

# God loves everyone ”with the same love He has for the entire world“. *Incurtio patristica*

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**Abstract:** In this article, we intend to highlight, as much as possible in a limited number of words and using the texts of the Holy Fathers of the Church, the multifaceted revelation of God’s love for us, specifically: through the entire Creation, through His Son’s unfathomable Incarnation through which He makes evident the true value of man, through His Cross which is the key to the mystery of Christ’s love, through His Resurrection and Ascension, by indwelling us with the Holy Spirit, by giving Himself for and to us as only He Himself could in the Holy Eucharist, through the fact that God always intends the best for man in all His actions and loves each of us to the fullest, etc. Moreover, we have emphasized the fact that the multitude of man’s sins does not exceed God’s love for us. This, of course, should not be understood as an exhortation to continue in sin, because God is merciful and forgives man, but it should be regarded as an exhortation to repent sincerely. God always awaits for the sinner to return to Him, through repentance, to bestow upon him forgiveness and, simultaneously, peace, joy, serenity and eternal blessing.

Each page of this article is intended as an invitation to love, and to grow in that love of God and our neighbours.

**Keywords:** God, love, world, patristic, thinking, human, benefit

## *God is love*

Saint John the Evangelist, the theologian of divine love, formulates the fullness of God’s existence and presence through the word ‘love:’ ”God is love and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him“ (1 Jn. 4:16). The same Saint Evangelist writes, in the same chapter, vs. 8: ”God is love.“ Never before has there been a more precious and beautiful assertion than this. ”God is love“ writes John the Evangelist; this was the first time when the earth heard a statement like this. Afterward, we, humankind, the inhabitants of the Earth, forgot it more or less. This assertion is very profound. Not only that God loves; He is love. When the Holy Scriptures say that ”God is love“ this does not mean that God represents a sentiment of vague, ephemeral and ambiguous love. It is God that defines love and He is

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above anything that we might consider as being love. When saying that it is God that defines love, we understand that God is the definition of love itself that He transcends all. There is no real love other than God. Even by trying by all our means, we cannot define real love without knowing God. Love is more than a feeling, love is a person: Jesus Christ. The teaching of Christ, Christ's life, reveals to the world God-Love. Christ is Love. The divine nature and essence is love. God loves us and He loves His entire creation as His nature is love. For how could it be otherwise, if God is love? The reason or the cause of God's love lies within God Himself; this reason does not lie within the one who is loved. God's love springs from God and it is not attracted by a particular object. Goodness, virtue, spiritual beauty or the sum of the reasons that make someone worthy of love are not relevant as God loves both the saint and the sinner. God loves us not only because we are virtuous, loving or because we deserve His love; He has loved us since the beginning, unconditionally. He loves us not because we are in His image; we are His most accomplished creatures and the crown of His creation, but, as a matter of fact, we are distinct from Him. He loves us not because He identifies with us as entities that are capable of feelings. The Incarnation of the Son is a consequence; it is not the cause of His love. He loves us because He Himself is love. From eternity, God has been love. Before the creation of the universe, before the world was brought into being, at the moment men separated from God and made various representations or idols that they worshiped or when they considered Him just an abstract concept, then, during the centuries when, decimated by wars and famine, despairing humankind believed exclusively in fate, God has always been love.

Love permeates His very being and surrounds, accompanies and fills thoroughly all His other characteristics, even His wrath. As He is love, He shows His love through the fact that He loves even those who rebel against Him. God's love is not something purely sentimental, romantic or professed. It is rather *ἀγάπη* [*agápē*], the love that sacrifices for another. He shows us this sacrificial love in sending His Son to sacrifice Himself on the Cross to be the propitiation for our sins (1 Jn. 4:10). He did this although we did not deserve it. "God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8). God knows everyone of us very well and He loves us all equally. He is a fervent love that is infinite as it has neither beginning nor end. This is what differentiates Christianity from all other religions. Why does God love us? It is because: "God is love."

Although this aspect is manifest, an analogy that might suggest further questions is made with light. Light provides illumination; its very nature is to give illumination. Its brightness does not depend in any way on the nature of the objects it illuminates and, consequently, it provides with light all objects equally. We can analyze this process. We are able to

distinguish brilliant light, its brightness and the emitted light.<sup>1</sup> We might further speculate on sharing endowed love in the age before creation, when there was not an external object to receive it. But, as long as there is an object, radiant light provides it with light and so our Loving God loves that object.

