will, because His human will, as a man,

7 Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilii la Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 59.

8 Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilii la Evanghelia după Ioan*, pp. 98-99.

9 Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilii la Evanghelia după Ioan*, p. 100

always submitted to His divine will (which, by the way, was the same as the will of The Father and The Holy Spirit). This happened as a result of the hypostatic union.

3. KNOWING CHRIST THROUGH HIS MIRACLES

About the knowledge of God from His miracles, the Savior's presence at the Wedding in Cana (John ch. 2) is very suggestive. An interpretation of Saint Maximus the Confessor shows us that *the good wine* is the good knowledge of God. Man must partake of the good wine first, that is, to know the Creator first of all, and only then to taste the least good wine, which means nothing but the knowledge of God, through His creatures, not directly. *"The best wine, which the Word brought later through His coming, i.e. the highest reason about God, the human nature must drink it at the beginning, as the first, and get drunk with it, and only then to know other wines, i.e. the reasons of things, as wines inferior to the first. For it is as just and proper as it is possible for nature to first know the Reason (God) for which it was made and only afterward to investigate the reasons of the things built for it."*¹⁰ In other words, man has a duty that in the matter of knowing God to focus on the personal knowledge of God in a direct way through prayer, and only then to try to know the Creator by means of the reasons planted by Him in the creatures. God is a tripersonal being and He lets Himself be known only as a Person, by another person. Man starts on the path of knowing God as a Person, from what he has in common with God, that is, from *the image of God* seeded in man. As man sanctifies himself, deifies himself, finds that he resembles God more and more (according to grace, not according to nature), he therefore finds that God is mirrored in him. This is possible because the image of The Father (by nature) is The Son, and the image of The Son (by grace) must be made, man.

The knowledge of The Father cannot be attained unless we first know The Son. In this sense, The Savior says: *"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to my Father except through Me"* (John 14: 6). Father Dumitru Stăniloae, interpreting this verse, states: *"Whoever knows Jesus as The Son of God also knows His Father as God, or God as His Father. God as Father cannot be known otherwise than through The Son; and the one who knows Christ as God knows God with certainty and at the same time as His Son."*¹¹ However, although they knew The Savior and were with Him day by day during the three and a half years of messianic activity, The Holy Apostles were afraid at the time of the Holy Passion of Christ (because The Holy Spirit had not yet descended and the Holy Apostles had not yet been filled with grace), except for the Holy Apostle and Evangelist John, the disciple who loved Christ the most and the only Apostle who followed Him to the Cross and even after that (being one of those who buried The Lord), together with the Mother of God and the holy women bearer of myrrh. Saint John the Evangelist had the strength to follow Christ to the place of the Crucifixion *not* because he was known to the Hierarch, but because *love casts out fear*.

Why was there this unjustified fear of the Holy Apostles? Because they were not yet full of grace, but also because they did not know The Lord of Glory well enough. They realized that Christ was superior to any man who existed until then, but they could not understand and could not receive His equality, consubstantiality (having the same nature) with The Father, this being something new to the human mind. This fact is confirmed by the

10 Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Răspunsuri către Talasie, Răspuns la întrebarea 40*, în *Filocalia*, vol. 3, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, București, 2009, p. 175.

11 Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Chipul evanghelic al lui Iisus Hristos*, Editura Basilica, București, 2016, p. 319.

Savior saying: *"If you had known Me, you would also have known My Father; but from now on you know Him and have seen Him"* (John 14: 7). What proves the doubt of the Holy Apostles regarding the divinity of the Savior, is shown by the request of the Holy Apostle Philip: *"Lord, show us The Father and it is enough"* (John 14: 8).

In chapter 14, The Savior presents the teaching about equality with The Father, as we also find it in chapter 10: *"I and The Father are one"* (John 10: 30). The Savior rebukes Philip for his doubt, saying: *"I have been with you so long and you have not known Me, Philip?" He who has seen Me has seen The Father. How do you say: Show us The Father?"* (John 14: 9). But knowing God is not enough just knowing The Father and The Son. This is complete when we also know The Holy Spirit, The Comforter. He who knows The Holy Spirit has the gift of always having divine grace within him. Thus, The Savior says: *"I will ask The Father and He will give you another Comforter, to be with you forever: The Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him, nor knows Him; you know Him, that He remains with you and will be in you"* (John 14: 16-17).

