THE ROMANIAN INSTITUTE OF
ORTHODOX THEOLOGY AND
SPIRITUALITY

Symposium

Prayer as Theology of the Mind and of the Heart for the Humanity in the New Millennium

The Ninth Ecumenical Theological Symposium

Vol. IX, Nr. 1, 2002

THE ROMANIAN INSTITUTE OF ORTHODOX THEOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY
The Chapel "St. Apostles Peter and Paul"
INCORPORATED IN AUGUST 1993

Prayer as Theology of the Mind and of the Heart for the Humanity in the New Millennium

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December 2, 2001

Published by The Romanian Institute of Orthodox Theology and Spirituality

New York, 2002

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ISBN 1-888067- 14-4

ISSN 1084-0591

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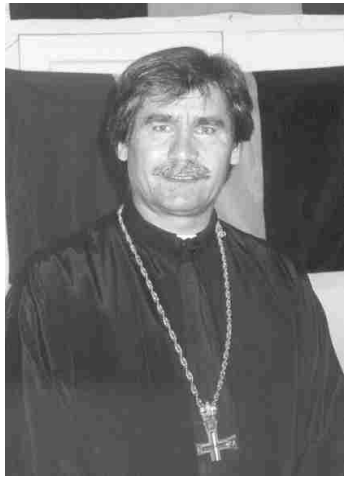


Rev. Fr. Theodor Damian, Ph.D.

Dr. Constantin Tsirpanlis (left),
Dr. Richard Grallo, Fr. Dr. Vasile Vasilachi,
Drd. Daniela Anghel, Mr. George Alexe,
Fr. Theodor Damian, Fr. Bert Breiner,
Dr. Nicholas Groves, Fr. Paul Theophilus

A General Introduction to the Ninth Ecumenical Theological Symposium

These days I was meditating about the symbolic significance of number 9 which is also a cardinal number in the history of our symposia. I was just thinking if there might be any symbolic signs luckily expressing some augural connections between our symposium and the number 9. But probably there is nothing else than coincidence. Anyhow, nine days ago, on November the 22nd, the entire country was spiritually united in the *Prayer of Thanksgiving*, celebrating Thanksgiving Day. Today, December 2nd, nine days later, the 9th Symposium of the Romanian Institute of Orthodox Theology and Spirituality of New York, is ecumenically and theologically dedicated to *Prayer as Theology of the Mind and of the Heart for the Humanity in the New Millennium*.

Certainly, reflecting on this, I am tempted to see something more than a simple coincidence. Never in history has the entire mankind been in such a dramatic need of real prayer as it is now, in our time. And what seems to be symptomatic for the humanity in the new millennium, is that even the true sense of the Christian prayer seems to be almost lost. And so seems to be the theandric sense of our Christian existence. The spiritual ravages of the anthropocentric era, or those of postmodern religious conventionalism and materialism, are visible everywhere in our Western hemisphere.

The so called spiritual solutions induced by the present New Age movement are only minor palliatives. They are not relieving the symptoms or the effects of these very old and at the same time very new anthropocentric diseases. A great part of our Western humanity of the 3rd millennium is experiencing change in a wrong direction, being deluded by the so called spiritual alternatives of our daily life that are generously offered by the New Age movement. Without any doubt, the danger of converting Christians to the New Age movement is real.

The only spiritual remedy to these modern and postmodern anthropocentric diseases is the Christian prayer. Personally, I believe that the best way of counteracting the false spiritual alternatives and misinterpretations provided by the New Age movement is through the Christian Orthodox prayer as theology of the mind and of the heart.

This spiritual remedy is the main topic of the Ninth Ecumenical Theological Symposium organized by the Romanian Institute of Orthodox Theology and Spirituality in New York, founded in 1993 by the Very Revered Fr. Prof. Dr. Theodor Damian.

Certainly, prayer could be emphasized as a common religious denominator for the whole of the world, especially since Adam and Eve committed the ancestral sin. All religions are worshiping and praying their divinities in their own specific ways, before and after the birth of Jesus Christ. So, at all times, throughout the millennia, throughout the centuries, throughout the years, throughout the months, the weeks, the days, even throughout the hours, the entire mankind is ardently, conventionally or apathetically, praying. All of us are praying. Just today, after the Divine Liturgy, we began our Symposium with a prayer. An ecumenical one. We may affirm that prayer, in itself, is an ontological part of our personal being, the only one which has the power of transcending our human nature, to spiritually unite us with our Creator. In fact, to quote Nichifor Crainic, prayer means nothing else than maintaining the soul in the presence of God.

At this very moment I would like to make some clear distinctions between prayer and theology, by approaching their spiritual relationship from a general point of view, in order to rightly appreciate all the religious nuances and confessional contributions of our speakers, to a better understanding of the main topic of our Symposium.

In my view, prayer is validated by theology, and theology is validated by prayer. According to the great theologian and Romanian national poet, Nichifor Crainic, the term *theologia* does not refer to an intellectual speculation on a certain religious issue, but to the personal participation in the intimate and mysterious life of God. To theologize does not mean to debate theological problemes, but to live in God, by personally and dynamically experiencing Him. In this sense, prayer in itself is the theology of the heart and of the mind, just as theology in itself is the prayer of the heart and of the mind. There is a perfect synonymity between them. Both of them have the same spiritual content. Prayer and theology are the perfect spiritual means of our divine transcendence. For both of them, space and time are unlimited. Also, in their theandric essence there is no specific difference, even if their form of expressing apparently might be more or less different.They both represent the most indivisible totality of the Christian Orthodox Spirituality.

In what will follow, the topic of the Ninth Ecumenical Theological Symposium will be debated, let us say theologized, in their papers, by our distinguished speakers.

Following the allocution of our Venerable Guest of Honor, the Right Rev. Fr. Dr. Vasile Vasilachi, with the meaningful title: *O, God, Create in Me a New Heart!,* the papers of our speakers will be presented in this order:

Apanthisma and the Humanity in the New Millennium, by George Alexe.

Human Rights and Personhood in Greek Philosophy and Byzantine Humanism: The Aristotelian Anthropology of Being and the Hesychast Personhood-Anthropology," by the Honorable Dr. Constantine N. Tsirpanlis, Professor Emeritus.

Questioning, Contemplation, and Receptivity to What Is, by Prof. Dr. Richard Grallo.

Prayer for the Third Millenium: the Prayer of the Spirit in Us, by the Very Rev. Fr. Prof. Dr. Bert F. Breiner, Episcopal Church in the USA.

The End Is the Beginning: the Human Person According to St. John Climacus, by Dr. Nicholas Groves of Chicago Public Library and St. Sava Seminary, Libertville, Illinois.

Psalm 103: Doxology as Philosophy of Life; Historico-Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation, by the Very Rev. Fr. Prof. Dr. Theodor Damian.

*The Orthodox Prayers Before and After the Holy Communion, by M*rs. Drd. Daniela Anghel.

Following our tradition, the Ninth Ecumenical Theological Symposium will kindly be moderated by the Rev. Fr. Paul Theophilus.

A traditional break will be honored with a delicious lent dinner prepared and served by the gracious ladies of "SS. Peter and Paul Romanian Orthodox Church" and of the oldest Romanian Fraternal Society "Dorul" of New York.

George Alexe

"Apanthisma" and The Humanity in the New Millennium

Our paper is trying to approach, from a patristic perspective, the two realities that are emphasized by the main topic of our Symposium: the Prayer as Theology of the Heart and of the Mind, and the Humanity in the New Millenium. The Greek word *apanthisma* means a bouquet of flowers and was the metaphorical title given to an anthology of the most beautiful prayers of the Holy Fathers. This bouquet of spiritual flowers *Apanthisma,* emphasizing the prayer as theology of the heart and of the mind, was published for the first time in Constantinople, by Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain (Nicodimus Aghiorites) in 1799, translated into Romanian at the Monastery of Neamtz in 1827, and now twice edited by Virgil Cândea in Bucharest (Anastasia Publishing House, first edition in 1996, 318 pages, and the second edition in 1998). These prayers, especially those addressed to the Holy Spirit are considered by Fr. Staniloae a true "ascetical and mystical theology".

In regard to humanity, there is a big difference between the humanity of the past two millennia and the new one entering the 3rd millennium. The consequences of the last three centuries of anthropocentrism have strongly affected the modern and postmodern era in which we are living now. Unfortunately, the theandric sense of prayer as theology of mind and heart seems to be almost lost. Also the theandric sense of our Christian existence.

But we don't have to despair, even if, for the moment, the religious scenario of Western Christianity in the first year of the new millennium does not look too good. The New Age movement and the new religious shifting paradigms are already invading the old kingdom of Christianity from inside and outside of its gates. There is an immense challenge that Christianity has to face, that of restoring the spiritual equilibrium of the world. It is never is too late for Christianity to establish, instead of direct confrontation, a religious dialogue of love and spiritual understanding, based on a total openness to the world.

By initiating this dialogue Christianity does not imply an abolishment of other religions, beliefs or creeds. The real vocation of Christianity is not to abolish other religions but to spiritually fulfill them. Our Lord Jesus Christ did not come to abolish the law or the

Prophets, but to fulfill the law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17). Yet, in order to spiritually fulfill other religions, we have to be ourselves fulfilled, in the first place, by the Holy Spirit and then to see what has to be fulfilled in other religions in order to bring them to the knowledge of the Christological truth of our Christian orthodox faith.

Unfortunately, after 2000 years of existence, Christianity is still misinterpreted, misunderstood and even unknown. Especially Western Christianity, is strongly but unjustly criticized and seen by the new religions and cults as anachronistic, unfulfilled, and even dead. Something seems to be unclear here. Then, what is wrong with the moral and spiritual life of Christianity today?

The acclaimed self sufficiency of Western Christianity, strangely contrasting with the humbleness of the Eastern Christianity, does not solve the problems which, justified or not, arise everywhere. In relation to this, trying to offer a solution, John Shelby Spong, an episcopalian bishop, contrary to his probably good intentions, wrote a controversial book *Why Christianity must change or die* (Harper, San Francisco, 1998, 258 pp.). As expected, the author deals in particular with the Western institutional Christianity, which must change in order to avoid its passing away. But the change that he is talking about is far from being conform with the spirit of the Christian Church. One example regards the Trinitarian theology. Our Triune God was not only replaced but also heretically defined by Bishop John Shelby Spong as the "Ground of Being." So, ironically speaking, on the eve of the new millennium, Christianity was saved by theoretically being killed by John Shelby Spong. From now on, it doesn't need anymore to be changed in order to survive, because Western Christianity was killed by "the Ground of Being", the impersonal god, apocryphally created by John Shelby Spong.

But the feeling that some sort of change is needed is persistent in many Christian circles. The true question is not what really must urgently be changed in order to update Christianity to the new millennium's standards of cultural, scientific, artistic and spiritual living; it is not about which aspects of Christianity are going to be affected by the change, whether they may concern the hierarchical structure, worship and the teaching of the Church or the spiritual life of the Christians themselves.

The real problem seems to be the concept of change itself. What we have to change is up to ourselves to decide. It is inappropriate, to say

the least, that agents outside the Church are in such a hurry to determine the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church to perform unnecessary changes that are not pursuing the achievement of her spiritual wellfare.

We cannot change the essence of Christianity that is true to our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, because we believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. This is the true Church of Jesus Christ the Son of God, "and all the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). We may temporarily change our attitudes toward Christianity or toward other religions, but not for ever. In such a case, we are the losers, not Christianity or the Church. One type of change that is always needed at an individual level is *metanoia,* the process whereby we redirect our minds to God. The power of *metanoia* is prayer; it is when we become people of prayer that we are theologians.

Certainly, the humanity of the third millennium appears to be spiritually too much precipitated and agitated, lacking inner peace and quietude of the souls, and in some way alienated from God, and unable to find by herself an exit from this strange situation. Generally speaking Western Christianity of the third millennium seems to be very tired . It seems that what we have now is a Christianity living inside the secular world but outside its spiritual needs and aspirations. For the great majority of Western humanity the personal prayer and communion with God seems to be forgotten, if not lost for ever. Anyhow, we may sorrowfully affirm that there is no relationship between this Western humanity and the daily prayer as theology of mind and heart. Maybe that is why today instead of Christian priests, pastors and ministers, there is out there a horde of metaphysical counselors, esoteric instructors, experts on stress, spirituality and mind/body connection, and many others of this kind. They are inductively experiencing and practicing a dubious power to change lives, the power of feelings and of touch, interactive light therapy, psychic healing, herbal divination, palm therapy and reading, the spiritual ponderings on the profound state of personal inner reality and intimacy, initiations in Tibetan and Celtic shamanism or Indian mysticism.

More than that, in order to create more confusion, they are pretending to be the so called "Unity Churches," where, as it is fancifully advertised, hearts are opened and lives transformed, where the adherent to such fake churches is discovering his spiritual self by blasphemously embracing the light of truth and "the teachings" of Jesus Christ. The "reverends" of these so called churches presumptuously

proclaim that "through practical application of spiritual principles, we awaken to our spiritual identity and learn to live it. Unity Churches provide a nurturing, guiding, spirit-filled environment for transformation. We serve all who seek inspiration and prayer support on their path of spiritual unfoldment". It is useful to mention that, according to the magazine *PhenomeNews* (Southfield, Michigan, November 2001), from which we are getting these informations, in Michigan there are already functioning 22 such Unity Churches. One of them proudly presents "Sacred Jazz Vespers".

This artificial imitation of the true Church doesn't have any value. Useless to say that the spiritual meaning of Christian terminology is totally distorted in the ritual performances of the above mentioned churches. I am tempted to believe that they are somehow generated not quite by the New Age movement but rather by the old anthropocentrism still alive in our society now at the beginning of the third millennium. The anthropocentric palliatives offered by the "Unity Churches" have nothing to do with the salvation of the souls of all the innocent and naive people esoterically fascinated by their strange rituals.

Now, the final and decisive question: Where will the spiritual salvation of the humanity in the new millennium be coming from? Certainly not from the New Age movement or from the old anthropocentrism. Not even from any kind of new aggressive cults and religions, or new religious shifting paradigms. The answer is very simple and at the same time worthy for the entire Christianity and humanity, in terms of restoring its spiritual equilibriun and communion with God. It is to be found in prayer, as the theology of the heart and of the mind, as it was inherited by Eastern Christianity from the Holy Fathers and practiced throughout millennia and centuries since then.

"Prayer," Fr. Staniloae said, "is the mystery of man's union with God." According to Elias Eccdicus "Prayer is the key of the Kingdom of Heavens". Prayer always was a theandric act. Saint John Climacus teaches that prayer is the illumination of the mind, our prayer in itself is also union of man with God. Saint Basil the Great said that prayer is the elevation of the mind to God. The heart is the spiritual center of the human being. Prayer is in fact the elevation and the communion of man's mind and heart with God, according to Evagrius Ponticus.

To conclude, I would like to stress the fact that the prayers of the Holy Fathers published in *Apanthisma* are the most representative and significant of the Orthodox Spirituality. They are spiritually

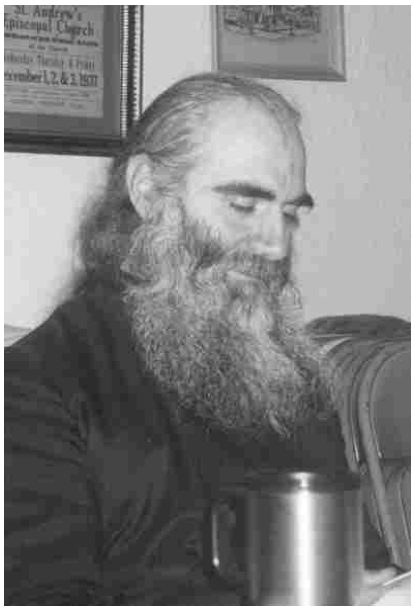
illustrating all human efforts in the long way of purification, illumination and contemplation leading to the mystical union of man with God. What we have to seriously take into consideration is the role that prayer as theology of the heart and mind could spiritually play in the cultural, scientific, artistic and religious life of the humanity in the new millennium.

It is the only charismatic gift, the real spiritual remedy, graciously offered by the Eastern Orthodox Christianity to the Western Roman-Catholic and Protestant Christianity and to the entire world in the third millennium.

Dr. Nicholas Groves

Rev. Fr. Constantin Chirila

Drd. Daniel Damian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Prof. Dr. Richard Grallo

RICHARD GRALLO

Questioning as Meditation and Contemplation

Introduction

The topic of this paper is the role that *questioning* might play in both *meditation* and *contemplation*, understood as distinct activities. Both meditation and contemplation have been shown to be important activities of consciousness that are associated with a variety of benefits. Included among these are: (1) affectively, the calming of intense emotions, (2) cognitively, the clarification of thoughts and purposes, and (3) behaviorally, the guidance of behavior by a more precisely targeted and focused consciousness.