Yet, as natural objects differ in their capacity to receive light, some reflect it, some radiate it, some absorb it, souls differ in their capacity to receive love. Only the object that absorbs light is changed internally, it becomes fervent and it radiates light itself. If it glows, it becomes a light source and it radiates light, even in darkness. Correspondingly, the soul that absorbs God's love is transfigured internally by this love and thus becomes an inexhaustible source of love.

We do not know the reason why there are differences of this kind. „What causes the differences in the way objects receive light is a problem of physics; the reason why souls differ in the way they receive love is a mystery.“<sup>2</sup>

God is love Himself not only in relation to man and the entire world; He is love through His outpouring to the world, but He had been love before the world was created. Love has need of two people who love one another. God is a Trinity of Persons, Who love one another, communicate with one another and share at the same time the same qualities. Through Christ we understood that God is love, that God is our loving Father and we are His sons. God is love, "love is the very life of the divine nature"<sup>3</sup>, "love is the defining characteristic of God"<sup>4</sup> and, according to the theologian Pavel Florensky, it is "God's essence, His substantial act."<sup>5</sup> If love includes any act of God, any relation with the Son and the creatures that exist, because it is a part of God's nature, this quality (love) is one and the same with His nature. God, in His very Essence, is love (*agápē*) which is not an abstract quality, but He is vitality, strength and shared kindness that is completely conveyed to the Son.<sup>6</sup> In other words, *agápē* establishes a natural and existential association between the Only Begotten Son and His Father. By experiencing *agápē*-love, the faithful realize what God is and knowing God in His relationship with Jesus Christ means understanding that He is love.

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<sup>1</sup> George Bosworth Burch, "The Christian Philosophy of Love", in *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1950, p. 416.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 416.

<sup>3</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione*, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca (P.G.)* XLVI, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1863, col. 196C.

<sup>4</sup> Rev. Fr. Professor Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. I, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1978, p. 297.

<sup>5</sup> P. Florensky *apud* Rev. Fr. Professor Dumitru Stăniloae, „Sfânta Treime, structura supremei iubiri“, in *Studii Teologice*, XXII (1970), No. 5-6, p. 337.

<sup>6</sup> C. Spicq, O. P., *Agapè dans le Nouveau Testament – analyse des textes*, III, J. Gabalda, Paris, 1959, p. 276-277.

## God loves everyone unconditionally

God's love extends over all of humanity and the entire creation: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Jn. 3:16). God has never created a being that He does not love.

He loves each of us with an *unconditional love*. From the perspective of many people, love is an intense affection for another person, based on family or personal relationships. This lively affection frequently originates in a sexual attraction to a person. Men and women, in general, love another person when they are attracted by that person and when the latter contributes to their well-being. These words 'based on' connote the fact that men and women find pleasure in another person conditionally; in other words, they love another person if that person fulfils a prerequisite condition, before taking a liking to that person. We have often heard the words or we have said "I love you because you are beautiful" or "I love you because you care about me" (put differently, I love you for myself and because I need you) or "we love you because your presence is enjoyable or because we experience enjoyment being around you."

Not only is our love conditional, but also unstable, whereas God's love is unalterable. Many people have loved us, but, later, their love for us waned and they even forgot us. Their love for us might have become hatred. God's love will not alter in such a manner. Saint John the Evangelist says that the Saviour, who loved His own, loved them until the end. "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end" (Jn. 13:1). Our love is based on sentiments, moods and emotions that may alter or disappear at a given moment. The divorce rate is particularly high in today's society because either the husband or the wife did not want to keep the flame of love burning.

Who can become aware of the significance and nature of 'unconditional' love? God is love and His love is distinct from human love. God's love is unconditional and it is not based on feelings or emotions. It appears that parents' love for their children is the closest in nature to the unconditional love of God for man that manifests in our lives. We continue to love our children both in difficult and good periods. We will not stop loving them even if they do not meet our expectations concerning them. We love our children no matter how hard it might sometimes be; not even then does our love extinguish. This pales in comparison to the love God has for us. Yet, as we shall see, God's love transcends any human definition of love, a definition that is limited, as all definitions are. Still, God cannot be defined in words or

in a series of sentences and phrases that attempt to characterize Him or make a cataphatic statement about Him.<sup>7</sup>