"All that I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you" (John 15: 15). With this word, Christ shows us that we are no longer servants but have the status of His friends, because all that is necessary for the salvation of people and what The Son has seen from eternity with The Father, He shared with us. The consequence of not knowing God also consists in the persecution of His chosen ones, obviously by those who do not want to know God. The sons of this age, the sons of the flesh, being carnal themselves cannot understand the beauty of the Spirit. That is why Christ would warn the Holy Apostles about the persecutions coming from those who do not want to know God, testifying: *"If you were of the world, the world would love what is it's own;... If they persecuted Me they will persecute you... and all these things they will do to you because of My name, because they do not know the One who sent Me"* (John 15: 19-21).

The priestly prayer spoken by The Savior before His Holy Passion, spoken for Himself, for the Apostles and for all the faithful, has a significant gnoseological character, presenting the knowledge of God (*gnosis*) as eternal life itself: *"And this is eternal life: To know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent"* (John 17: 3), and again: *"I have shown Your Name to the people whom You have given Me from the world. They were Yours and You gave them to Me and they kept Your word. Now they know that all that You gave Me was from You... and they truly knew that I came from You, and they believed that You sent Me"* (John 17: 6-8).

Another way of knowing is the palpable, sensory, or measurable one, this being attributed to Saint Thomas the Apostle, unfairly called *"The Unbeliever"*. The Savior, eight days after the Resurrection, entering through the locked doors in the pavilion of the Last Supper, in order to entrust also Saint Thomas of the Resurrection, said: *"Put your finger here and see My hands and bring your hand and put it in the My side, and be not faithless, but faithful. Thomas answered and said to Him: My Lord and my God! Jesus said to him: Because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed"* (John 20: 27-28). Father Dumitru Stăniloae, interpreting this evangelical passage, affirms the fact that: *"Jesus appeared to the Apostles on the eighth day after the first apparition, also through locked doors, doing this to strengthen the Apostles even more, but more so the future men, in the conviction about His Resurrection."*¹²

The Savior was sent by The Father with the mission to save the world, that is, all the people who will believe in Christ and embody His commandments in concrete deeds.

12 Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Chipul evanghelic al lui Iisus Hristos*, p. 319.

Saint John the Evangelist presents the virtue of love as one of the main themes of his Gospel. This fact is not surprising, since he himself is "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*" (cf. John 19: 26), the one who, at The Last Supper, with an innocent and loving voice, asked Christ if he was not the one who will sell Him. Saint John the Evangelist was "*a slave of divine grace*"¹³.

4. KNOWLEDGE THROUGH LOVE OF GOD AND FELLOW MEN

Likeness to God has as its finality, perfect love. This is shown by Saint John of the Ladder in whose work *The Ladder*, the last step in man's ascent from the image to the likeness of God is love. In this sense, we must resemble God in grace, this can be understood from the Lord's words: "*That they may all be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, so also these in Us may be one ... I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, and that the world may know that You sent Me and that You loved them as You loved Me*" (John 17: 21-23). The only one who knows the Father perfectly is Christ, and we acquire divine love to the extent that we strive to know God's plan for ourselves, and work with Him, to multiply the talents entrusted to us. In this sense, living in love with God and with our fellow men is the message of the Gospel: "*Righteous Father, the world has not known You, but I have known You, and they have known that You sent Me. And I made Your Name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them*" (John 17: 25-26).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we note that in order to get to know God, we must first know ourselves and the purpose that God has for each individual person. Knowing God is done through prayer, through knowing the reasons planted by Him in creatures, and then, according to the fulfillment of His commands. Love is the perfect way to know God. This reality is reinforced by the Apostle of Love in his first catholic (universal) Epistle, confessing: "*He who does not love has not known God, because God is love*" (1 John 4: 8).

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¹³ Pr. Daniil Sandu Tudor, *Acatiste*, Editura Christiana, București, 2009, p. 73.