Questioning, on the other hand, has received very little attention by both philosophers and psychologists. Even the immediate product of the activity of questioning, namely *question*s, has received very little attention from these groups. Yet this is very strange, since both groups have spent their professional lives in asking, formulating and attempting to answer questions.

Given the little attention that questioning as an activity has received, it is not at all surprising that it would not have been related to other topics, including the very ancient topics of meditation and contemplation. My aim here will be to approach these three areas – meditation, contemplation and questioning – from the viewpoint of a cognitive-behavioral psychologist. It is beyond the purpose here to explore the historical roots of the many ancient traditions of both meditation and contemplation. As important as those concerns are, the goal here is much more modest: namely, to suggest some fruitful lines of inquiry and collaboration among specialists from many fields. I would count these small efforts as successful if readers: (1) would begin to pay more attention to the spontaneous activity of questioning that emerges in their own conscious life, (2) strive to grasp the broad implications of this activity in developing an understanding of the world, and (3) begin to appreciate how the act of questioning itself can be used for purposes of both meditation as well as contemplation.

The conscious life of a person is marked by a succession of states of awareness that have been named by James (1983) and others as a "flow of consciousness". Each state in this succession may be primarily *cognitive* (i.e. concerned with the processing of information) or *affective* (i.e. primarily an emotional state). In each case, such states may or may not be accompanied by activities of *observable behavior*. Following a definition presented by Myers (2000), we can say that when these states (cognitive, affective or behavioral) become recurrent schemes or habits then we may speak of a more or less coherent "personality".

The management of these states is not easy and can become bogged down in unproductive habits or can run off in a variety of directions. Consequently, an important concern of many thinkers down through the ages has been the *management of conscious states*, in the belief that if these states can be managed in an ongoing way then the advantages of habit could be maximized without suffering from its disadvantages, and the uncontrolled wandering of conscious activity could also be channeled. Consequently numerous schools of meditation and contemplation have arisen in order to deal with this problem in a practical way.

Contemporary English linguistic usage does not make much of a distinction between *meditation* and *contemplation*, regarding them both as overlapping in meaning, referring broadly to activities and exercises of consciousness *(American Heritage Dictionary,* 1993). However, for purposes of this discussion, we will draw a distinction between them. Here *meditation* will refer to a set of activities and exercises designed to promote emotional tranquility. As such, these exercises and activities may not focus on any specific object, or may focus on only a bodily process such as breathing. Examples of meditative type activities would be many types of yoga, listening to relaxation tapes, or the Japanese Tea ceremony. In contrast, *contemplation* will refer to any set of activities designed to focus completely on an object, to the exclusion of all other concerns. Contemplation is very much a matter of "following" an object to see where it leads. Examples of contemplative type activities would include guided imagery and spiritual exercises.

No claim is made here about how the activity of meditation is or should be related to the activity of contemplation, only that they are different in their aims. Further, no claim is made here that the words 'meditation' or 'contemplation' are used by many authors in the same way as suggested here. The definitions presented are simply working definitions for the start of a dialogue.

Questioning as a State of Consciousness

Questioning is an important state of consciousness that arises in us periodically in daily life. To understand its importance try to recall a time when you were bothered or made aware of a question that would not disappear. What was that experience like? What can we learn from it? In contrast, have you ever had a day when no question whatever occurred to you? How often has that happened? What can we learn from it?

Analysis of an experience like this can show that the *act of questioning* itself has six important characteristics. First, questioning involves a recognition that there is a gap in our knowing. We suddenly become aware of a "known unknown" in our world. It is unknown because we do not have the answer we desire. It is a known unknown because we recognize this deficiency. Second, the act of questioning focuses our attention. While we think about it, what we are trying to find out takes over, and it rules out other concerns of all kinds. Third, the *act of questioning* can yield a preliminary and immediate product – the *question.* Questions are a formulation, in some language or other, of the recognition of the gap in our knowledge. For this reason, people are sometimes cautious about the questions they ask and to whom, since the posing of a question reveals one's ignorance. Fourth, *questioning* and *questions* invite a *decision:* to pursue them or not. Have you ever had an urgent question occur to you, only to drop it a few days later? Or in contrast, do you know what it is like to pursue a question for years? Fifth, *questioning* challenges consciousness to new tasks. A person's state of mind is entirely transformed by the occurrence of a question. How long that transformation will last is another matter. Finally, all *questioning* is a search,(if taken seriously, a quest). The nature of the search depends on the type of questions being asked. The search itself

is the intending of some future state not yet achieved: the answer. What constitutes an adequate answer depends on the kinds of questions being asked. Some questions are a *search for possibilities*. Others are a *search for knowledge*, and still others are a *search for other values,* beyond either possibilities or knowledge (Barron, 1998; Lonergan, 1958).

Authentic questioning should be distinguished from *inauthentic questioning.* Authentic questioning is the flow and expression of the *desire to know* as it seeks its fulfillment and as it rules out other concerns. Inauthentic questioning however is the articulation of a question for some other purpose than coming to know. For example, a person who shouts in anger "Why me?" is probably expressing a complaint rather than a desire to know. The child who asks for details of a bedtime story may not be so much interested in the story as in staying up beyond bedtime.

Authentic questioning can have decided effects on our emotional, cognitive and behavioral states as well as on our habits. These effects can be both meditative and contemplative in nature. The change in focus can dramatically change the intensity of present emotions. Consequently, if one desires to change a present emotion, a shift to a new question may be all that is needed. If the desired change is to be in the direction of emotional tranquility, then shifting to the *act of questioning* may serve a *meditative* purpose: the calming of emotion and the introduction of a relaxed state. This meditative use of questioning therefore bears some similarity to other meditative techniques such as focusing on breathing or repeating mantras in that they all involve a shift of attention.

The change in focus provided by our questioning can also change the contents of present thoughts**.** By shifting to questioning we can either focus on a new content, or we can focus on the same content of previous thoughts but in a new way. Either way we are thinking differently about the object of our attention. If the desired cognitive change is simply to pursue and explore the object of attention, then shifting to the act of questioning may serve a *contemplative* purpose: the unhurried pursuit, exploration and even enjoyment of an object of our thought. But such objects of contemplation could be anything: not only thoughts, but emotions-as-contemplated, behaviors-as-contemplated, habits-as-contemplated, religious or spiritual or everyday experiences, memories etc. Therefore, the very act of *questioning* itself can be used

as an aid in *contemplation*.

To the extent that we can change our emotions and thoughts *at will* we are controlling our states of consciousness. To the extent that we control our states, we take possession and control of what we do. To the extent that we continually practice this self-control we develop the habits that will become our personality and character, and we become full partners in shaping what Lonergan calls "the one and only edition of ourselves".

Functional Distortion of Questioning

Questioning is natural capacity that seems to emerge spontaneously in children once they have developed a rudimentary command of language. How those questions are received by the adults around them will very likely shape the manner in which children may come to manage their own questioning capabilities. In many instances, young people suffer a lifetime of neglect of this remarkable capacity not only at the hands of adults in the home but even at the hands of "educational" institutions. It would lead some educational critics to lament that even college and graduate students need to re-learn how to formulate, ask and pursue questions (Postman, 1992).

Although questioning seems to be a natural tendency, it is possible to distort it. Lonergan (1958, 1971) in his discussions of "bias" provides an extended discussion of the distorting influences that can deflect, suppress or defeat questions as they arise. He groups these distorting processes under the general term of "bias". The discussion of bias is quite different from that provided by psychologists and social science researchers. For them, bias is often identified with systematic error, understood as the *end product* of thought processes (Kahneman, Slovic & Tversky, 1982). For Lonergan, bias is systematic but it is mainly a *process* rather than a *product.* Furthermore, it is a process that specifically interferes with *questioning*.

For our purposes here we will define *bias* as a systematic exclusion of relevant questions and the insights to which they lead. As such, *bias* is one of seven functional distortions of problem solving that have been identified (Grallo, Breiner & Aquilino, 2001). While there are many ways in which our problem solving efforts can be distorted, it

is *bias* that attacks the process of *questioning* itself as well as the insights to which this questioning leads. As Lonergan first works out in *Insight*, the consequences of the sustained operation of biases are catastrophic, both personally and socially (Lonergan, 1958).

The operation of a *bias as a process* will block off whole areas of the development of consciousness. If such a process were to operate over a lifetime, the consequences can be cumulative and serious, including the failure to even recognize problems until it is too late. In August Wilson's popular play *Fences*, there is a character by the name of Lyons who exhibits the process of bias interfering with personal development. Lyons, at thirty two years of age, was in the habit of borrowing money from his father, yet he himself refused to work. His father, Troy, was a working man who would use his son's requests to challenge him about his attitudes toward work and toward other people. On one occasion, when Troy does this, Lyons angrily exclaims that he does not want to hear anything about how he lives. He just wants the money. After years of operating on the basis of this bias, Lyons comes to the consequences of his actions and ends up serving a prison sentence for cashing stolen checks. He also comes to the insights about living that Troy was attempting to convey and that the bias was blocking for a long time.

Consequences of Questioning for Meditation, Contemplation and Life

To the extent that *questioning* can be incorporated as a technique in both *meditation* and *contemplation*, then it will bring with it all the benefits of those two practices. The primary benefits pertain to the very purpose of meditation and contemplation. In the case of *meditation* it will bring emotional tranquility and whatever may flow from that. In the case of *contemplation* it will bring a heightened focus on a selected object and whatever may flow from that. But in addition to these general considerations, there are quite specific things that *questioning* brings to our conscious lives.

First, the initial raising of a question is easy, and if we are fascinated by it, it is enough to get us started. However, while just raising a question is often not sufficient to get us to *pursue* that question

for months or years, it often is sufficient to get us rewardingly absorbed in the activities of meditation or contemplation. Since such experiences are rewarding in themselves, we are more likely to engage in them in the future. The more likely we are to engage in these activities, the more likely that they will become *habit* and part of our personality. Thus *authentic questioning* can not only serve to calm us down, but it can focus our attention in ever widening circles to reverse the operation of *bias* and to begin to approach the universe as it is. Giving a full range to *questioning as a cognitive process* helps to develop a receptivity to the universe (all that is, was, will be), profoundly changing us in the process. Flanagan (1997) has summed up this change as follows:

> Your questioning carries you beyond the actual reality of things to the fuller reality of their worthwhileness. It is in apprehending and appreciating their values that you discover that things do or do not exist in truly worthwhile ways. Such truly valuable realities that you come to know and value only serve to reveal that the final objective of your knowing and valuing is a further unknown, and will not be known until you have brought all your questionings to rest and fulfilled all your desirings. God then can be defined heuristically and implicitly as the completely valuable objective of all your questionings and desirings that you do not yet know and have not yet loved. Further the only way to be an authentic knower and an authentic chooser is to appropriate the foundational tension between the knowing and choosing being that you now are and the more intelligent and worthwhile person that you can make yourself come to be in virtue of your capacities. (p. 234)

Recommendations

In light of these considerations, several recommendations can be made:

1) Distinguish meditation from contemplation. The two are not the same. Inducing emotional tranquility should not be identified with the vitally absorbed following of an object. Using the definitions provided here should offer some clarity in distinguishing these activities.

2) Set aside time to meditate. Special times during the week are

useful to get started. Choose carefully those practices that you can most easily and enjoyably use to achieve the *peace* of emotional tranquility. Experiment with *questioning* and *specific questions* as one of those practices. As you become adept at this, try to expand it to a daily practice and then to special situations that may require this type of response.

3) Set aside time to contemplate. As with meditation, setting aside special times is useful – on a weekly basis at first, then daily, then as needed at will. Experiment with *questioning* and *specific questions* as part of one's practice. You may find that *contemplation* can often be fruitfully prepared by a period of *meditation.*

4) Keep a journal of questions and the results to which they lead. Such a journal could also trace other meditative and contemplative activities, or it could be a part of an overall life journal. However organized, use the journal to keep track of your progress. Take the time periodically to review this evidence and re-construct your habits in light of the knowledge gained.

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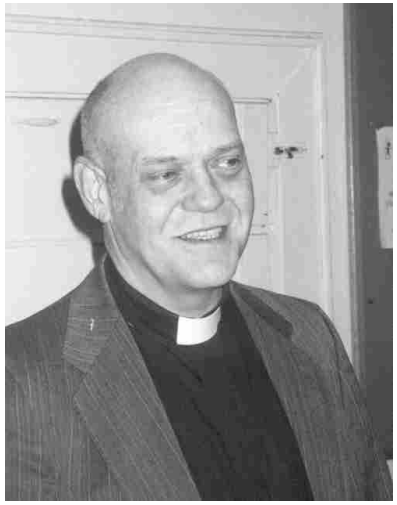

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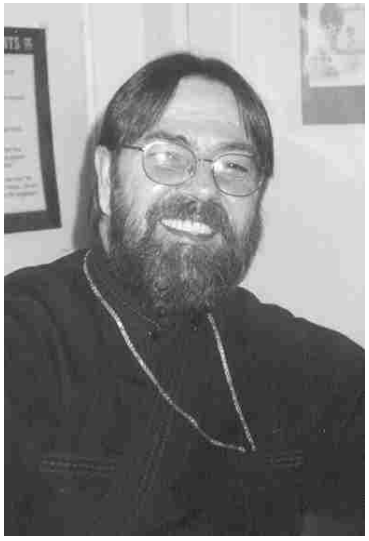

Dr. Nicholas Groves

My End Is My Beginning - the Human Person According to John Climacus

Introduction

This evening we shall be looking at a topic which is very close to the heart of our Orthodox Christian faith. Namely, how the human person, you and I, man or woman, child or adult, sick or well, wealthy or poor, is a unit: body and spirit, thought and emotions, heart and mind. God, as the book of *Genesis* (the book of "beginnings") tells us, created each of us as such according to God's image and likeness.[1] In our prayer we are, according to scripture, mediated through tradition to bring the mind into the heart and so discover the stillness *(hesychia)* that is in our hearts and in the heart of God. So it is that the journey of return to the God who made us is to be as much a bodily, a fleshly journey, as it is a spiritual one. What St. Gregory of Nazianzus set forth in the middle of the struggles of the fourth century of our era remains precisely as true for us today as then: What has not been assumed (taken up) cannot be redeemed.[2] We could paraphrase it thus: Christ saves us - body and spirit - just as he himself rose in body and spirit. For us as Orthodox Christians there is no merely spiritual redemption, no gnostic escape from being human.

Yet there is a rich paradox involved here that we need to explore, however briefly. Our guides for this journey of return of holistic redemption are to be ascetics - monks and nuns - people who supposedly abandoned the "world" that the rest of us live in Orthodox tradition, always a friend of paradox, holds that these people are often our best guides in our daily struggles, and we remember them in the litanies of the Divine Liturgy. Perhaps the most informed and helpful for our journey can be the sixth and seventh century Palestinian monk known as John Climacus, or John of the Ladder.[3] Much as St. Maximus the Confessor set out a theological synthesis born out of the theological and personal crises in his life, so John Climacus forged an ascetic synthesis and a map for our personal and daily use.[4]

As we are going to see, Climacus will teach us that there needs

to be a certain synergy or cooperation of energies, of body and spirit, if we are to ascend the ladder of return just as in the larger Patristic tradition of the East, there is a parallel synergy or cooperation of God and the person, of grace and human effort that is to complete Christ's saving life, death and resurrection in each of us.[5]

Thus, in a most fundamental sense for Climacus, the "end" or goal of our journey informs its beginning and continuation. Our "end" is our "beginning" - to paraphrase T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets.* To misunderstand or forget this basic point is to make a profound error or detour in our Christian life. For if we engage in asceticism, spiritual combat in its varied forms - whether fasting, works of mercy and love for others - as if we were chalking up spiritual "Brownie points," but forget the point of beginning of our struggle which is also its end, we indulge in a false pursuit of ourselves, of our own spiritual "perfection." This is what the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Trungpa Rinpoche called "spiritual materialism," or what our own late Father Alexander Schmemann described as "religion" pursued as a hobby like stamp-collecting.[6] In such an end we are the greatest losers and the bitter joke is on us. But God would have it otherwise as Climacus will tell us.