Another wonderful verse describing God's unconditional love is in Romans 5:8: "But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Neither this verse, nor Jn. 3:16 ("For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.") conditions God's love for us. God will not establish conditions we have to meet. He will not tell us, for example: "Once you have improved your life and you have become holy, I shall love you." What He did not tell us is "My Son will die for you only if you promise Me you shall love Me." If fact, in Ro. 5:8 is written the opposite of that. God wants us to know that His love is unconditional as He sent His Son to die for us, while we were yet sinners, unworthy of His love. We did not cleanse ourselves from sins and any evil, we did not promise anything to God before we felt His love. His love for us has always been ardent and incomprehensible to the mind and unutterable through words, unconditional and without boundaries and, for this reason, He has given everything and His Son sacrificed for us before we even could realize we needed His love.

Every person is overwhelmingly important from God's perspective; in fact, the entire Gospel highlights the fact that Christ the Lord loves even those who show no gratitude to Him and those who consider themselves unworthy to be loved. This is the very secret of man's self-esteem: if we want to become self-confident, let us understand to what a great extent God cares about us. God loves us, no matter what others may think about us. And, because God loves us, we do not have to prove anything so that others might have a good opinion of us. We do not have to put on certain clothes to feel comfortable or to drive a certain car to boost our *ego*. Displaying external marks of success has become worthless.

### **Concerning the breadth, length, depth and height of God's love (Eph. 3:18)**

In the Epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul the Apostle speaks about the breadth, length, depth and height of God's love (Eph. 3:18f): "That ye may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth and height. And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge". We all think we know something or we have experienced and perceived this love; yet, however, we are nowhere close to understanding or to completely perceiving and experiencing this unbounded love. Many of us have discovered certain aspects of God's love; but the height, length and breadth

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<sup>7</sup> Available online at <https://www.allaboutgod.com/french/dieu-est-amour.htm>, accessed on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 2017.

of this love are still unknown to us. This love resembles an immense ocean; one could never comprehend its full extent, I mean to know it in detail and to cross its full length, breadth, depth, etc.

In the prayers and the services of the Orthodox Church, one of the most important divine names used to worship God is 'Lover of mankind'. "O, Love That deifies us, You are God"<sup>8</sup> calls out St. Symone the New Theologian. The ritual of the divine Liturgy and of the Holy Mysteries, of Lauds and Hierurgies, in fact the entire Orthodox public worship includes numerous texts that invoke God's love, the Lover of mankind. We mention some examples. In the Divine Liturgy, the priest, among others, intones in a loud voice the following ephoneses: "For You are a merciful God Who loves mankind and to You we offer up glory, to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages." During the service of the Mystery of Holy Unction, in the second prayer, the priest reads: "O God, Great and Supreme, worshiped by all creation, fountainhead of wisdom, abyss of unfathomable goodness and boundless gulf of loving-kindness; Master Who loves mankind, the God of things eternal and wonders ... O Lord, Who are easy to be entreated; You alone are merciful and You love mankind; You are sorrowful for our evil deeds... ." Then, in the 4<sup>th</sup> prayer, the Church, through its saints, entered at the beginning these words: "O Gracious, Loving Compassionate and Ever-Merciful Lord, Plentiful in mercy and rich in beneficence, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort..."; in the 5<sup>th</sup> prayer the priest entreats God using the words 'Merciful' and 'All-Merciful': 'All-Merciful King'. At the end of the service, the priest, as he opens the Gospels above the heads of the sick attending the service, reads a prayer that mentions the boundless mercy of our Lord: "... for as it is Your majesty, so is Your mercy."<sup>9</sup> Otherwise stated, if His glory is boundless, then His mercy is unlimited.

God, in His essence and nature, remains in a transcendence that is inaccessible to man, as no man has ever seen God (Jn. 1:18; 4:12). Yet, He reveals Himself, He manifests Himself in relation to the world that He created and supports in its existence, through His energy. The grace of love for men has been working in the entire history of the fall and salvation as in the following fragment:

"Is there anything that God has not done so that we love Him? Is there any means that he has not used? Is there something that He has overlooked? We mocked Him without Him doing something wrong before us, on the contrary, He did good before us and He bestowed thousands of gifts upon us. (...) We should consider the

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<sup>8</sup> St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Imne*, hymn 6, translated by Rev. Fr. professor Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, in *Studii de Teologie Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, Mitropolia Olteniei Publishing House, Craiova, 1990, p. 349.