Our End - Christ as Beginning and End of Our Life

Let us begin our journey at the end, at Step 30 of the *Ladder,* "On Faith, Hope and Love." Several manuscript illustrations in Byzantine versions show Christ pictured at the top of the ladder. Some even show him welcoming up those who ascend with his hands outstretched.[7] Imaging the Lord awaiting us, our author urges: "Ascend, my brothers, ascend eagerly. Let your heart's resolve be to climb...Run."[8] There is urgency and excitement here, a fast pace, no pompous or steady procession. (Here manuscript illustrations depart from text. To me Climacus sounds more like someone in Grand Central Station at rush hour than someone at worship in Hagia Sophia.) In his eagerness he goes on to tell us: "I long to know how Jacob saw you (Christ) fixed about the ladder...That climb, how was it? Tell me, for I long to know" (p. 289). Notice the highly personal tone - that of lover and beloved - of someone who wants to share both our Lord's struggle and vision. Yet there is an enigmatic phrase at the end of this

exclamation, a note enticing us further into the mystery of God: "But he would not - perhaps he could not - tell us any more."

The larger context of *Genesis* 28:12, of Jacob's dream of the ladder, is essential for our understanding of Climacus' journey. Jacob stops for the night in the middle of his excursion. He improvises a bed and sets up stones for a pillow and then dreams of a ladder. "And behold, the Lord stood above it" *(Gen.* 28:10ff.). Jacob awakes from his dream and exclaims: "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it." He was afraid and said: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven."

"Surely the Lord is in this place." For Climacus, the "place" is the point at which we struggle, where the spiritual combat is waged. It is here and now - in our homes, offices, the subway, etc. - not only in the confines of the Divine Liturgy. And the realization of Christ's presence at these points of struggle, of *ascesis*, is to bring us - as Jacob - to awe, to holy fear, and to a condition of repentance, *metanoia*, of a "turning around" of our hearts and minds. In the words of the Shaker hymn familiar to many of us: "When true simplicity is gained. To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed. To turn, turn, will be our delight. 'Til by turning, turning, we come round right." The point we are to arrive at is love or more properly "that triad, faith, hope, and love, binding and securing the union of all" (Step 30; p. 286).[9] Speaking of love, Climacus highlights its essentially apophatic or indescribable nature. At heart, love is unknown and unknowable, yet draws us into its depths.

"The man who wants to talk about love is undertaking to speak about God. But it is risky to talk about God and could even be dangerous for the unwary. Angels know how to speak about love, but even they do so only in proportion to the light within them" (30; p. 286).

Or again: love "is the condition of angels and the progress of eternity" *(Ibid.)*. Love is a "fountain of faith, an abyss of patience, a sea of humility." Note the vastness, the sweep of the language Climacus uses. It is the vastness experienced by a smitten lover or jealous spouse. Such is our love for God to be. Our author goes on to picture this reality using images of hunger, thirst and fever.

Body and spirit are both involved in our approach to the beloved:

"A man flooded with the love of God reveals in his body, as if in a mirror, the splendor of his soul, a glory like that of Moses when he

came face to face with God" (30; p. 288, cf. *Exodus* 34:29-35).

The images Climacus uses here are rooted in a tradition which considers the physical body as iconic. Just as much, if not more than wood and paint, it is the human physical person who shows forth in the flesh - who radiates the presence of God. (An excellent and nearly contemporary example of this same principle is Athanasius' description of Anthony of Egypt after Anthony came forth after a period of intense ascetic struggle).[10] It is this same tradition that will prevail although with some setbacks on the way at Nicea II, and be expressed with much depth and eloquence by Symeon the New Theologian (eleventh century), and personified closer to our time by St. Seraphim of Sarov. The point is clear both as Climacus presents it as well as for these later witnesses. God can be, and is, present in and through our corporeal nature. That nature can acquire and be transformed - transfigured - by the Holy Spirit as was Christ's entire nature on Mount Tabor. And as we acquire that Holy Spirit who also helps us discover our own most true, created nature, we also may draw many others to ourselves in our transformation.[11]

Yet there is also fear, at least in the sense of awe, mixed with this love. Is it a contradiction when our author can say immediately after his description of the smitten lover the following: "Lucky is the man whose fear of God is in no way less than the accused in front of a judge" (30; p. 287)? I think not. Love and fear (especially awe, holy fear) mingle because the awesome reality of God progressively invades our consciousness as we ascend the ladder. Both are necessary if the vision of the climber is not to degenerate into sentimentality or the ardor of the seeker into some form of spiritual lust. Once again as with Moses whom Climacus evokes as well as for Jacob the original dreamer in *Genesis,* we are standing or moving on holy ground. The ground of our love is also to be the ground of our combat, our struggle with the powers and principalities who try and often succeed in pulling us off the ladder, and sometimes when we are near the top.

Our guide is quite clear that love of God is directly related, as in John's *First Epistle,* to the love we have for others: "He who loves the Lord has first loved his brother...the man who claims to love the Lord but is angry with his neighbor is like someone who dreams he is running" (30; pp. 288-289). This is not love, rather it is delusion.

Climacus' final words in Chapter 20 are much like his first. He is caught up in and by a love that defies description - that opens and

expands ever both outward and inward: "You (God) rule everything, and now you have enraptured my soul. I am unable to hold in your flame and therefore, I will go forward praising you" (30; p. 289). As earlier in this chapter: "'God is love' (I *John* 4:16). But someone eager to define this is blindly striving to measure the sand in the ocean" (30; p. 286).

This is to be the end and the goal of our journey. But what of its beginning? We find that it is exactly the same. As Climacus explains in the magnificent picture of God which he places at the beginning of the *Ladder:*

> God is the life of all free beings. He is the salvation of all, of believers and unbelievers, of the just or the unjust, of the pious or the impious, of those freed from the passions or caught up in them, of monks or those living in the world, of the educated or the illiterate, of the healthy or the sick, of the young or the very old. He is like the outpouring of light, the glimpse of the sun, or the changes of the weather which are the same for everyone without exception. (1; p. 74)

It is in a passage at the very beginning that we first encounter the body. Climacus' attitude may strike us - at first glance - as ambivalent. But in reality he proves quite consistent because his understanding of body is very close to that of St. Paul and the entire New Testament. Our bodies are not incidental:

> The monk finds himself in an earthly and defiled body, but pushes himself into the ranks and status of the incorporeal angels...The monk is ever embattled with what he is and he is the unfailing warder of his senses. The monk has a body made holy, a tongue purified, a mind enlightened. Asleep or awake, the monk is a soul pained by the constant remembrance of death. (1; p.74)[12]

"The monk is ever embattled with what he is." It is not the physical body here that is evil. Rather it is the inclinations in our physical nature which would have us satisfy immediate urges or "needs" as if they were somehow the chief goals of our life. To phrase this in terms familiar to our consumer society where so often we define (and delimit) ourselves - who we think we "are' - by what we buy, or tailor a particular "life-style" for this imagined self, it is to "go for the gusto." As if the meaning and purpose of human life fashioned in the image and likeness of God was to "get" all we can. (Another advertisement urges: "When drinking from the cup of life, chug"). It is the exercise of the

remembrance of death that Climacus introduces at this early point which is to shake us out of such a vision of life. Rather than being an exercise in gloominess or despair, it is an exercise in realism. It is to have us recognize, in the words of St. Teresa of Avila, that "all things are passing" except God.[13] Climacus will even go so far as to advise his disciples later on in the *Ladder* to imagine their nightly bed as their tomb and an imperfect meal as a lot better fare than the food for the worms that they are going to be! (7; 138). Harsh or strong words? Or Christian realism?

So it is that our physical, mental and emotional world is to be a place of contest or struggle so that we can become who God intends us to be: "God, who judges the contest, stands waiting to see how it ends for the one who has taken on this race" (1; p. 74).

Climacus is very clear at the beginning of his account of spiritual combat that the struggle will be hard. In many respects his description of it sounds like someone overcoming an addiction or substance abuse:

> Violence (cf. *Matthew* 11:12) and unending pain are the lot of those who aim to ascend to heaven with the body, and this especially at the early stages of the enterprise when our pleasure-loving disposition and our unfeeling hearts must travel through overwhelming grief toward the love of God and holiness. It is hard, truly hard. There has to be an abundance of invisible bitterness especially for the careless, until our mind, that cur sniffing around the meat market and reveling in the uproar, is brought through simplicity, deep freedom from anger and diligence to a love of holiness and guidance.

Yet we do have help: "Yet full of passions and weakness as we are, let us take heart and let us in total confidence carry to Christ in our right hand and confess to Him our helplessness and our fragility" *(Ibid.,* pp. 75-76).

This is the world of the desert, whether ancient or contemporary, Egypt or urban America. There Anthony struggles mightily with the demons within and without. In his final victory, the exhausted warrior asks why Christ has just stood on the side (at least seemingly). Christ's answer, as reported in the *Life of Anthony,* could be equally applicable to each of us: "Anthony, I wanted to see your struggle."[14] In Climacus' words, we are to "draw food and drink from the bread of pain and the

cup of weeping" (1; p. 76).

In conclusion, as we look at Climacus' end and beginning in the *Ladder,* we can ask a fundamental questions. Is this a sad and weary view of the world? Surely in light of the values of much of our contemporary culture, a culture of the "now" and of the finality of the sensual and sensate, of "conspicuous consumption," it must appear to be. Yet I would maintain with Climacus, that in the light of "mere Christianity" it is, rather a realistic view. Of where death and the passing through death is a preparation for resurrection, where freedom from addictions is freedom for our fullest humanity.[15] For any of us who have ever been "on the brink" in any way, Climacus' words are words of hope and his ladder a way to salvation. We need to plunge into the struggle, not avoid it. We can see ourselves as "down and out," at the bottom rung of the ladder and maybe going lower, and feel real grief for our condition. Then the struggle itself can become a source of strength. We meet Christ, the beginning and end of our journey.

NOTES:

1. There are several good studies of the understanding of the human person created in God's image and likeness as presented by early fathers and mothers of the Church. See especially, Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God,* St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974; also Verna Harrison, *Grade and Freedom According to St. Gregory of Nyssa,* Mellen, Lewiston, NY, 1992. In many ways I find John Climacus' understanding to the human person very close to that of Gregory. This is not to claim any "influence" of Gregory on John, but rather to see both as living in the same theological world, a world of image and likeness.

2. "What has not been assumed has not been healed," as St. Gregory phrases it in *Letter 101 (Letters to Cloudiness): to aproslepton atherapeuton.* This insight is developed from a somewhat different perspective that Christ assumes every part of human nature in his *Theological Oration 30.* Gregory argues against different opponents who would either question Christ's full humanity, the Appolinarians, or who would question his full divinity, varieties of Arians. Gregory of Nyssa struggles against similar opponents. See the collection of translated texts with explanatory material in Anthony Meredith, S.J., *Gregory of Nyssa. (The Early Christian Fathers),* Routledge, London & New York, 1999.

3. For John's basic biography as best as scholars can construct it, see: C. Luibheid and N. Russell, translators, *John Climacus. The Ladder of Divine Ascent,* Paulist Press, NY, 1982. Introduction by Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, "The Author and His Background," pp. 1-6. Also John Chryssavgis, *Ascent to Heaven. The Theology of the Human Person According to Saint John of the Ladder,* Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, MA,

1989, chapter 1. John's first biographer was a monk named Daniel of Raithou, who may or may not have been a contemporary.

4. This is a point Timothy (Kallistos) Ware discusses in his Introduction to the Luibheid and Russell translation, pp. 3 and 18-19.

5. Verna Harrison explains this point of the *synergeia,* or cooperation of nature and grace in the theology of Gregory of Nyssa as cited in note 1. Such a view is in rather marked contrast to the later Augustine who had such profound influence on subsequent Latin theology.

6. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism,* Shambhala Publications, Berkeley,1973. For Father Alexander Schmemann on "religion," see especially *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemann. 1973-1983,* St. Vladimir's, Crestwood, NY, 2000, p. 52.

7. See for example, Stavronikita ms. Cod. 50, fol. 1r-fig. 133; Athos, Vatopedi Cod. 376, fol. 421v-fig. 17 and Garrett ms. 16, Princeton University, fol. 4r-fig. 31 as reproduced in J.R. Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1954.

8. As translated in Luibheid and Russell *John Climacus* "A Brief Exhortation and Summary," p. 291. Hereafter this edition is cited in my text by chapter and page number. For anyone familiar with the *Rule of Saint Benedict,* Climacus' admonitions to "hasten" and "run" will be familiar. Both Climacus and Benedict share an urgency of the "end times," of an eschatology. Both warn us not to let these times overtake us. It is, in fact, later than we think. See Benedict's Prologue to his *Rule.*

9. The word Climacus uses for "love" throughout this chapter is *agape* (Latin: *caritas)* See the *Patrologia Graeca* (Migne) edition, vol. 88, cc. 1153ff. For the manuscript tradition and editions of Climacus, see J. Chryssavgis, *Ascent to Heaven,* pp. 9ff. Curiously enough, there has not been a modern critical edition of the text.

10. See the description of Anthony's presence after he emerged from combat with demons in the *Life of Anthony* by Athanasius, chapter 14. Modern translations of this work include that in the Ancient Christian Writers series, vol. 10 and Robert C. Gregg's translation, *The Life of Antony* and the *Letter to Marcellinus* (Classics of Western Spirituality, New York, 1980).

11. See the account of St. Seraphim of Sarov's transformation as presented in V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,* St. Vladimir's, Crestwood, NY, 1976), pp. 227ff.

12. There is an excellent discussion of the varied meanings of body and embodiment for Climacus in J. Chryssavgis, *Ascent to Heaven,* chapter 2: "Soma-Sarx: The Body and the Flesh." Patristic authors had a much more nuanced and balanced understanding of our entire human nature than some contemporary scholars and polemicists give them credit for. In the context of their cultures, they were not negative about the value of our physical nature. In this sense, Christianity was often a message of liberation. See especially, Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity,* Columbia University Press, New York, 1988.

13. This is a phrase in Teresa's poem entitled "Eficacia de la Pacienca," also sometimes called "Teresa's Bookmark." See *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Alveoli,* Vol. 3. K. Kavanaugh OCD and O. Rodriguez OCD, eds., ICS Publications, Washington,

DC, 1985, p. 386.

14. See Athanasius, *Life of Anthony,* chapter 10.

15. As Christians we are asked to follow Christ's own road of death and resurrection. We cannot have the one without the other. This paradox of life through death, so foreign to much contemporary culture, is the central theme of St. Paul in *Romans* 6-8.

Christian Prayer for the Third Millennium

The thesis of this paper is that Christian prayer is the best hope for the world in the future. The ultimate goal of Christian prayer, as described in the literature on prayer and the spiritual life, is contemplation (θεωρία). In particular, it is the direct contemplation of God, the vision of God which is the ultimate, "first," contemplation – ἡ θεωρία ἡ πρώτη. At first glance, this seems strangely removed from the problems of the world in which we live. It seems, rather, to speak of the fulfillment of the individual soul in the contemplation of God. But there is another dimension to this union of the soul with God which is the goal of the spiritual life in general and of contemplative prayer in particular. St. Augustine wrote in his *De Civitate Dei* that the Heavenly City was marked by "the perfect union of hearts in the enjoyment of God and of one another in God" (xix, 13). Not only is there a communal and interpersonal dimension to the contemplation of God, but there is a practical dimension as well. The contemplation culminates in a divine action here in the world. The contemplation of God becomes a vehicle for God's activity; it becomes a vehicle for the divine energy (ἐνέργεια).

When we think about prayer, we often think of a dialogue with God. We think of speaking and maybe of listening, although many people say that they find listening much harder than speaking when it comes to prayer. But there is an even deeper dimension to prayer than listening to God and it is this deeper dimension which I believe may be the best hope for humanity as we face the challenges of the third millennium. This deeper level of meaning is the prayer of the Holy Spirit in us. It is a prayer deeper than our dialogue with God, it is the inarticulate groaning of our deepest union with God. It is a prayer which is beyond words. It is the prayer described by St. Paul in his epistle to the Galatians (4:6) "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' "

Let us begin by looking at a model of the contemplative life of prayer which goes back to Origen and which was developed by Evagrius of Pontus. It is a model which became classic among Christian authors of the Greek tradition, especially Maximus the Confessor. According to this understanding the contemplative life may be divided into two

aspects (contemplation of God and contemplation of nature) and three stages: the active life (πρακτική), natural contemplation (θεωρία φυσική), and contemplation proper or the vision of God (θεωρία πρώτη). In the first stage, there is a radical conversion, a centering of our whole life on God. The second stage meant to see all things in God and God in all things, to see the sacramental nature of all things. At the third stage, the Christian meets God face to face, in a direct and immediate union of love. God, of course, is a mystery beyond words, indeed beyond human conception. At this point, the soul must rise above words and images in order to apprehend God intuitively.

Evagrius in his treatise *On Prayer* wrote:

> When you are praying, do not shape within yourself any image of the Deity, and do not let your mind be stamped with the impress of any form; but approach the Immaterial in an immaterial manner. . . . Prayer means the shedding of thoughts. . . Blessed is the intellect that has acquired complete freedom from sensations during prayer.

According John Cassian, Anthony of Egypt said:

> And that you may see the character of true prayer I will give you not my own opinion but that of the blessed Antony: whom we have known sometimes to have been so persistent in prayer that often as he was praying in a transport of mind, when the sunrise began to appear, we have heard him in the fervor of his spirit declaiming: Why do you hinder me, O sun, who art arising for this very purpose; viz., to withdraw me from the brightness of this true light? And his also is this heavenly and more than human utterance on the end of prayer: That is not, said he, a perfect prayer, wherein a monk understands himself and the words which he prays. And if we too, as far as our slender ability allows, may venture to add anything to this splendid utterance, we will bring forward the marks of prayer which are heard from the Lord, as far as we have tried them. (Conferences 9:31)

The goal of contemplation, however, is not just to be lost in the presence of God. It is not simply to become absorbed into the divine light and thereby disappear. Were that the case, there would have been no need for the Church to struggle with the whole hesychast controversy. The great theological debate which wracked the Eastern Church about the Light of Tabor with which the Athonite hesychasts

shone and, in particular, its relationship to the divine energy (ἐνέργεια) would lose much its importance and, indeed, the whole thrust of its ultimate meaning, if it had simply taught a "getting lost" or "being absorbed" in God. Rather it claimed that the light of the Athonite hesychasts *was* the Light of Tabor. Here was visible, in a sense, the divine energy. This has profound implications for the life of the world.

The purpose of contemplation is "the vision of God." One seeks God for God's own sake. The quest for the vision of God is, to borrow terms from Kant's philosophy, categorical and not hypothetical. Kant distinguishes between a categorical and a hypothetical imperative. A hypothetical imperative is one which is valid under certain conditions, in order to achieve a particular purpose. For example, if someone where to give you instructions about how to get to the subway, it would be foolish to follow them if your destination were actually the supermarket. In that case you want directions to the supermarket – a set of imperatives whose purpose is to get you to that particular place: turn right at the corner, then turn left on 23rd Street, etc. A categorical imperative, however, is one which is binding in its own right and for no purpose other then itself. Now Kant's categorical imperatives themselves need not detain us. While their enlightenment rationalism might appeal in part to a philosopher like Aristotle, they would not appeal either to Plato or to the Christian writers on the spiritual life.

We find something similar to the concept of the "categorical" in this sense also in Aristotle. But there it is not so much an imperative which is categorical but one particular goal or purpose which he believes to be "categorical" for people. There is, he argues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* one goal which humans seek for its own sake and not for the sake of some other goal. He believes this to be happiness. On this premise, he builds his ethical system. While he develops the implications of the categorical nature of the quest for happiness in thoroughly rational and logical ways, he is closer to Christian understanding in that he sees the foundation of ethics in something to be sought rather than in something which is already given.

Of course, that is an oversimplification. We ought perhaps to say that the tradition of the Fathers preserves the best of Aristotle's insight and, in some ways, anticipates the insights of Kant. The Fathers argued that, because we are made in the image of God and because that image is often associated in a particular way with the intellect (νοῦς), there is a sense in which this intellect, when functioning correctly,

provides a kind of categorical imperative in the Christian life. And although the Fathers would agree that the final goal (τὸ τέλος) of human life is indeed a happy one, they would not make happiness the categorical end of human striving. That true end (τέλος) is, of course, God. Nonetheless, they would, I believe, agree with Aristotle that the foundation of the Christian life is something beyond what is innate in us. It is something outside ourselves which we must seek.

As interesting as this theory is, we cannot really pursue it here. Its purpose has been to establish the difference between what is categorical and hypothetical. These terms apply, in the first instance to the ethical life, but they run through the whole of Christian (and indeed all forms of religious) life. The Church Fathers always stressed the continuity of the way to God from obedience to God's commandments through to the final vision of God. Thus, as early as Origen, we find the following sayings: οὔτε γὰρ πρᾶξις οὔτε γὰρ θεωρία ἄνευ θἀτέρου "no praxis without contemplation and vice versa," and πρᾶξις γὰρ θεωρίας ἀνάβασις "praxis is the way up to contemplation." Both are found in Origen's *In Lucam fragmenta 39* and the second, in particular, was to become something of a maxim with Christian spiritual writers.[1]

In this context, it is the first of Origen's aphorisms which is particularly important: οὔτε γὰρ πρᾶξις οὔτε γὰρ θεωρία ἄνευ θἀτέρου "no praxis without contemplation and vice versa." These words imply that not only is "praxis the way up to contemplation," but that contemplation is also "the way down to praxis." This reversal of the second aphorism implied in the first is not as widely discussed as the other in the traditional literature. Perhpaps that is because it is as misleading as it is profoundly true.

Reading Origen's first aphorism, one might be tempted to think that the praxis, the activity, to which contemplation is the way down, is simply a return to the praxis, the activity, which was the way up. Were that so, one might well wonder why anyone would bother and especially what good it would do the world in the third millennium (or any other for that matter) even if anyone did bother. The fact of the matter, however, is that the praxis to which contemplation is a descent is not the same praxis which leads us up.

The ascent begins with the ascetical life and the "aquired virtues." "Aquired virtues" are those resulting from personal effort aided by that universal love and activity of God usually referred to as either "general" or "prevenient" grace. It follows on through the

"infused virtues," in other words, the gifts of the Holy Spirit which come into prominence over and above our human effort. This aspect of the spiritual has often been compared to a boat which has both oars and a sail. Rowing the boat thus becomes an image of "aquired virtues" and sailing the boat becomes an image of "infused virtues." But, of course, both of these are to be understood, in the first instance, in terms of the ascent referred in Origen's second maxim.

In the descent, one returns not to the praxis of "aquired virtues" but to a praxis which is the direct result of the work of the Holy Spirit within us. In other words, when we view contemplation as the way down to praxis, action in the world, it is God's action in the world which is the goal of *that* descent. St. John of the Cross expressed this clearly when he wrote that "In this state the soul cannot make acts because the Holy Spirit makes them all and moves it [the soul] toward them. As a result all the acts of the soul are divine."

It now begins to become clear how Christian prayer serves as the basis for hope for this world in the third millennium. The end of such prayer is to ascend to the vision of God and to descend to a new praxis, a new activity, a new way of being in the world. At the end of this descent, the Christian's life in the Body of Christ finds its fulfillment. He has accomplished St. Augustine's famous challenge to Christians that they "become what they are." The ultimate end of prayer is God himself. God and God alone is the only goal worthy of pursuit for its own sake. And yet, God is love and this love is directed to this world. That was true when St. John, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote the "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, so that all who believe in him might not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). If this understanding of prayer is true, then God still gives the Body of his only-begotten Son to the world he loves so much. He gives it whenever the members of that Body do the things (or the deeds) of God (τὰ πράγματα τοῦ Θεοῦ). This is true, of course, throughout the process of Christian prayer. It is true in the praxis which leads us up, the practice of acquired virtues, when we strive to live according to the revealed will of God. It is especially true, however, in that glorious praxis to which contemplation is the way back down. To that praxis which is no longer ours, but God's own. This is what is meant by that other great aphorism of St. Augustine: "love God and do what you will."

Does this mean that the world must become filled with mystics if Christian Prayer is to realize its proper place in the future of

humanity? In a sense, it depends on how you define a 'mystic.' If by mystic one means someone who has withdrawn from world and its daily activities, then the answer is emphatically 'no.' The majority voice of the Christian tradition has made it clear that this life of prayer is available to all. Thus Nicholas Cabasilas in *The Life of Christ* wrote:

> Everyone may continue to exercise their art or profession. The general may continue to command, the farmer to till the sol, the workman to pursue his craft. No one need desist from his usual employment. It is not necessary to retire into the desert, or to eat unaccustomed food, or to dress differently, or to ruin one's health, or to do anything reckless; for it is quite possible to practice continual meditation in one's own home without giving up any of one's possessions.
>
> [tr. C.J. de Catanzano]

and Symeon the New Theologian is even more explicit when he says that contemplation, in the sense of the "vision of God," is available to someone "who has wife and children, crowds of servants, much property, and a prominent position in the world" and proclaims that a heavenly life is possible "here on earth ... not just in caves or mountains ar monastic cells, but in the midst of cities" [Discourse 5 and 6].

Were Christians to practice the prayer described by the Fathers, the love of God would flow naturally into this world. Could there be a greater hope for the world in which we live?

NOTES:

1. See references in Tomáš Špidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East,* tr. Anthony P. Gythiel, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986, p. 334, especially endnote #38 on p. 345.

THEODOR DAMIAN

Psalm 103: Doxology as Philosophy of Life. Historico-Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation

SITZ IM LEBEN

Introduction

I have chosen this Psalm for analysis and interpretation because it has a special meaning for me as it played a significant role in my spiritual formation. I first came in contact with it when I was 16 years old and had just started my theological education at the Theological Seminary at the Neamtz Monastery in the Moldavian Carpathian Mountains in Romania. For a period of five years, while I was there, I heard this Psalm sung by the monks regularly for a special liturgical service. I learned to sing it myself, according to the custom in the Byzantine music, called in Romania Psaltic music. It was probably initially used only in order to sing the Psalms. (Psalm 103 is sung in tone V: *Pa Ke De Ga Vu Pa.)* As verse 1 of the Psalm has a permanent place in the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, the Liturgy used most in the Orthodox Tradition, from that time on I have constantly come in contact with this Psalm, often singing it in its entirety during the Divine Liturgy after the "Our Father" and before the Holy Communion.

Title

Gunkel wrote that this is a "lovely Psalm."[1] It is more than "lovely", it is a beautiful song that opens the door of the heart, reaches all its hidden places and remains there. Having in view its role in the Christian tradition and seeing it also as a guide for the correct understanding of the Bible, Weiser described the Psalm as "one of the finest blossoms of the tree of Biblical faith."[2] Also, J. Cabs wrote that Psalm 103 is one "*des plus beaux poèmes du Psautier, tant par l'élévation des idées et la delicatesse des sentiments, que par la noblesse et l'élégance limpide de l'expression*."[3] Neil Adkins believes as well that

Psalm 103 "is a magnificent celebration of God's majesty as displayed in His creation"[4]

In his presentation of the Psalm, L. Jacquet quotes a very appropriate description written by Mercier for whom this poem is "*cinq siècles à l'avance, la plus belle paraphrase du mot célèbre de S. Jean: 'Dieu est amour'*,"[5] or as Morris A. Inch put it, Psalm 103 is an attempt to measure God's love for the world.[6] The same idea is present in N.H. Parker's description: Psalm 103 is "one of the most beautiful O.T. utterances about the central theme of the Bible: God is love and he deals with his creation with love."[7] Indeed, this Psalm, which announces the Gospel of Love, is in a sense a prefiguration of the essence of Christ's message for us about God the Father. In words well chosen and rich in meaning, belonging to different but interrelated ways of speaking, like covenant and election language, creation language and salvation language, the author succeeds in transmitting to us a vibrant message about the God of righteousness, mercy and love. This is the central idea of the Psalm: God, the Creator of the universe, does not withdraw from creation in His impenetrable hiddenness, but without diminishing anything from His majesty and greatness, comes "down to be with his people in their lives." He is a God that bestows good on His people.[8]

The idea of God's transcendence and immanence is already present: He is Lord, Ruler, Judge, and Heavenly King and has dominion over all creation, but at the same time He speaks to Moses and hears his petitions and is present in the life of the children of Israel. As Michael Jinkins points, out, "The reign of God is not only anticipated in the future, it is realized in the present. The Psalms reverberate with the presence of the sovereign Lord, majestic and awful, gracious and merciful, fearful and long-suffering."[9] Suffering is, in fact, an ongoing theme of the Psalms, in general, as Thomas Merton writes. In this they anticipate the Cross, which transfigures suffering into joy and victory.[10] The ideas implying God's transcendence and His immanence are emotionally creative in the most effective way. This constitutes the inner movement of the Psalm, which passes dynamically into the interior life of the reader or listener; thus the intention of the author and of the Psalm is accomplished.

The psalm is not a conference in Systematic Theology; it is a testimony charged with emotions, a witness and a confession, which goes from heart to heart. In this it is more than a conference. It contains "a very personal note, including strong emotions and personal concerns

that express the psalmist's anguish or great joy."[11] It is a testimony marked by some prophetic influences as Gunkel remarks,[12] insisting upon keeping the covenant with God and His commandments, upon the image of God as a Father who does not repay "eye for eye and tooth for tooth" but judges with mercy, compassion and love. Indeed, as S. Terrien writes, these are the "essentials of the divinity"; they uncover the supreme mystery of God and, in this Psalm, are sung by the poet.[13] In other words, in those of L. Sabourin, this is a psalm about the divine goodness praised and acknowledged as God's mercy in the life of the author of the poem and in that of the "children of Israel."[14]

As I mentioned above, the idea of divine transcendence and immanence, present in different types of attributes of God like majesty and power on the one hand, and mercy and compassion on the other. At this point, I agree with Weiser who asserts that the true theme of the Psalm is not the simple juxtaposition of different types of attributes of God, but their dynamic interaction.[15]

Setting in Life

The Author and the Date

Jewish Tradition, early Christian Patristic interpreters, Calvin and others acknowledge David as the author of the Psalm 103. L. Allen thinks that the reference to David in the title of the Psalm does not indicate precisely the real author but is just a sign that the poem was a portion of the Davidic collection.[16] S. Terrien described the author of the Psalm as an uncreative thinker. To that, Parker reacted saying that although the author may not be David, he is yet a creative thinker.[17] For P. Miller, the poem would be "the result of scribal activity in exilic and post-exilic times" and "impacted more by concerns of wisdom and torah and the search for true piety than by the influence of the cult."[18]

If one would take into consideration Westermann's statement that the Psalms of the later history are characterized by an increased call to praise and by the one-sided praise of God's grace[19] and if one would find this predominant note in the speeches of God, as God of creation and as God of history (for instance, v. 14 and v. 7 respectively), then one would conclude that the poem belongs to the late period of Israel's history. This is what Allen thinks especially because of the

"Aramaicism" present in the text.[20] Kraus shares the same opinion because of some allusions in the text to the Deutero-Isaiah (v. 9-Isaiah 57:16; v. 15f-Isaiah 40:6ff) as well as because of linguistic indications.[21] However, M. Dahood dismisses both arguments showing that the allusions to Deutero-Isaiah cannot be a basis for an opinion such as that held by Kraus. As for "Aramaisms" (the suffix *ki* in vv. 3-5), he asserts that they could be a Canaanite archaism, which the psalmist had borrowed at least for poetic purposes.[22]

Reconstruction of the context

The title of the Psalm may help us to understand better its *Sitz-im-Leben*. It is not impossible that the author is David because the literary form of the poem is well elaborated.(3 + 3 meter dominates, with some exceptions).[23] Here one finds comparisons, epithets, personifications; the poem denotes an author with good knowledge of the history of Israel and wisdom literature. It denotes a reflective temperament of a well educated person; he used different imageries and types of communication like anatomical language (vv. 1, 5, even 14), familial or domestic language (father-children analogy that suggests a covenantal relationship), creation language (vv. 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20), and death language which can be associated with wisdom language (vv. 14, 16). The symmetry between v. 1 and 22 can also indicate a certain technique and therefore, a certain level of education.

In addition to all of this, if one accepts David as author, the overwhelming zeal and sentiment of gratitude present in the Psalm becomes more explainable. Seeing David as a well situated person with all his richness and glory, one understands that the richer a person is and the more one has a comfortable and luxurious life, when that person is at the point of losing everything - glory, comfort, friends, richness, health, even life - if and when saved and restored and again in the possession of the previous life, the more this person has all reasons of having the greatest possible feeling of gratitude towards God, the greatest zeal for praise and enthusiasm to share his experience. The deeper the "pit" is, the greater the catastrophe, the more one loses, when restored to the previous level of life or to an even higher level, the greater the reason for praise is. And this is even stronger when the person in cause acknowledges his sin and that the "fall" came upon him

justly. Then out of his humility, overwhelmed by the benefits of God, he will not cease to praise, “as long as he lives”.