<sup>9</sup> *Aghiasmatar cuprinzând slujbe, rânduieli și rugăciuni săvârșite de preot la diferite trebuințe din viața creștinilor*, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 2002, p. 147, 153 și 167.

occasions when we mock and dishonor Him even if we receive innumerable gifts and the way He comforts us on every occasion in which we ask for His help and He will not overlook us, but He will draw us to Himself. If we are convinced of these things, we shall then be capable to ignite within ourselves that love for Him.”<sup>10</sup>

For this reason, the same Father of the Church exhorts us: “God provided us with a multitude of paths to salvation; let us not disregard them.”<sup>11</sup>

### **God’s love poured out upon creation**

Reviewing the writings of the Patristic literature, we unequivocally discover an consensus among the Fathers of the Church who, with affable and gentle words, aim at persuading us to follow them in their resolute belief regarding the knowledge of the irresistible love of our Lord for us, love that He has revealed on many occasions and under many forms to humankind. In the beginning, through the Word, God made heaven and earth. He made the firmament as a dividing wall between the water above and the water below. He commanded the water below to be collected into one place and He called them seas, and the dry land which appeared he called earth; and commanded the earth to bring forth grass bearing seed and other plants. He made two great lights on the firmament of heaven to shine upon the earth; then He commanded the waters to bring forth animals having life and winged creatures flying above the earth under the firmament. And because it was necessary to create the animals, God brought them into being; some of them were to be used by man as sources of food and others to serve him. Wild beasts and reptiles were also created. At the end of the sixth day, God made man in His image. He made him partaker of His knowledge and endowed him, above all creatures, with reason, will, feelings, freedom, consciousness etc. He gave man authority over all the animals, giving them names and He allowed man to take delight in the unspeakable splendours of paradise, letting him have dominion over all the creation of the Earth. All these were for man, so that man, being so richly endowed with these benefits, could enjoy everything eyes could see. Thus:

“After arranging everything in good order, after establishing all visible things in proper order and patterns, after laying an unstinting table filled with various foods, rich and plentiful, after adorning the heaven and the earth with equal beauties and splendours and, if I may say, after preparing a kinglike palace, gleaming in all its details, then, He created the creature who was meant to enjoy and benefit from all

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<sup>10</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Comentariile sau explicarea Epistolei către Romani*, translated from Greek, Oxonia Edition, 1849, by Archimandrite Theodosie Athanasiu, Bucharest, 1906, p. 70, 72.

<sup>11</sup> Idem, *In Acta Apostolorum*, XXI, 4, in *P.G. LX*, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1862, col. 169.

these splendours. This creature was given authority over everything that eyes could see and He demonstrated that this creature that was to be created was superior to the rest of the creation which was to be under this creature's authority and direction."<sup>12</sup>

Making a short digression in our composition, we emphasize the fact that these divine gifts were not bestowed exclusively on our protoparents, Adam and Eve, but they were intended for all their descendants until the end of the world. In this regard, St. John Chrysostom adds:

"... now see that God made the firmament, placed the sun in the firmament, collected the seas into one place, expanded the air, set the course of the moon, set immutable laws for the seasons of the year and at His sign all the other elements of creation shall follow their intended route. For both men and animals, those that creep, that walk, that fly and swim, animals in ponds, in springs, in rivers, in mountains, in plains, in houses, in the air, in fields, plants, seeds and trees, wild and planted by man, both fruitful and unfruitful, in one word all things that are moved by the weariless hand of God, they all serve to provide for our life, and God not only provides and gives us what we need, but He will bestow on us more than we need."<sup>13</sup>

Returning from this short digression and continuing our reflection, we mention that Adam, immediately after being created, needed help and support from a being of the same nature as his. God did not overlook this aspect either and created woman in the image he wanted and He committed her to him and bestowed on him the gift of prophecy.

"And I think then – writes St. John Chrysostom – that after all these unspeakable and ineffable benefits He bestowed on man the unsurpassed gift of them of all was to liberate man from all concerns related to the body, precluding man from wearing clothes and any other needs. Quite the contrary, God intended man, as I said above, to live on the earth like an earthly angel; thus, when I consider all these, I can only marvel at our Lord's love for humankind and at man's laziness and the envy of the devil that could not stand to see man living as an angel in a human body."<sup>14</sup>

When man, being deceived by the serpent, fell into sin and through sin into death and all the consequences related to it, God did not leave him without watching over him, but He gave man, at the beginning, a law to help him, He (then) appointed angels to guard him and care for him, He sent prophets to rebuke man for his foolishness and teach him virtues, He set a guard over man's tendency to wickedness through threats; through promises He awaked man's aspiration for virtue. He revealed, in advance, on different