Also, one who is in a position of authority has more ground to exhort other people around him to praise God after he first speaks only in the first person singular than a person without any authority (although this last possibility is not excluded at all). In our case, David, with his authority had all the grounds to pass from personal speech (about himself) to command exhortation for praise whether in private devotion or in public worship

Psychologically speaking, the movement of the Psalm is also explainable. As he was praising and meditating at the same time, in the élan of his soul to thank God for what he was given, he goes on and on, as enraptured, describing the greatness of God’s mercy, with an intense and ardent feeling of gratefulness. This is visible in his insistence on being obedient to God’s commandments and on the fear of God. Then, as he expands on these (mercy and obedience) at a certain moment, he feels that it is no longer enough to refer only to himself in praising God, but he has to do something, to find a more appropriate way of responding to God. And thus, he starts to speak in plural, referring to all the people. Then as he becomes more engaged in praise, he refers to invisible powers and finally, to all God’s creation. This movement is also noticed by Konrad Schaefer when he writes that Psalm 103 reflects God’s eternity: “it begins with the individual and fans out to the community of Israel, and finally to all creation.”[24] For such a great God, the believer feels he needs to bring such a great praise, as an act of justice, as far as he is capable. Theologically speaking, the author may have experienced a sickness and understood it as a punishment for his sins. Then he repented, confessed the sin, cried for help from God, was heard and delivered, and now he thanks God. He was sick of soul and body (sickness and distress or even despair, not to speak about the sin aspect) and after restoration, he addresses himself, his soul to praise. This is evident because he speaks about restoration of both soul and body (v. 3), restoration in the physical powers (v. 5, rejuvenation). Now, experiencing God’s mercy he declares that although normally God might have punished him for sins, God did not. And this situation, on the one hand, reminds him of other times when God proved such mercies in the history of the community and, on the other, gives him a basis for hope in future mercies of this God who is indeed, generally and

fundamentally speaking, merciful and gracious. (v. 8).

Physically speaking, the author is a person who was sick with a grave illness on the bed of suffering, he was even rescued from the threshold of death (the word "pit" may suggest this) and now he speaks in the midst of the assembly, telling his friends about his life-transforming experience. Thus, being with other people and speaking of his own situation, it is easy to pass from the language of self to the language of community. As Kraus notices, it is also possible that the Psalmist was oppressed and accused by enemies (v. 6) and even if he considered himself guilty, God helped him (v. 10).[25] Therefore, it is clear that although we have little indications in the Psalm about the real problem of the author,[26] we have to do with one who was sick, fully restored, who went to the temple, as Parker writes, to give thanks and to praise God, after which his hymn was taken by the priests for their collection.[27] That is why Kraus thinks that the Psalm should be placed near the Psalms of sickness and healing.[28]

In his very special situation, the Psalmist exhorts his soul to praise God and not to forget all God's benefits, which he enumerates using participles in order to stress or to give the sense of a repeated typical action[29] and which refers not only to the past but also to the present, and which shows that God not only cared for His people but continues to care for them.[30] The repetition of the summons indicates the ardent desire to be grateful of which his heart was inflamed. (Also it may indicate that the danger from which he was rescued was great). The fact that the author does not speak much about himself but about God and that he speaks of sin, indicates to Gunkel that the Psalmist in his poem reveals his purity and humility.[31] From the development of the discourse, one can see that the poet knows the ways in which God was and is present in Israel's history, he knows what the obligations of the people are towards God and in what their right position *Coram Deo* consists. He gives testimony that what God did to him is new to him but not for God. That God showed His mercy and steadfast love is not an occasional act but a permanent attitude. That is why the praise has to be given by himself, by the entire people, and by the whole of Creation.

But of all this situation, the Psalmist lets us see two images of himself and two concerning God: 1) He sees himself in the sin, in the darkness, in the "pit," near death; 2) He sees himself rescued, cared for, received, heard, restored in life and his life crowned with good things. The picture he gives us about God is on the one hand, that of a

transcendent God (suggested by images like king, ruler, heaven, Lord of hosts, angels, His dominion) and on the other, that of an immanent God, in dialogue with His people, a Father of those who fear Him, full of love and mercy.

The use of the Psalms

Westermann writes that there are two modes of calling on God: praise and petition. These two poles determine the nature of speaking to God. Only after that, the Psalms can be seen in literary or cultic terms and categories.[32] If so, then, speaking with God is dialogue and speaking about God is theology. In this sense, the author of Psalm 103 makes a theological discourse, and a theological discourse of this type has more chance than anything else to be affiliated with cult. The form of the speech in the beginning and the end, Mowinkel says, does not indicate that Psalm 103 was not intended for worship, for cultic use.[33] This combination of thanksgiving and praise and the mention of God's steadfast love (vv. 4, 8, 11, 17) (Jeremiah 33, ll) are also, for Allen, indications of a cultic setting.[34] Allen believes that those who were hearing the Psalmist were a pious circle of "God fearers."[35] If he drew this conclusion from verses 11 and 17, where the expression is mentioned, then one may or may not accept this because one could also think that the expression in cause relates not to the people surrounding the author but to a memory or a theological statement or a warning which the poet wants to make for his hearers.

Parker advances the idea that the Psalm may have been written by a priest and was used in the cultic worship. He finds reason from the Psalm to say that the priests used to magnify the "terrible holiness of God" but then, in order not to have a too distant God from the people, they also spoke of a God like a father who treats first the child and afterwards, the sinner.[36] I find this assertion arbitrary and the reason insufficient. I think that the poem really breathes an authentic enthusiasm (in the full emotional and etymological sense of the word: en-theos(thous)-iasm) of one who had a strong personal reason to disclose his feelings and who did it not in a premeditated or artificially constructed way, but as if in a single breath. Parker assumes that Psalm 103 was already a part of the Hebrew "Book of Common Order" and was prescribed as a solo for those who - at the temple during festival pilgrimages - had to accomplish vows of thanksgiving previously

planned. The Psalm would have been prescribed especially for cases of healing and forgiveness, and certainly accompanied by sacrifices and other prayers.[37] A similar assumption is expressed by Kraus who thinks that the Psalm was used in the sanctuary as a standard prayer for numerous petitioners with problems of distress and affliction.[38]

Form Analysis

In the 22 verses of the Psalm, Allen sees an indication of "alphabetizing" like in Psalm 33.[39] The poem begins with a self-exhortation to praise followed by the reason for praise expressed in participles; then it contains declarative and descriptive praise (and a passage from the "I" language to the "we" language). It speaks of God's revelation to His people and about the transitory character of human life and ends with an exhortation for praise extended to the whole creation and as a final conclusion, at the end of the long respiration, the Psalmist addresses his soul again. The joy, the wonder and exaltation for life are some of the dominant notes of the Psalm. This content and the way in which it is developed and expressed determined different interpreters to situate the Psalm in different categories and to see it either as a hymn or as a thanksgiving song or as both.

Psalm l03 as (predominantly) hymn

For Gunkel, Psalm 103 is a hymn, a liturgical song to be understood in relation to worship.[40] It is a hymn because the main part of the subject-content (of a hymn) expresses, through participles, attributes and deeds of God which evoke praise.[41] For instance, God's creative power, God's beneficent sovereignty over humankind, God's deeds in history, God's majesty, His love and compassion. Psalm 103 according to Gunkel is a hymn also because the predominant feature of a hymn is "enthusiastic but reverent adoration of the glorious and awe-inspiring God." The purpose of the hymn is to give pleasure to God.[42] In all of Gunkel's description of the hymn, Psalm 103 can be recognized.

Mowinkel writes that the core of a hymn of praise is the consciousness of the poet that he meets the almighty and merciful God

face-to-face, in His own place, through worship in praise and adoration. The characteristic feelings of the hymn of praise are: awe and trembling, jubilation and enthusiasm, reverence, trust, love, gratitude, joy.[43] Here also Psalm 103 can be recognized.

For Westermann for whom the hymn is determined by form (while the song of thanksgiving by content)[44] the hymn is only secondarily a literary unit; it is primarily determined by the two basic modes of speaking to God - petition and praise.[45] As both of these modes of speaking are addressing God and have God as subject (not from the point of view of syntactic analysis but from the point of view of content analysis), the Sitz-im-Leben of the hymn is God's intervention in history; God has acted (having heard the petition) and now He is to be praised.[46] Again, Psalm 103 can be recognized in this framework.

Brueggemann sees this Psalm as a hymn because, theologically speaking, it expresses a "liturgical and unrestrained yielding of the self and community to God."[47] It is a self-abandonment to God in the joy of a new destiny seen as a promise, which is itself already in the foretaste of its accomplishment. Brueggemann describes a hymn of praise as a public song offered to God in recognition of the attributes of His person or nature and of His creating and liberating actions.[48] This category fits Psalm 103 because although it starts with reference to the individual, it continues at the level of the community's relationship to God.

A. Weiser, who situates the origin of the hymn in cult, decided that Psalm 103 is a hymn even if it has the Psalmist's own self-addressing.[49] Sabourin is categorical. Psalm 103 is a hymn proper, composed for liturgical use, like the majority of hymns.[50]

Psalm 103 as (predominantly) song of thanksgiving

According to Gunkel, the song of the individual presupposes worship and could have been sung as an offering of thanksgiving. Features of a song of thanksgiving are recognized in Psalm 103: a person who was saved out of a great distress, restored to health and then, grateful to God.[51]

Mowinkel agrees that the occasion of the thanksgiving song of the individual is more often the recovery from some illness. In this case, the Psalm starts with an introduction in which the purpose is expressed: "I will thank", or with an imitation of the hymn introduction: "Thank!"

"Praise!". The name of Yahweh appears explicitly in the text as well as the grateful confession of the "name" of God. Then follows the account of the experience of the worshipper in front of the believers; the address to God is in the third person.[52] The character of this kind of Psalm is the laudative and narrative testimony before the people about the saving acts of God performed to the singer, with the purpose of increasing God's honor in the congregation. The song of the thanksgiving of the individual is sung where the sacrificial act is taking place; it can be sung whether by the person who had the experience or by one of the temple's servants.[53] For Kraus, Psalm 103 is a song of thanksgiving because it starts with summons to praise followed by thanksgiving words. Yet he acknowledges that vv. 6-22 contain a discourse which goes beyond the individual speech into the hymnic style (reporting Yahweh's wonderful rule and assistance to His people), thus, he agrees with A. Deisler's classification of this Psalm as a "hymn of thanksgiving."[54]

Psalm 103 as a mixed form

Psalm 103 is indeed a mixed form: as a thanksgiving song of the individual, it contains the declarative praise of what God has done for the individual; as a hymn, it contains descriptive praise about God's attributes as related to the fullness of His being and activity. Gunkel agrees with this mixed form for Psalm 103. He explains it by saying that the thanksgiving of the individual was so highly enthusiastic that it could not remain only at the level of individual expression and it passed into plural.[55] But for him Psalm 103 also represents another type of combination, namely that of the thanksgiving of the individual with wisdom features because the author, after he relates what God has done for him, joins with his song his teaching and/or admonition for other people in reference to the transitoriness of life and respectively to the fear of God and the obedience to His commandments.[56]

Mowinkel also acknowledges Psalm 103 as a mixed style song but he specifies that this is not necessarily proof of a later origin or lack of sensitivity. The mixed form is based on psychological reasons; namely, it reflects the fluctuating emotions of the one who praises God.[57] In this Psalm of thanksgiving, which becomes a hymn, Mowinkel finds the confession referred to Yahweh in the third person and the gratitude of the individual that passes from the self to the unselfish universal; thus

it becomes a panegyric of God Himself for His works accomplished both in human history and life and in creation. The reason for this passage from individual to communal speech (although the poem finishes its last verse with self-address again) is the exaltation of the poet.[58] Mowinkel remarks that this thanksgiving Psalm in hymnic style, begins as a hymn with an imperative (only not in the plural) and then the summons to praise expands from the individual to the community and to all creation, including the heavenly powers.[59] Because of these characteristics, Mowinkel suggests, this kind of Psalm can also be classified as a "Psalm of confidence."[60]

Westermann sees that even in Gunkel's explanation the hymn and the song of thanksgiving generally agree in the introduction and conclusion, they have the same rules of form and agree in their basic mood.[61] This kind of combination or affinity is not a rare case in the books of Psalms.[62]

About the form of this Psalm, the opinions are still different. While Weiser sees it as a mixed style (hymn and thanksgiving),[63] Jacquet decides that Psalm 103 as a song of praise is not a pure hymn nor a liturgical one but a meditation on the merciful attitude of God towards His people. He does not see in the Psalm any triumphant enthusiasm but only astonished contemplation of God's works for His people.[64] Parker mentions that Gunkel placed Psalm 103 among the national hymns of thanksgiving but specifies that most commentators assert that the song is an individual utterance. He also mentions E.A. Leslie who wrote that this Psalm is a poem sung by an individual in the congregational worship.[65]

The types of praise in Psalm 103

In terms of Westermann's distinction between declarative and descriptive praise, Psalm 103 uses both kinds. Declarative praise one can say that although not the dominant one in the poem, is still evident especially in the first part (up to v. 7); this declarative praise which is in relation to God and his people (not God and his creation) expresses two facts; God has heard and God has delivered. This is a reason for joy.[66] The accent in this praise is not on what happened to the singer but on what God has done for him; thus the singer is a witness giving testimony for God.[67] Westermann writes that the declarative praise follows God's

action when it takes a poetic expression, although the introduction may not be willed or deliberate as is usual in the declarative praise of an individual. Psalm 103 also clearly contains what is characteristic of the declarative praise, namely, looking back on the time of need and reporting of deliverance.[68] Westermann acknowledges that the declarative praise can pass into descriptive praise[69] as happens in Psalm 103. The descriptive praise revolves around two themes: God's majesty or His enthronement in majesty, which sees God mostly as creator, and God's mercy or the compassionate God, the Lord of history.[70] They are evident in Psalm 103 where God as the Lord of history is the central theme. The hymn with descriptive praise, Westermann says, does not indicate a specific occasion but praises God generally for what He is and does.[71] As one can see in Psalm 103, the descriptive praise lives on the declarative one.[72] In terms of Brueggemann's classification of Psalms (orientation-disorientation-new orientation), this song seems to be of new orientation. It did not completely lose all specificity and concreteness (see first seven verses), it is not entirely speaking of a well-ordered world, nor does it reflect a permanent *status quo,* that is why, in fact, the song keeps its enthusiasm and vitality. Yet some of the most descriptive praise places of the psalm may cause one to think that the Psalm is one of orientation (very much for ex. v. 19).

Structural analysis

G. Rice divides Psalm 103 into two main parts: vv. 3-5 (personal experience) and vv. 6-18 (God's goodness witnessed to the community).[73] With respect to this second part, Kraus writes that vv. 6-13 represent didactic hymnic statements about Yahweh's deed, without a clear location in time; however, they may have been at some levels experienced personally by the psalmist.[74] Sabourin who thinks that Psalm 103 is a hymn proper, describes the literary structure of a hymn as being formed from an introduction (summons, intention), a main section (development, reason, praise) and a conclusion (recapitulation of motives, blessing formula, etc.); he applies this to the Psalm 103, adapting the following division: Part I, vv. 1-5; Part II, vv. 6-10; Part III, vv. 11-18; Part IV, vv. 19-22.[75] Jacquet divides the Psalm in three main parts: self-exhortation (vv. 13), body of the Psalm (vv. 3-19) and conclusion (vv. 20-22).[76]

My structural analysis is the following: Part I, vv. 1-5 with two subdivisions, vv. 1-2, introduction with summons to praise (self-exhortation) and vv. 3-5, reason to praise (which also can be seen as looking back on the time of need and declarative praise). Part II, the main body of the Psalm, vv. 6-19 with the following subdivisions: vv. 6-7, declarative praise of God in relation to history and life of people; vv. 8-9, descriptive praise about God's nature; vv. 10-14, declarative praise of God in relation to His people and confession of trust, (the author recognizes himself in the situation of the v. 10 which may be a confession of trust); vv. 15-16, wisdom as reflection or meditation (which can even start with v. 14b last part); vv. 17-19, descriptive praise of God in relation to His people (v. 19 may also be seen as descriptive praise of God in relation to creation). Part III, the final one, vv. 20-22, communal summons to praise, closed by individual self-exhortation (v. 22, c.).

INTERPRETATIONS

Midrash Interpretation[77]

The explanation of Psalm 103 begins on the basis of the acknowledgment of the complete ontological difference between God and man. This idea is set in the very beginning as a framework of the understanding of the Psalm, as if the interpreter wants to warn the reader on the necessity of not getting an incorrect idea about the God he will discover in the Psalm, where the central theme is the divine mercy and work in history. The interpreter contrasts God's eternity to man's transitoriness by means of the image of a sculptor who makes a statue and the difference between them. In order to stress the same idea, the difference between a king and his picture is used. Then, the interpreter, after having stated this difference, goes a step further and says that a man is not a statue without soul. Thus, he begins to speak about the human soul and how one can understand the rapport of similarity between soul and God. With this, the interpreter enters the explanation of v.1 of the Psalm, relating his speech to David's self-exhortation. Then he speaks about the mysteries of God present in our life that are unseen benefits of which one should be aware in order to praise God. A great

benefit is the possibility of hope for forgiveness because life without sin, totally pure, is impossible for more than three days. That is why the fact that we live is due to God's forgiveness. Verses 4-7 are explained in relation to concrete acts of God in Israel's history. These acts are perfect because whatever God does, He does plentifully. V. 8 is interpreted with respect to God's attitude towards people: for a few good things done by those who are wicked, God rewards plentifully; yet for the righteous, God may punish for a few bad things, but afterwards He rewards them with plenteous peace. This is the way in which God's justice works. The interpreter acknowledges that God had shown His anger many times with Israel but He did not stay angry, because (v. 13) He has for His people a fatherly compassion. Verses 14-16 contain the teaching about Resurrection (pp. 162-163). The mercy of God is evoked again as being eternal in contrast with His righteous punishment, which can be for a maximum of three generations. This mercy, so evident in the wilderness period of Israel's history, is still working and manifest, though perhaps in less evident ways. But for this one should not step on or diminish one's obedience to God's law. The last verses of the Psalm refer to God's dominion over all creation. The angels mentioned in these verses are allusions to the people who at Sinai wanted to do the will of God; they refer also to Moses and to the prophets.

One can see that this interpretation of the Psalm is based on a strong sense of God's presence in the life of Israel as well as on the idea of Israel's election by God. The idea of election and of providence (liberation) is rooted in the creation theology that comes out of the interpretation. Understood in relation to creation, the election and the liberation of Israel are themselves a kind of creation. Even the idea of forgiveness on account of which we live is a kind of creation. The interpreter would like to say that we take for granted every day of our life when in fact each day we live cannot exist without God's forgiveness; if we live in the context of this forgiveness, this is a kind of perpetual creation. As he says: One cannot live purely more than three days; but, nevertheless, we live years and years! (See Barth's theology of the nevertheless, which is in fact God's creative forgiveness). The idea of creation is a key to this interpretation. It is present from the beginning in the image of God as a sculptor, through which the interpreter stresses the dissimilarity between God and man. The idea of dissimilarity is the daughter of that of creation. It is stressed throughout the OT and the interpreter is faithful to the OT Theology interpreting

this Psalm in such a framework. He stresses thus God's absoluteness (transcendence) as it is mentioned or alluded to in the OT in numerous places; some of these are the places where God Himself speaks of his unicity (Decalogue), of the difference between His ways and man's ways, of his power and majesty, and especially in the places where God (or through the prophets) manifests His claim over the people of Israel when the people are disobedient and does not understand its special destiny. Yet, as a corrective to a possibility of understanding God as too far removed from History, the interpreter stresses the immanence of God in terms of His merciful deeds for the people.

Tehillim Interpretation[78]

In presenting this interpretation of Psalm 103, I will direct my attention especially to those aspects that are different from the Midrashic interpretation, and which may represent an addition to it. For the Tehillim interpreter, in this Psalm, David thanks God for the soul, the greatest gift man has received from God and that which makes man the reflection of the heavens, to be in the divine semblance. Very often when man is unaware of the essence of his being and engulfs the soul into the flesh, man lives in darkness. The purpose of the psalmist thus is to make us aware of the value of the greatest gifts we have received from God and which make us able to stand in the presence of God. Although so different from the soul, the body of man joins the soul in the action of praise. God provided the repentance for sins for the soul. In this, the soul is "crowned" (v. 4), healed and forgiven (there is an emphasis on the relation between healing of diseases and forgiveness of sins). Thus, the soul is purified; life is renewed and strengthened, (there is mention of the legend concerning the eagle's rejuvenation). The interpreter insists on the power of repentance; repentance can save the person from the "pit." But repentance comes because the illness of the body made the person aware of the sickness of the soul; thus, one can say that sickness comes upon man in order to bring about repentance, which in its turn brings healing of both soul and body. All of this is part of God's righteousness.

Another theme is that related to God's fatherly mercy towards

His people. But this also is developed in the framework of the concept of sin-repentance; for example, God is slow to anger in order to give time for repentance (v. 8). The problem with the shortness of life is that man passes away before fully realizing his mistakes, before repenting of them; life goes so quickly that man has no time to rectify his errors. Yet here the mercy of God again intervenes. First of all, God does not punish according to our sins and when He punishes in this world, He does this in order to let people enjoy the peace with Him in the eternal world. There is yet the conviction that finally God will purge Israel from sin and that sin will be as far from Israel as the heavens are far from the earth. The references to obedience to the commandments of God are related to promises for the "children's children" of Israel. Having the image of such a merciful God, all creation is summoned to praise Him.

One can see in this interpretation of Psalm 103 a special stress on the contrast between soul and flesh (Platonic influences?). Flesh is associated with darkness, it keeps the soul in captivity; but a greater accent is put on the idea of sin-repentance-forgiveness-healing, and on the perfection of the soul through good deeds. This kind of topological interpretation differs from the previous one. It may be the result of initial interpretations of Psalm 103 in periods when the Law was understood more rigidly, which led to a kind of culpabilizing interpretation of it in a more "legalistic" way. Hence the idea of sin-repentance-penitence took a dominant place in the Jewish thought of those periods. However, the image of a merciful God, caring for His chosen people is parallely strongly maintained.

Augustine's Interpretation[79]

St. Augustine excels in the development of the great themes found in the Bible. He was confronted with several crises or conflictual situations in his own life as well as in the life of the Church. He had to take a firm position against schisms or heresies of his time such as Donatism, Manichaeism and Pelagianism so that throughout all his writings one can find traces more or less evident of his inner struggle on the one hand, and open polemic on the other. He also strove for the great problems of human life as is very evident in his *Confessions*. Part of these problems can be detected also in his interpretation of Psalm 103.

From the beginning, he asserts that praise must be a permanent

attitude for the believer (v. 1); our ability to praise is a reward that God had given to us (v. 4). Therefore, one should not forget God's reward, but first of all, one should not forget one's own sins. In this way, we will keep condemning ourselves and this self-awareness of sin with self-condemnation (which leads in fact to repentance) brings God's forgiveness (v. 2). This is also a reward from God. In order not to lose this reward, the Christian must be careful of his attitude in society; he must not only keep his soul away from sin but he has to be careful not to provoke others to sin (v. 6). The purification from sin cleans the *Imago Dei* in us. With a clean, pure image, we give God what is His; we give Him good for good, rather than evil for good. Thus, we give what is His because we have nothing of our own to give Him for ours is only sin (v. 2).

When we have the consciousness of sin, we must not despair, for if we are greater sinners, we have an even greater Physician. Our duty to Him is not to reject Him; but the Physician comes with the physician's knife, which brings pain. Yet it is this pain that also brings remedy (v. 3). Besides the Physician Himself, because human life is teemed with the "worms of corruption" (v. 4) the Law was given to us, which is easy to accomplish as it is reduced to two commandments. Yet the Law, while showing us our infirmities, leads us to the Physician, and causes us to ask for Him. This is the hidden way in which God works for and leads to healing, Augustine insists (v. 7). We have to confess our sin today (v. 8), in order not to accumulate sin upon sin because if we live in the multiplication of sin life becomes hell, and thus impossible (v. 9). Whoever renounces sin makes room for grace; in this context, Augustine alludes to the sacrament of Baptism (v. 12). When we renounced sin, God crowns us in Jesus Christ with Christ's gifts (not with our merits) (v. 4) and thus, our soul progresses in the spiritual benefit.

One of the most interesting theological concepts mentioned here by Augustine is that of the deification of man, a concept present in Irenaeus of Lyon and especially in Athanasius of Alexandria *(On the Incarnation)*. Athanasius wrote that man became God (evidently by adoption by the Father in the Son); Augustine also, using the language of St. John the Theologian, here in the context of verse 16 writes that, "The Word became flesh" so that the grass (us) might not despair. Or, he writes, Jesus Christ came to share our grass-ness so that we can share His eternity (v. 15). It is very appropriate to speak of deification in the

context of this Psalm especially because the deification in the Early Church was clearly understood not according to God's *ousia* (essence) but by adoption in His Son; or one of the main ideas of Psalm 103 is that of God as our Father. For Augustine the whole Psalter is full of Christ and the numerous references to the life of Israel are but references to Christ, or as prototype events of different moments in the life of Father-children theme, to which he joins his typological, mystagogical, allegorical and Christological interpretation, in order to introduce in this explanation the concept of the deification of man.

In the context of this Incarnation-Deification language, Augustine also uses the concept of a theology of hope; the Incarnation took place so that the "grass" might not despair (v. 16). Christ is the most solid base for our hope. This theology of hope together with the idea of deification finds another root in Augustine's allusion to the Resurrection when he interprets verse 5 of the Psalm in relation to the legend of the eagle. The eagle, which breaks its beak against the rock so that it can live and be rejuvenated, symbolizes the Resurrection; the liberating and saving rock is Christ. In all his or her renewed relationships with God through purification from sin and communion with Christ, the Christian still has to fear God and to obey His commandments. One must fear God in order not to remain grass!(v. 17). The accomplishment of God's commandments consists in our good deeds (v. 18), which are works of righteousness (v. 9); they bring us reward from God. They also make us become like the angels (vv. 19-20) because the angels fear God and do His commandments. This is the spiritual context in which one can rightly praise God.

One can detect in Augustine several kinds of interpretations: topologic, moral, spiritual when he speaks about sin-reward or sin-penitence (repentance) - forgiveness; or when he speaks about the progress of the soul and good works (even concerning the social attitude of the Christian). The first kind of interpretation is the dominant one because in his interpretation, Augustine makes a strong emphasis on sin-repentance-healing. The sin language is used so much throughout the whole interpretation, that one could see it as a culpabilizing intent if Augustine did not repeatedly speak or allude to positive doctrines such as Incarnation, Resurrection, Deification, hope, etc. The metaphorical and allegorical interpretation is also very evident here (the Physician, the Knife, the worms of corruption, the crown, the eagle, the heavens - in v. 11). The mystagogical interpretation is used when he alludes to

deification and to the doctrine of *Imago Dei* (one may relate this reference to *Imago Dei* to his doctrine of the Trinity – perhaps by way of elaboration as he explained this Psalm - to the analogy he made between different spiritual faculties of the human soul and the Trinity.) Also, one can notice along with the reward-penitence language and with the image of Christ as Healer, his references to Paul's doctrine of justification (v. 7) and grace (v. 12). Finally, I want to mention Augustine's sacramental language in his reference to Baptism (v. 12) and confession of sins (several times); this goes together with a little trace of ascetic language (v. 5) and is well explained since the monastic asceticism in his time was largely spread.

In short, Augustin gives to Psalm 103 an emphatic spiritual-moral interpretation. He explains it with the clear intention to introduce or stimulate and strengthen the reader into the Christian life, based on faith in God through Jesus Christ, obedience, virtue; he stresses in a special way the idea of sin in order to teach humility and the necessity of good works, in order to teach what an authentic life is for one who wants to be a son of God in Jesus Christ.

Calvin's Interpretation[80]

For Calvin, Psalm 103 is a "beautiful and affecting Psalm." The author is David and the occasion is the recovery from a sickness and forgiveness of his sins in relation to Uriah and Bathsheba. Here David teaches us to give thanks to God for His mercies upon us and for His covenant of salvation. The generosity of God towards us has as purpose to lead us to praise Him. David also teaches us how to get rid of our own torpor, to come out of any lethargic Christianity and to inflame our hearts for introspection and then, praise of God (v. 1).

Speaking about God's mercies, Calvin asserts that the first of these mercies is the free forgiveness we have from God and which we experience daily (v. 11). Thus, the grace of God marks the beginning of our salvation and accompanies us through the way of the whole progress (v. 4). The entire compassion of God that surrounds the believer from all sides during his spiritual progress is but God's grace. The reason for all these mercies is simple: God is our Father. He freely adopted us as children; He freely wanted to have a covenant with His people (v. 13). God's grace is once more evident in the fact that it is extended also to the generations to come; as they are the "children's children," they are

naturally adopted by God and benefit from the grace of the same adoption like us (vv. 17-18). The grace of election has to lead to the knowledge of God; without this knowledge, man is the most miserable object that can be imagined.

The idea of knowledge of God is present in Calvin's interpretation of verse 8 where he explains how our meditation on the characteristics of God's nature strengthens most effectively our faith. In such a relation to God, one can trust God and hope for His help in case of need and oppression (v. 6). We, the faithful, live in this world, Calvin writes, as among wolves *(homo homini lupus!);* therefore, when we are in an oppressive situation, we don't do our own revenge or justice but we trust God; He will be the One who will repay. The result of this kind of relationship to God, is that without trust and faith in God, one lives in death.

Speaking of death (v. 3), Calvin writes that Psalm 103 teaches us that we carry within us not only many diseases but also many deaths and that is exactly why we need so much the mercy of the heavenly Physician. There is a death of the body but there is death of the soul, too. The brevity of our life is related to soul also. Although the soul after death has its own life, it remains in full dependency on God and if God withdraws His grace, the soul has the same fate as the body, it disappears (vv. 14-16). In this context, Calvin speaks yet of the possibility of the soul's resurrection from death (v. 4). There is hope for this resurrection because the God revealed to David is never an irreconcilable God. However, this privilege is only for the children, not for those who reject this paternity (v. 9). Yet, the idea of resurrection of the soul from death should not leave any room for one's self-glorification (v. 4) because it is God's free mercy upon us; resurrection is not given because of our merits or good works. Calvin is obviously against the doctrine of good works and merits, against those who proclaim themselves self-righteous (v. 11). He teaches humility because everything we have in life is God's mercy. This theology of grace does not encourage us to sin (Calvin is aware of such a possible interpretation) because God's mercy is given only to His worshippers, to those who fear Him and reverently submit to His words (v. 13). In this obedience, the angels are a good example for us, as well as in accomplishing the divine commandments (vv. 19-21).

It is clear that the dominant note of Calvin's interpretation of Psalm 103 is the idea of grace - *sola gratia*. His theology of grace

(sometimes expressed in covenant language) is closely related to that of predestination; one can see it where he writes that God's mercy extends even to the ungodly but they are not enjoying this generosity the way a godly one tastes it (v. 3). Also it is visible when he speaks about the conciliation of God only for His children (v. 9 and in other places). Out of the theology of grace naturally comes the doxological theology, man's doxological attitude in life and especially *coram Deo*.

Calvin's method of interpretation is a mixed one. Sometimes he uses the historical interpretation as when he discusses the occasion of the Psalm's composition, the understanding of "the ways" that God had shown to Moses (v. 7). Sometimes he is critical, as in the case of the eagle's interpretation (where he rejects the symbolical interpretation of the legend and remains symbolic only in transposing in spiritual terms the eagle's natural power and characteristics). Most of the time, however, he uses tropological, spiritual, theological interpretation in the sense that he tries to take out of each verse a teaching for the edification of the reader as to how to progress correctly in a better understanding in the believer's relationship to God. As I mentioned, he also greatly stresses the idea of free grace and free forgiveness against the idea of merit. For him, the free grace is the real foundation for an authentic worship and praise of God.

Bellarmine's Interpretation[81]

Cardinal Bellarmine starts his interpretation of the Psalm through the meaning of the word "soul" in the context of verse 1; thus, he creates symmetry in the Psalm as the final verses of it represent also a reference to the entire creation of God. After this, Bellarmine interprets God's generosity and mercy (v. 2); there is a double way of understanding God's mercy: the fact that God does not punish us for our sins and the fact that God gives us many favors daily. The idea of mercy is taken again in his explanation of verse 6 and of verse 13. In verse 13, the image of God as Father is understood in the sense that a father regards the transgressions of his son not as an offense against him but as filial wanderings. God's mercy is indeed from eternity, which means that we are predestined from eternity to be glorified in His Kingdom; of course, those predestined for God's communion are those who fear Him (v. 17). This predestination as mercy can be understood also in the sense of the "infusion of grace" to which we are subject, a grace which is

"substantial, not imputative" (vv. 11-12) and which operates the remission of sins in us. The original sin is also forgiven by God's mercy (v. 3); yet, all our infirmities are cured in this world only to a certain extent. They will be completely cured in the world to come (v. 3) when we will be with Christ in His Kingdom (v. 4); there we will be like the angels of God and we shall see Him as He is (v. 8). The life in the eternal Kingdom of God will be lived by us both in body and soul; the eagle is a symbol of the resurrection of our bodies in Bellarmine's interpretation, and the immortality of our bodies in the Kingdom is part of our glorification (v. 5) and is due to the mercy of God which is plenteous in the sense that He predestined us for eternity both in "nature and in grace" (v. 8). Bellarmine writes that the angels and the heavenly creatures mentioned by the psalmist at the end of the Psalm l03 represent the example of the most adequate praise that can be offered to God in the sense that the angels have a better knowledge of God than we, and therefore they know how to praise God more adequately.