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<sup>12</sup> Idem, *Omīlii la Facere*, homily VII, VI, translation, introduction, indices and notes by Rev. Fr. D. Fecioru, in coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești (PBS)*, vol. 21, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1987, p. 94-95.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, homily XIII, V, p. 164.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, homily XV, IV, p. 173.



occasions, the end of foolishness and the beginning of virtue through exemplary people, so that man could learn from his neighbour; and, despite all these and even more, He did not turn His face away from us when we would persist in disobedience to Him. All these are because the goodness of God has never abandoned us and we could not obstruct His love for us; on the contrary, even if we have offended our Benevolent Father through our unresponsiveness to His gifts, we have been brought back from death and we have been brought back to life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **The multi-faceted revelation of Christ's love for us**

The manner in which God calls humankind to salvation remains inscrutable and mysterious. We can illustrate this by examples from N.T. texts. We shall choose only some of them. Zacchaeus, the tax collector who ardently wanted to see the face of the Lord Jesus and who, to be able to do this, as he was little of stature, climbed up into a sycamore tree. Not only was he accepted and received by Jesus, but He even honoured him with the blessing of going to his house, displaying a love that the publican did not deserve. He called Paul, who sought not and even resisted the call, and He turned him, the great persecutor, into the greatest apostle, thus directing his zeal and fervour to love for Christ and the preaching of His Gospel. Thus, Paul became one of the most paradigmatic Christian missionaries of all times and Petre Țuțea, the Romanian essayist and philosopher, in an answer to Nae Ionescu's question about his opinion concerning St. Paul, said: "He is not a mere man, sir, he is the entire Mediterranean."<sup>15</sup> He caused another one to follow Him and He did not allow that man to bury his father (Mt. 8:21). To Cornelius, who was continuously praying to God and persevering in charity and alms, "as a reward, He showed the path to salvation and He urged him, through an angel, to receive Peter who would tell him what he ought to do achieve salvation together with his household. Thus, in numerous ways, with infinite love, He bestows on men the wisdom of God that is necessary to achieve salvation. God bestows on every man the Grace of His generosity."<sup>16</sup> Since the beginning of creation, if one wanted to look with good mind and right judgment upon everything that is achieved every day by the Creator of the universe for the well-being of every part of creation, he or she would discover in every aspect and action in creation the infinite love of God for men and he or she could say, together with Origen: "As the body is

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<sup>15</sup> Petre Țuțea, *322 de vorbe memorabile*, the 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Humanitas Publishing House, 2009, p. 109.

<sup>16</sup> St. John Cassian, *Convorbiri duhovnicești*, Part 2, The third talk with Fr. Cheremon, Chapter XV, 1-2, translated by Professor David Popescu, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 57, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1990, p. 545-547.

accompanied by its shadow on its way, so does the benevolence of God the Almighty support those who love Him: angels, souls, spirits.<sup>17</sup>

Christ the Saviour calls His death a sacrifice and He says that He came to give His life as a sacrifice (Mt. 20:28). He did not refuse to give His life as a sacrifice and ransom even for one single man only as He loves each of us infinitely. "Christ loves each of us with the same love He has for the whole world"<sup>18</sup> as each of us is unique<sup>19</sup> before God and more precious than all the galaxies because it is man who was made in the image of God and was given the possibility to unite with Him and possess through grace what He has by nature. Man is the connection between the world and God as "human nature contains an element akin to God."<sup>20</sup> The ultimate purpose of the redeeming work of Christ is the joy of man, accomplished and achieved through the Resurrection of the Saviour from the dead.

Through His Resurrection from the dead, human nature received the grace of Christ and we were given the possibility to partake of eternal life, through God's grace. The Fathers of the Church do not talk about the death of Christ without mentioning the Lord's Resurrection. Saint John Damascene underlines the fact that, even though they are distinct and distant moments, the death and resurrection of the Saviour are, in fact, a unity. Although His human body is dead, He is a life giver and the source of incorruptibility, as He overcomes the laws of the corruptible nature.<sup>21</sup> Through His resurrection, the Saviour "renewed and deified the human nature that was strengthened and restored through the sacrifice on the cross. The death on the cross is closely connected to the Resurrection and to the Incarnation and they are both accomplished in and through Resurrection."<sup>22</sup>

Christ made His love manifest to us not only by creating us and the world out of nothing, through His Incarnation, passion and death on the Cross, but also through the Resurrection, the Ascension and by sending the Holy Spirit and through His grace that is apparent in everything we see around us. "And I remember – says St. John Chrysostom – that man had so deeply sunk into the depths of wickedness that he could not go any deeper

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<sup>17</sup> Origen, *Contra Iulium Celsus*, Book VIII, Chapter LXIV, translated by Rev. Fr. Professor T. Bodogae, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 9, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1984, p. 558.