Bellarmine's interpretation is very much spiritual and mystagogical by its rootedness in eschatology. He mentions the original sin (v. 3) and the idea of remission of sins (v. 11-12) but this is not his central theme. Jesus Christ is mentioned (v.4) as he is understood in other contexts but the whole stress is put however on our eternal life in the Kingdom of God. This emphasis is very evident especially in his references to the resurrection of the body and its incorruptibility in the Kingdom and in the doctrine of predestination.

In relation to these two ideas, there are traces of the theology of nature and grace, that formed the great medieval theological debate and, even more, of the doctrine of justification (v. 8 and also v. 13 where he speaks of the offence against the father). He makes a distinction between the gifts of grace and the gifts of glory given to us by God and all the eschatological references are on the framework of the gifts of glory. The life in the Kingdom of God is based on our predestination *from* eternity *for* eternity (for those who fear God). On this ground, here in this world we are subject to the "infusion of grace" (vv. 11-12) in a "substantial, not imputative" way; his theology of grace is related to that of resurrection and of immortality of body where one can recognize evident influences from Early Church Fathers (Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Maximus the Confessor). These doctrines lead naturally to that of the beatific vision, common to the Mystical Theology of the Early Church (Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor) and the

middle ages (Bonaventure, Gregory Palamas) according to which in the Kingdom of God we will "see" God, "face to face."

Neale and Littledale's Interpretation[82]

Psalm 103 is acknowledged to be the thanksgiving of a pardoned sinner. There is no special occasion or particular time mentioned for this thanksgiving; that means that every event of our life is an opportunity to praise God. The incessant praise of God is our answer to God for all His mercies toward us. God, as a Father who is more ready to forgive than we are to sin, forgives all our sins, (vv. 13-14) (the Metropolitan Sebastian of Moldavia once told his priests that they could not sin as much as he could forgive). God forgives all our sins, the original and the actual sins (vv. 3-10) as well as the inclination to sin, which is in our nature (our infirmities) (v. 3), and during all our life, covers us with His bounties (v. 8), mercy and compassion (v. 9). The "crown" of all mercies is given to us in Jesus Christ (v. 4) who died on the cross for us, the Church of Christ (vv. 11-12), as we partake the Eucharist (v. 5) and we hope for the final beatific vision (v. 5) in the Kingdom of God. But as long as we are God's children, we have to do His commandments and thus, we are similar to the angels of God who obey and praise Him in heaven.

As a collection of different interpretations by authors from different times, we find that this presentation mentions and alludes to many theological themes; one can distinguish some of them: original sin (vv. 3-10), mercy and forgiveness, Eucharist, beatific vision (v. 5), theology of the cross (v. 6), angelology (vv. 20-21). The concept of the cross and that of the beatific vision denote traces of the Medieval mysticism and of the Medieval theology of salvation with the accent on Christ's suffering and death on the cross; there is mentioned also the problem of the original sin which can be an echo of the major medieval theological debate concerning the relation between nature and grace. The threefold seat of Christ (v. 19) (throne of King, chair of Teacher, chair of Judge) can be understood as an allusion to the doctrine of the threefold ministry of Christ: to lead people, to teach and to sanctify (save) according to which Christ is King, Teacher (Prophet) and Priest. There is also a certain emphasis on the angelology of vv. 20-21 where the angels and their functions are distinguished and classified which

reminds one of the whole development this theme received in the Middle Ages starting especially with Pseudo Dionysius Areopagites.

A. Weiser's Interpretation[83]

Weiser interprets Psalm 103 mostly in the context of the psalmist. For Weiser, the self-address (v. 11) reflects the will of the singer to meet God face-to-face, to open his soul to God's living presence; thus, he wants the whole man he is to be turned towards God. Weiser notices the sublimity and the intimacy of the God of the psalmist, this God who is so far and so near at the same time. God, in His mercy, forgives the sinner even against the sinner's expectation; God's intervention in one's life equals a new beginning. This is what in the New Testament is called "being born again" (vv. 3-5). History is seen as a divine order (v. 6), it is a living present reality (v. 8).

Israel's history is a proof of God's grace; this generates faith in God (v. 8). The grace of God is a miracle (vv. 14-16), it is evident in the fact that although man is mortal, dust, man is still considered child of God; the psalmist uses the image of the Father for God in order to render more appropriately the idea about the reality of God's grace. The culminant point of the poem is in vv. 11-13 from which one understands that in order to enter the divine grace, one has to fear God and to do His commandments. In this, although man is mortal, man is given the possibility to share God's eternal grace (vv. 17-18). By meditating on the transient character of human life, the majesty of God appears even stronger; for such a greatness and majesty, the entire universe including the created invisible world praises God.

A. Weiser appears to be historic-critical in his interpretation; he exegetes the Psalm mostly in the framework of its *Sitz-im-Leben* (vv. 1-2, 6-13); this is also evident in his references to the relationship between cult and history in Israel. He distinguishes in the Psalm *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus* (vv. 1-2), using transcendence and immanence language. With his reference to the New Testament and to God's mercy and forgiveness, one can discern in Weiser's presentation a certain development of a theology of grace.

Liturgical Interpretation

Enjoying such a high consideration for its beauty and meaning, Psalm 103 was not only interpreted in the course of the history of the Church but also, following the Jewish tradition, it was introduced in the Church's worship from early times. Indeed, as the psalm texts in general and psalmody served the need of a religious community,[84] from the very beginning they persisted because they were both scripture and liturgy,[85] because they became standardized forms of worship, as N.M. Sarna puts it.[86] Today Psalm 103 is very much in use, and significantly so, in several kinds of divine services. I will shortly mention here the liturgical use of the Psalm only in the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox traditions. For the Roman Catholic part, I am using the information provided by L. Jacquet.[87] First of all, the entire Psalm is recited during the Compline service on Saturdays in the conclusion of a week of liturgical praise; in this, the Church invites the believer to thank God for all mercies given during the whole week and to think of his/her fragility as a basis to continue to ask it from God, to pray and praise him continually. Besides this use, different verses of the Psalm are to be found in several other services. For instance: vv. 2-5 in the offertory of the Friday of the First Week in Lent, v. 2 in the ritual of the prayers and actions of grace, v. 5 as antiphon of the Second Vesper office of several martyrs, vv. 8-1.0 are features of the Mass of Sacre Coeur, v. 10, in the Masses for time of war and calamities, v. 10 also in the ritual of the Litanies of the saints, vv. 1, 2, 20, 21 in the Mass of Angels; the Psalm is also recited at the Complines of Saturday in the Matins of Ascension.

In the Orthodox Tradition, Psalm 103 has also had a very large worship application from very early times. It is recited entirely in the service of Matins (celebrated in the monasteries according to the Monastic Early Church Tradition before the rising of the sun but in the parishes, later). This service of Matins is officiated in the monasteries every day and in the parishes every Sunday and with every Feast Liturgy as well as in several other occasions. The Psalm's integration into a daily service intends to invite the believer to thank God every day for the benefits received in the previous day and night. Verse 1 of the Psalm is used in the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom which is celebrated every Sunday in the liturgical year with a few exceptions when the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great is celebrated (but there v. 1 of the Psalm is found as well). The Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is celebrated daily in the monasteries (and can be celebrated daily as well as in the parishes) and also for special occasions.

V. 1 of the Psalm represents the first antiphon sung after the great Litany which follows the Trinitarian opening benediction of the Liturgy. This is the context of the Liturgy of the Word or of catechumens. The understanding of the meaning of the liturgical context in which verse 1 is placed speaks about the significance which the verse and the whole Psalm has in this liturgical tradition. The Divine Liturgy is a celebration of the Kingdom of God in which songs of glory and humility are united in a harmonious order. Other features of this Liturgy are: the repetition of praise, the evocation and representation of the past and of the present in prayers, alternation of present day, actual and eschatological references, etc. These features present in the hymns and prayers of the Liturgy cause the believers not to forget their human condition but also to remember their condition as pilgrims on the way to the Kingdom. They are transitory people - like the Psalm says - but in transit towards God's Kingdom. These factors of the Liturgy: glory and humility, past and present, history and eschatology, earth and Kingdom are all present in the Psalm. That is probably the reason for which it was chosen to have this place in the Liturgy. The Liturgy also creates a sense that the people are not simple people but people of God - *Laos tou Theou,* a concept that is also found in Psalm 103. The Psalm can also be sung antiphonally in its entirety, in the same Liturgy before communion. It is used in several other services as well.

ANALYSIS

General Presentation

Psalm 103, which is a part of a trilogy with psalms 101 and 102,[88] speaks for itself to such an extent, Stnasley L. Jaki affirms, that it limits "the commentator's task to a reflection or two."[89] It tells the story of a person rescued from the pit of distress, caused most probably by illness. It is also possible that the author was on the threshold of death or that he was persecuted and oppressed by "enemies". Restored to his normal life or even in a better condition than previously, (possibly he was restored unexpectedly at least "quantitatively" speaking) he is taken by a deep feeling of gratefulness and in a considerable élan of joy he enthusiastically praises God. He mentions different attributes of God

which may have to do directly with his own problems now resolved and then he continues to praise God for what He did not only for him but also for the whole people of Israel. As he passes from his own personal history to the history of Israel the poet also passes from self-address to communal address and continues to mention different attributes of God. Having no more adequate words to praise God he starts to use figurative language such as analogy, comparison, contrast, and metaphor. For example, the image of the grass for us, the contrast between the dust of man and the eternity of God, etc.

In his praise the poet - probably a person with some authority in the community - begins to teach his listeners (in the form of his praising God) about the benefit of respecting the covenant and obeying and doing God's commandments. He finishes his praise with an exhortation to all of creation, visible and invisible, to praise God.

Theological Exegesis

If Psalm 103 belongs to David, it seems to be easier to understand the authority of the speech in certain places, the passage from an "I" formula to "we" language, and also, literally speaking, the beauty of the poem as composition.

V. 1: "Bless the Lord."

This is an exhortation of the one who prays directed to himself. To bless means, generally speaking, to have authority, power, dignity and to impart them to others. Yet in our case it is the man who blesses God. What can a man give to God? As Augustine says, one cannot give to God what belongs to one's own person because we have nothing which is our own except sin. What we can give to God is that which He gave us. But most often we stain the pure gifts we receive from God and in order to give something to God in a just way we have to purify our heart; then only, from a pure heart can we give God praise. The pure heart presupposes repentance and forgiveness. In our case the Psalmist was healed and forgiven, he has a pure heart (one can see that from the nature of the poem, its beauty and spontaneity) and he can bless the Lord in praise; in fact in many languages *to bless* means to speak good words about somebody. In Latin *bene dico* means, I speak good; good being used here as an adverb; in Romanian *binecuvintez* means to speak good

(cuvint means *word)*. *Nota bene*: the words *bine, bene, good* are adverbs, not adjectives. They indicate that the way in which one speaks is good, that the speech is correct, just, appropriate. However, full blessedness belongs only to God.[90] Yet, to say that God is blessed eternally is to say that "God rejoices eternally in the outpouring of goodness, mercy and love upon creature each in accordance to its ability to participate in God's being".[91] This explanation fits entirely with the image that the Psalm gives us about God. Yet in our case this expression "Bless the Lord" can be an exhortation to acknowledge God's self-sufficiency, His independence from any need or necessity, in contrast with the poet who in all respects was and is so dependent on God.

The words "O my soul" (the Hebrew word means "throat," which can refer to the voice or the origin of voice, which would be consistent with the expression "all that is within me") reflect a meditative speech, a state of introspection. The dialogue form used here helps the singer to interiorize the theme of the speech; then the speech is taken out and given to God from the depths of the heart. This internalized dialogical speech may also have the purpose of stimulating meditation and introspection in the community, in the listeners. This is a kind of language that expresses the position of man vis-à-vis himself. This can be understood as mirror imagery, but not in the narcissistic sense. For this mirror is founded on the openness of the heart towards God and community so that the mirror becomes transparent, it becomes a window through which relationships are possible. The word *Yahweh* or *Lord* appears eleven times in the Psalm as a proper noun and thirty-two times in pronominal form (personal pronoun in the nominative, genitive, accusative, and relative pronoun). This helps us better understand how deep the feelings of gratefulness were and the height of the psalmist's exaltations. It is as if the Lord were the real centre of every statement in which His name appears. One can see that it was indeed so, it was what the poet intended, that is why the entire psalm appears to be a hymn of praise, a kind of "amazing glory," as J. Limburg puts it.[92]

And "all that is within me" may refer first of all to the psalmist's entire being. And, more specifically, it may refer to his soul, to all the inner feelings and spiritual faculties. It may refer to those faculties through which he had sinned (allusion in vv. 3 and 10) and now that he is forgiven he exhorts them to praise God. It may also refer to his interior physical organs. If he had an internal illness or interior pains and

now he has been healed, he exhorts all of his organs to praise God. Possible references to this interpretation can be found in: Ps 35:10; Ps 94:19; Is 51:8-10.

"His holy name" is, in relation to God, transcendent language. *Holy* usually means set apart, consecrated for a special purpose, distant, untouchable, incorruptible. In relation to the name of God this idea of holy implies set apart in an absolute sense; it implies total distance, transcendence. This understanding is consistent with the same concept present in other contexts in the Psalm, for instance when the psalmist speaks of the distance between heaven and earth (v. 11) or of God's throne which is in heaven (v. 19, for example). In Hebrew understanding names had great significance. Names express being, names contain power, the power of the person the name designates. The name protects, it can be invoked, it can be praised. The name is the presence of the person. There is an interesting association of words in this expression: *holy name* because the word *holy* implies transcendence, whereas the concept *name* implies immanence (not totally) because the name is revelation already, disclosure of the person, of attributes. We have to do here at the same time with *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus* and this explanation is not just a linguistic and theological speculation, it is consistent with what kind of God the psalmist had in mind, as evident in the Psalm as a whole, where God is simultaneously transcendent and immanent.

The expression "to bless his holy name," reminds us of the first petition of the prayer "Our Father," where we ask that the name of God be sanctified, be blessed. God wants us to keep His name holy, to keep it "there," untarnished even through ignorance. To keep God's name untarnished means both not to loose the transcendent dimension of God by retaining only the immanence and thus making of God an idol. It also means to have the right idea about God, according to what God himself revealed to us. God's disclosure demands reverence.

V. 2: After this exhortation the Psalmist encourages himself not to forget God's benefits. He knows that to forget is to turn one's back on God, which is ingratitude. But he also may fear that if he forgets he may be punished by God, he may fall again into the "pit." Maybe the psalmist knows something about ingratitude! To forget may also be seen in relation to verse 18 where the psalmist speaks about remembering to keep God's commandments. If one forgets God's benevolence and commandments, one forgets God. If I forget Him He is not anymore my

Lord. Or if I remember God but I forget His benevolence, it is another kind of God that I will have in mind. This would be nothing else but a false image of God, that is idolatry. That is why as F. Beaucamp says, "do not forget" is a grand imperative of Israel's religion. The prophets reiterate it often as an expression of Israel's fidelity to God,[93] as well as an expression of Israel's right position *coram Deo*. In fact, how can the psalmist forget the danger he was in? How can he forget the pain, the threat? Therefore, if restored, how can he forget God's benevolence? And even more: if he knew that he was innocent and unjustly punished, one can admit that he still can forget. But when he knows that he sinned before God, that he was rightly passing through the pain, then if rescued, how can he forget? To forget would mean to be silent. In Brueggemann's terms to forget is to create a static society that instaures monopoly over peoples' minds and hearts. This monopoly controls everything and leads people into false ideology and idolatry, transforming them into marionettes. The authentic, real society and person is the one who does not forget, who keeps memory alive. That is why the imperative *memento* is absolutely central in one's life, and the psalmist gives his praise this authentic character. The psalmist refers here to all the benefits; this can be seen as an allusion to all that God has given to him, but also to all people in all of history. The word *all* may very well take us back to the election and the liberation from Egypt; it is as if the poet had in mind all of God's interventions in Israel's history.

V. 3: This verse, like verses 4 and 5, offers a reason for praise; the reason for praise is itself descriptive praise, rendered through participles (according to the form). According to the content, this speech about God may refer to concrete moments in the life of the poet and thus it is declarative praise. The expression "who forgives all your inequity," can also be a confession of trust uttered out of the poet's own experience. We see that here the psalmist relates sin to sickness (like in Ps 107:17; Ps 108:17-20; I Cor 1.1:30) as if some offence, some guilt, caused the malady. This is reminiscent of the occasion of the paralytic man in Capernaum, and what Jesus told him (Your sins are forgiven). In this case forgiveness is also related to healing (soul and body) as we find in Jacob 5:13-16. It is a restoration of the position previously held in the eyes of God, it is restoration to honor, power, like in the parable of the prodigal son. It is recovery in the fullness of life in the presence of God (Hos 6: 1-3).

V. 4: The God who redeems from the pit is the God who redeems from death. (This can also be seen as a messianic allusion - Is 52:3). The author of the poem was in the pit. We can hear his cry: "out of the depths I cried unto You, O Lord." After the restoration of the soul through forgiveness and of the body through healing God completes his providential work by crowning the man with mercies and steadfast love. These two words, mercy and steadfast love, are key words in this Psalm, as J. Limburg notices as well.[94] They appear again in verse 8 and verse 17 respectively. And they are understood in other descriptions of God's nature, deeds, or attributes. God *crowns* man. This is an important expression because it also contains an eschatological meaning (Is 28:5); those who fear God will be glorified. The crown is the symbol of glory, beauty, honor, power; we have here the whole theology of the *Imago Dei;* man reflects God's glory, he has power, beauty, and honor (Ps 8:5). Therefore, restoration or salvation implies glorification. This word can also be seen in the perspective of vv. 19-24 as an anticipation or prefiguration of our future sharing in the angels' praising of God.

V. 5: "He satisfies you with good" can be understood as God's providential care; it suggests feeding, growing, maturity. In this case, after the restoration of the soul through forgiveness and of the body through healing, God does not abandon the person. He feeds the believer with good food which is either protection from becoming sick again or spiritual and physical strength, rejuvenation (cf. Is 40:31: the eagle's story, as the eagle is a sign of regeneration[95]). This rejuvenation can also suggest the return to the original state; the good food suggested by this expression can be simply rich life which after forgiveness and healing can be even better than before. God in His abundant mercy does not only give what one lost but much more (Jos 8:7) - as suggested also by the word "crowned" (Ps 16:11; Ps 17:15; Ps 21:3-4; Ps 23:6; Ps 91:16). Such life itself is the best reason to understand the Psalm. In this kind of restoration one feels the need to sing "a new song."

V. 6: "The Lord works vindication and justice." If the accent is on the Lord it refers to Matt 7:1 and Rom 12:19 where the idea that men should trust God's "ways" is stressed; that God will defend the oppressed in God's way (in Hebrew the word *justice* here means "favorable verdict"). If we refer back to the restoration of life by God, we can interpret that if God took care to save from the "pit" and to satisfy the person with good things, God will continue to take care even in the case of oppression. On the other hand, the one who speaks about

his experience of God's saving intervention can assure his listeners, who may be oppressed or in other pits, that they should trust God, that He will intervene and that He restores better and more than the man who would vindicate and revenge himself.

V. 7: The ways God showed to Moses can also refer to God's will in general as likened to Israel's destiny or as the journey of Israel led by Moses from Egypt to Canaan (Hos 11:1-4). In both cases the expression of this verse is a reference to the election and the liberation of Israel by God, through Moses.

VV. 8-10: These verses speak again about the bounties of God. They are like a conclusion to what was said above with respect to all that God had done for His people: forgiveness, healing, nurturing, deliverance, law, and precepts, in other words, with respect to God's compassion towards the sinner who returns to Him.[96] They also suggest that God works unexpectedly, He is beyond human logic (v. 10; see also Ezra 9:13). This is also consistent with the image we have of God in Ex 34:6 and especially in Is 54:7-8: "For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you; in overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer." This reflects the covenantal God who is disclosed in verses 17-18 of the Psalm. About this God St. John Chrysostom wrote that he is "*un juge qui ne sait pas calculer exactement les péchés et en laisse passer de nombreux*."[97]

VV. 11-12: Here the psalmist uses creation language (see Is 55:9) as if he wants to give a magnified picture of God's steadfast love which is a key word of the Psalm. It appears in verses 4, 8, 11, and 17. Creation language is used for the first time in relation to the rescue from the pit; the second in relation to the opposition to God's anger (v. 11), as a reward for those who fear Him, for those who being rescued and judged with love, remain faithful to God, as in verse 17 also. The obedience to the divine commands is a condition for God's faithfulness and generosity; one can also understand that even if the believer sins, if he remains bound to the covenant, recognizing God's authority over him, he will benefit from God's generosity. This suggests the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) where although the son sinned against the father, when he acknowledged the father's authority and himself as belonging to the father, he benefited from the father's generosity and steadfast love (see also: Eph 24-7; Jn 4:16-19). Indeed, as W. Brueggemann writes, the problem of guilt is present here. Guilt is

acknowledged by the sinner, but in his context of total confidence in God's "capacity to override it and not let it determine the outcome of life."[98] The comparison made in verse 11, "as the heavens are high," reminds one of the image of the eagle who flies so high as it is rejuvenated (or according to the legends as a way to its rejuvenation) and also it reminds one of verse 19 where the image of the heavens is also used in order to show the distance of God, His majesty (see: Is 55:9; Ps 57:11; Ps 108:5).

V. 13: The image of the Father used to stress the idea of God's love seems to be the expression of the desire of the poet to give a solid foundation to all that he said about the mercy and love of God throughout the whole Psalm. The poet wants to give in this purpose a strong argument, as simple as it is logical and thus unbeatable. The culmination of the description of God's goodness through this image expressed in the domestic, family language again leads us to the parable of the prodigal son and to all the instances where Jesus calls God Father, including the Lord's prayer.

V. 14: "He knows our frame" and "dust" is creation language used to emphasize God's absolute distance, authority, sovereignty over man (like in v. 19). This is consistent with verse 13, "all that is in me" as it is also said or alluded to in Ps 51:10 and Ps 33:15 (God who *fashions* the hearts), and in Job 10:9, (God knows our interior structures, our weaknesses and fragility). This verse is introduced by the preposition *for* which would imply that the idea introduced is thus reason or justification for what was previously said in relation to God's mercies. One can see that the psalmist is really preoccupied with giving us possible proofs, logical arguments for what he says, in order to be convincing. This suggests once more how enthusiastic and how grateful he felt towards God, his redeemer. This wisdom-like language with references to creation wants to say that the love of God described here is rooted in the act of creation itself.

VV. 15-16: The key word in this verse is *grass* which follows the word *dust.* They express the nothingness of man which underlines not only the eternity of God (consistent with verse 17) but also substantiates the previous verses that speak about the immense and sublime grace of God given even to such creatures. The word *dust* refers directly to Gen 2:7 and, the word *grass* is consistent with: Ps 39:5 (about the nothingness of our life); Ps 90:5-6; Ps 129:6; Jos 7:21; Is 40:6-8. The idea of the transitoriness of human life (Ps 78:39), its fragility, in order

to be more powerful is contrasted with God's eternity (v. 17) and majesty (v. 19) as it also appears in Ps 90:4: "a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past." These images together with the expression "and its place knows it no more,"[99] as Mowinkel remarks, represent a meditation motif about the human condition in its quality of creature.

VV. 17-18: These verses reinforce the ideas already expressed in verses 11 and 13. God's love which is from everlasting to everlasting reflects God's eternity in contrast with man's nothingness. But, it also suggests (especially in relation to the idea of remaining in the covenantal relationship by fearing God) that God's eternal power lasts beyond death; death is to be understood otherwise than complete interruption of relationship. The fact that through death one who rests in the covenant does not end one's relation with God is expressed very clearly in the words of Jesus on the cross. Jesus said, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" which reflects the idea of abandonment. But, what kind of abandonment is to be understood is explained by Jesus' next words: "Father into your hands I put my soul." It is not an abandonment which cuts the relationship because one still has grounds to hope, to trust, to entrust one's soul to God's mercy which is "from everlasting to everlasting (Ps 104:31; Ps 135:13). One should no longer fear death because death is overcome by God's mercy and by our fear of Him. The relationship created or based on these two realities - God's mercy and fear of God - is the major point of one's life. These two conditions attract the righteousness of God upon the "children's children" (see Ps 128:6) that is, from generation to generation or forever. These two verses expressed in wisdom language are also the core of the Psalm because they express the same mercy of God by means of powerfully contrasting images.

V. 19: Speaks about God's enthronement in heaven in the old cultic tradition; God is king and ruler over the whole of creation; He is in full victory and majesty (Ps 2:4; Ps 10:16; Ps 97:2; Ps.146: 10). The words *has prepared* (His throne) may suggest that now something is coming, is to be expected, waited for, something is going to happen *(dies irae, dies illa?)*. We have here eschatological language just as in the following verses that can give one a sense of the end of the world when God will be so enthroned over *all* nations and when all creation will glorify Him. This vision or understanding becomes even stronger if related to the idea of God as king, ruler and judge; if *His kingdom*

rules over all, nobody can escape judgment when it comes. God is ruler over all because He has His seat in heaven and He is the creator of all things. Because He "knows" *the frame* of everything, and *all within me* (see all the references to God's knowing of the hearts and kidneys), God is the real judge, the only one who can judge. Here the logical argumentation of the psalmist is once again evident.

VV. 20-22: The last verses of the Psalm represent a summons for communal praise (see also Ps 29:1ff; Ps 148:1-2) expressed in creation language (angels, heavenly powers). The greatness of God requires great praise. The symmetry between "O my soul" from verse 1 and verse 22 after the exhortation to praise addressed to all of creation shows that the psalmist does not forget that he himself received deliverance, that he has the duty to praise God. It is not enough to pass this duty to creation and then to remain anonymous therein, but he comes back distinctively to his own situation as if, after he spoke with the others, he continues to remain with his own soul (to meditate). It is as if the Psalm is finished in a sense, but in another sense the praise will go on in and with his soul. But now after telling his story to those around him and to all creation, in his continuing praise the poet is not alone anymore; as he summoned the entire universe to praise he feels that the whole of creation has become a temple in which he lives and in which God is celebrated as if in a cosmic liturgy where people like angels become doxological beings under the merciful rule of the creator God.

Additional Theological Considerations

Psalm 103 is the expression of a real theology of God's mercy, glory, and majesty. This is the story of a man speaking about the God of love. Nietzsche called this Psalm "The Book of divine justice." Nietzsche denounces those who make an irreducible opposition between the God of the Old Testament as the God of fear and the God of the New Testament as the God of love because in this Psalm God as the God of love is more evident than anywhere else.[100] We have in the Psalm two kinds of interaction: the horizontal one *(I - they* or *you)* and a vertical one *(I - Thou)*. The *I* both with respect to God and to people can be understood in a double way: as separation from (discontinuity) and as integration with (continuity). In relation to God these two dimensions

signify humanity and communion; in relation to people they signify self-awareness and common responsibility before God. The relationship of the psalmist with Yahweh can be seen from up-down images such as: Father, sovereign, forgiver, creator, revealer, covenant, commandments, benefits, providence. This relationship can be seen from down-up images such as: children, sinners, guilt, failure, fear of God, obedience, hearing-doing, etc. The psalmist tells us what kind of God he praises: holy (v. 1), forgiving, savior, healer (vv. 3, 4, 6, 12, 17), just (v. 6), revealer (v. 7), merciful (v. 8), gracious (v. 8), patient (v. 8), rich in goodness (vv. 8, 11, 17), compassionate (v. 13), all knowing (v. 14), king and ruler (vv. 19, 21, 22). This is a God who overcomes any kind of "disorientation." Again, with such a God people are not simply people but are *Laos tou Theou.* In this quality they are people and God of the covenant. The covenant has for people two dimensions: one on the basis of which they can petition and the other on the basis of which they have to obey. They have the right to ask but also the "right" to obey! The creation language used here stresses the idea that God the creator is also the God of history. This is a theology of the presence of God.

Conclusion

This is a psalm full of salvific teachings. We learn first of all that the God we praise is God-with-us; this is our basis for hope, trust, faith, confidence, love; this also requires us to keep walking in God's ways, or having the right position *coram Deo*. We are crowed by God but *memento mori:* we are dust! Yet death is not to be feared, God is to be feared. The way of God comes from God and leads to God. It has to be so because, as Paul Evdokimov says, "one can never go to God if one does not start from God," or in Augustine's words "you would not seek me if you had not already found me." We learn also that gratitude should not be an occasional act in our life but a permanent attitude; doxology is not a simple "thank You" to God but a way of being in the world, the right way of being, or as Abraham Heschel put it, "man will not die because of lack of information but because of lack of appreciation." We need to become people of celebration, doxological persons for whom the whole of life is a liturgy; after our presence at worship in Church, this should be taken "outside" into our life and celebrated as "Liturgy after

the Liturgy" until it takes on cosmic proportions in which all people and all of creation become a song of praise of our Father and Creator.

NOTES:

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23. Kraus, *op. cit.,* p. 289.

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25. Kraus, *op. cit.,* p. 290.

26. Gene Rice, "An Exposition of Psalm 103," in *The Journal of Religious Thought,* Vol. 39, Nr. l, 1982, pp. 56-57.

27. Parker, *op. cit.,* p. 193.

28. Kraus, *op. cit.,* p. 290.

29. Rice, *op. cit.,* p. 56.

30. Fleming James, *Thirty Psalmists,* G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1938, p. 44.

31. *Ibidem,* p. 47.

32. Westermann, *op. cit.,* p. 20.

33. Sigmund Mowinkel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship,* I-II, Abingdon Press, New York, 1962, p. 93.

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35. *Ibidem.*

36. Parker, *op. cit.,* pp. 192-193.

37. *Ibidem,* p. 191.

38. Kraus, *op. cit.,* p. 290.

39. Allen, *op. cit.,* p. 20.

40. Gunkel, *op. cit.,* p. 30.

41. *Ibidem,* p. 12.

42. *Ibid.,* pp. 12, 13, 20.

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48. *Ibidem.*

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50. Sabourin, *op.cit.,* pp. 180-181.

51. Gunkel, *op. cit.,* p. 32.

52. Mowinkel, *op. cit.,* II, p. 74.

53. *Ibidem,* pp. 31-32.

54. Kraus, *op. cit.,* p. 290.

55. Gunkel, *op. cit.,* p. 37.

56. *Ibidem,* pp. 38-39.

57. Mowinkel, *op. cit.,* II, 74.

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59. *Ibid.,* pp. 82, 93.

60. *Ibid.,* p. 132.

61. Westermann, *op. cit.,* p. 19.

62. *Ibidem,* p. 17.

63. Weiser, *op. cit.,* p. 658.

64. L. Jacquet, *op. cit.,* p. 29.

65. Parker, *op. cit.,* p. 191.

66. Westermann, *op. cit.,* p. 109.

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68. *Ibid.,* p. 103.

69. *Ibid.,* p. 111.

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90. Thomas Oden, *The Living God,* Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 1987, p. 128.

91. *Ibidem*.

92. James Limburg, *Psalms,* Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2000, p. 348.

93. E. Beaucamp, *op. cit.,* p. 15.

94. James Limburg, *op. cit.,* p. 350.

95. Silvia Schroer, "Under the Shadow of Your Wings: The Metaphor of God's Wings in the Psalms, Exodus 19, 4, Deuteronomy 32.11 and Malachi 3.20 as Seen Through the Perspectives of Feminism and the History of Religion," in *Wisdom and Psalms: A Feminist Companion to the Bible,* edited by Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine, Sheffield Academic Press, England, 1988, p. 275.

96. Herman Gunkel, Joachim Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel,* Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 1998, p. 52.

97. See: Jacquet, *op. cit.,* p. 15.

98. Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith,* Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995, p. 200.

99. Mowinkel, *op. cit.,* p. 91.

100. See: Jacquet, *op. cit.,* p. 44.

Mr. George Alexe (left), Fr. Theodor Damian, Fr. Bert Breiner, Dr. Nicholas Groves, Fr. Paul Theophilus

Dr. Nicholas Groves (right), Fr. Bert Breiner, Fr. Theodor Damian, Mr. George Alexe

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GUEST OF HONOR:

The Right Rev. Fr. Dr. Vasile Vasilache
Vicar of the Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese of America and Canada

Fr. Dr. Theodor Damian, Ms. Ruxandra Alexe (center, foreground), together with the Church's ladies group that helped organize the symposium.

Artist Ruxandra Alexe (left) with Prof. Dr. Mihaela Albu.