<sup>18</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Galatas*, II, 8, in *P.G.* LXI, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1862, col. 647.

<sup>19</sup> We are unique, each and every one of us, created by the hand of God for one reason: because this was His will and He has loved us. We are not the result or the effect of chance or of an accident – *author's note*.

<sup>20</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio catechetica magna*, VI, in *P.G.* XLV, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1863, col. 25D.

<sup>21</sup> St. John Damascene, *Ode VII*, 1, in *P.G.* XCVI, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1864, col. 841C.

<sup>22</sup> Ph.D. Sava Gheorghe, „Moartea și Învierea lui Hristos, temeieri ale dreptei credințe“, in *Ortodoxia*, XV (1988), No. 2, p. 110.

and that he was saved by Jesus Christ and taken to a place that would not allow him to go any higher."<sup>23</sup>

Mentioning the Ascension of the Lord Jesus into heaven, St. Cyril of Alexandria proposes a series of very profound theological interpretations. Thus, first<sup>24</sup>, he highlights the fact that Christ, after destroying the domination of death, conquering the power of sin, giving us the strength to trample down serpents and vipers and all the power of evil. He did not consider it to be instrumental and beneficial to stay here, on earth, in the form of humility and of self-denial – a form that He took fruitfully in His love for us – but He had to return to His glory, as all the divine economy intended for us was accomplished, and to ascend into heaven and return to the equality of His relationship with God the Father in the body He had taken for us. He did not consider the Incarnation as a separation from His divine nature, which He had as an inseparable characteristic, and He descended to our lack of glory. He revealed Himself as God over the Powers of heaven, of those who were standing at the gates of heaven and who were commanded to receive Him as Lord of hosts, even if He ascended with His body.<sup>25</sup> Ascending into heaven, He did not enter the Holy of Holies made by hands, but heaven itself, beyond the dwellings of angels, to stand in front of God on our behalf, "as the face of man, loved to the highest degree, in Him."<sup>26</sup> Christ did not ascend into heaven to stand Himself in front of God the Father, as He has always been and will be within the Father and in the eyes of the Father Who begat Him and the Father will always be with Him. But, "the Word who has not been previously incarnated" ascended into heaven to appear, Himself, in front of the Father in an exceptional and wonderful form, having a human face and appearance. He did this for us and to our benefit, the Son being there as well as a man who could hear with His ears: "Sit thou on My right hand" (Ps. 109:1) and who could share with humankind the glory of His filiation. The Son, standing in front of the Father with a human appearance, "makes manifest His filial relation with the Father through His human body as well. Thus, He ascends with His human nature to the height of His filial love for the Father. This adds worthiness to the human nature! The Father is delighted at and enjoys seeing the face of man as He takes pleasure in seeing the face of His Son."<sup>27</sup> He came as a man in front of the Father so that He could "bring us back in front of the Father after we fell for our disobedience. He

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<sup>23</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homiliae XXXIV in Epistulam ad Hebraeos*, 5, 1, in *P.G.* LXIII, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1862, col. 46-47.

<sup>24</sup> St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan*, Book IX, Introduction, translation and notes by Rev. Fr. Professor Dumitru Stăniloae, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 41, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 2000, p. 835.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, Book X, chapter I, p. 910-911.

<sup>26</sup> Rev. Fr. Professor Dumitru Stăniloae, explanatory note, no. 1583, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 41, ed. cit., p. 835.

<sup>27</sup> Idem, explanatory note, no. 1585, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 41, ed. cit., p. 835.

wanted, as the Son, for us to be called and considered sons and children of God for Him."<sup>28</sup>

Blessed Augustine's commentary on our Lord's Ascension highlights points of view that are worthy to be considered.

And He vanished from our sight so that we could return to our heart and look for Him and find Him as He departed and 'here is Christ' (Mt. 24:23). He did not want to stay any more with us and yet He did not abandon us. He returned to the place from which He had not departed, as the world was made through Him and He was in this world and He came to this world to deliver sinners (Jn. 6:33).<sup>29</sup>

From the same perspective, the church writer (†524), known in history as the last Greek philosopher, although he wrote in Latin, concludes: "(Christ) ascended into heaven from where, as He is the Son of God, He had never departed and He took man, who was not allowed by the devil to ascend, with Him into heaven."<sup>30</sup> In his turn, Nicolaus Cusanus (†1464) aims at convincing us that Christ's Ascension places Him in the same proximity with all creatures in all places and times and makes Him the First-fruits of any resurrection and ascension in the world.<sup>31</sup> According to the Orthodox doctrine of God's love for man, the preparation of man for God's grace, the deification of man and of all of humankind through grace, born with the sin of our protoparents, "would not have become apparent in all their splendour unless man had been raised and ascended together with Jesus Christ, the human and divine hypostasis, on His right hand, a human being among us, the Mother of God and our Mother. 'For you did not go to the threshold of heaven as Elijah, but you went to the throne of our Lord.'"<sup>32</sup>

Even though He ascended into heaven, the work of Christ in the world continues uninterrupted. Thus, we can realize without difficulty that the earth, water, fire, whose nature does not have any rational explanation, could not exist of themselves. Those who have a different opinion might be asked this question: how could they have been organized and existed under the form they exist? Or, as Eusebius of Caesarea so admirably states:

<sup>28</sup> St. Cyril of Alexandria, *op. cit.*, p. 835.

<sup>29</sup> Blessed Augustine, *Confessiones - Mărturisiri*, Book IV, XII, (19), translation and indices by Professor Nicolae Barbu, D. Sc., in coll. *PSB*, vol. 64, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1985, p. 110.

<sup>30</sup> Boethius, *Articole teologice*, I, 4, translation, notes and commentaries by Professor David Popescu, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 72, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1992, p. 32.

<sup>31</sup> *Docta ignorantia*, Petzolt I, 1949, p. 107 *apud* Olivier Clément, *Introducere*, in Marko Ivan Rupnik, *Cuvinte despre om. Persoana – ființă a Paștelui*, translation by Maria-Cornelia Oros, Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 1997, p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> St. John Damascene *apud* Professor D. Stăniloae, „Maica Domnului ca mijlocitoare“, in *Ortodoxia*, 1952, no. 4, p. 127.

“What could have differentiated the elements or, on the contrary, the attraction and the union of opposites? Who made and commanded the heaviest of the elements to be carried by water? Who reversed the characteristics of water (that, as we know, flows downward) and carried it upward, in the clouds? Who forced the flame of fire to spread through the fibers of the wood and to mix with elements that are so contrary to its nature? Who added to the coolness of fresh air a certain thermal characteristic that brings to an end the conflict between opposite properties under the form of leniency? Who endowed the human race with the possibility to multiply thus prolonging their existence until eternity of the life without death? Who made man and woman and made them complement each other in an absolute harmony and who allowed all living beings to pass on life from one generation to another? Who turns the fluidity of man’s semen – which is just an ephemeral and insensitive secretion – into something that can give life? Who will ceaselessly work every day all these and many other wonders of wonders beyond our capacity to marvel? Who is That makes possible, every day and every second, through His unseen and intangible power, all these births and deaths?

Well, the source of all these things can be found in the Word of God, Who works in such an incomprehensible manner.<sup>33</sup>

When contemplating the entire creation or meditating on the stupendous works of God in it, we can only marvel at them. The one who will not marvel at God and His works, he or she does not know God. This is the essence of theology: a continuous marvelling at God and His gifts embedded in His creation. Our words cannot convey nor our feelings and thoughts perceive the wonderful work of God in the world. Saint John Cassian, speaking about the complete change, in and through Christ, of sinful men, says that the insatiability of their stomachs and the appetite of their mouths for costly things and their burning desires, which before that moment they used to consider natural and inextinguishable, were repressed and vanished to such an extent that they no longer felt compelled by any bodily unquietness:

“Is there anyone who will not tremble when realising the power of God, when seeing that men who were once mischievous and wicked, who would be beside themselves with rage even when their subjects would address themselves to them with flattering words, have improved to such an extent that they will not be filled with anger when being injured, but, on the contrary, they will become filled with joy and contently receive any office, or is there anyone who will not become filled with wonder when seeing God’s works and who will not exclaim from the depth of their souls: ‘I know that the Lord is great’ when he or she finds out that he or she has changed from a greedy person into a generous one, from a big spender into a thrifty person, from a haughty person into a humble one, from a fastidious man and luxury lover into a simple and modest person, willingly enjoying poverty and being in need?

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<sup>33</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Viața lui Constantin cel Mare*, Lecture on the Holy Sepulchre, 11.13.-11.14., translation and notes by Radu Alexandrescu, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 14, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1991, p. 221.

(...) What other wonder may be greater than the situation when, in a very short time, the greedy publicans became apostles, the blood-thirsty persecutors became very diligent preachers of the Gospel who made known and shed their blood for the faith they had persecuted? These are the works of God and the Son acknowledges that He fulfils them together with the Father when He says: 'My Father worketh hitherto and I work' (Jn. 5:17).<sup>34</sup>

As far as men are concerned, we received both life on earth and eternal life from Christ the Saviour, *the Word of life*. Jesus Christ is the life of the world (Jn. 1:14). This truth is strengthened by the Saviour Himself when He says: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn. 14:6). "For life was manifested and we have seen it and bear witness and shew unto you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested unto us" (1 Jn. 1:1f). Saint Gregory of Nyssa says: "Not living in You is not living at all."<sup>35</sup> Although we cease to exist physically, Christ will never leave from us as He says: "I am Resurrection and life; he that believes in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (Jn. 11:25). Christ is for us "the way, the gate, the key and the kingdom. He is the way because He guides us; the key because He opens and opens Himself to those who are worthy of divine things; the gate because He leads us in; the kingdom because He is inherited and He is shared and partaken in by the entirety of humankind."<sup>36</sup>

When he speaks about our Saviour as of our Physician and Healer, St. Cyril of Jerusalem gives us this advice: "Let everyone hear Jesus (...) Let us flee to the Lord who forgives our trespasses! If we are ill, He will deliver us from illness; if our souls suffer, let us follow the Physician of souls; if we are hungry, let us receive the Bread; if we have died, let us receive the Resurrection; if we have grown old in ignorance, let us beg wisdom from the Wisdom."<sup>37</sup> Not only that Christ receives and answers our prayers and brings to us from God the answer of goodness, but He will also pray for us and within us. As Blessed Augustine says: „He (Christ) will intercede for us as

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<sup>34</sup> St. John Cassian, *Convorbiri duhovnicești...*, part II, The second talk with father Chaeremon, chapter XII, 2-7, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 57, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, p. 525-526.

<sup>35</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *La titlurile Psalmilor*, part I, chapter VII, translation and notes by Rev. Fr. professor Teodor Bodogae, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 30, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, p. 151.

<sup>36</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor, *Capete gnostice*, the 2<sup>nd</sup> hundred, chapter 69, translation, introduction and notes by Rev. Fr. Professor Dumitru Stăniloae, Ph. D, in coll. *Filocalia sau culegere din scrierile Sfinților Părinți care arată cum se poate omul curăți, lumina și desăvârși*, vol. II, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 190.

<sup>37</sup> St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Omilie la slăbănogul de la scăldătoarea Vitezda*, 19, in *Cateheze*, translation from Greek and notes by Rev. Fr. Professor Dumitru Fecioru, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003, p. 378.

our Priest; He will pray for us as He is our Head; we pray to Him as He is our Lord."<sup>38</sup>

After His Ascension into Heaven, the Lord Christ does not abandon us, but He gives Himself entirely to each of us during the Divine Liturgy. In our turn, we bring to the Holy Altar what we have that is most precious – our own life, represented and symbolised through the gifts of bread and wine. Christ will help us from within. The love of the Son of God for mankind is made manifest not only through His Sacrifice on the Cross, but also through the Sacrifice that is mysteriously continued in the Holy Eucharist through which we are in union with God. Thus, as only He knows, He enters man through the most intimate and complete union, for a reciprocal habitation, of Christ in man and of man in Christ. Saint John Chrysostom launches under this aspect a rhetorical question:

“Is there any other shepherd who feed his sheep with his own limbs? But, why do I say a shepherd? There are frequently mothers who, after giving birth, send out their newly born children to nurses. But Christ could not do this, rather He Himself feeds us with His blood and in every possible way He brings us in communion with Him. He will mingle and unite with each of the faithful through the Holy Mysteries. He nourishes by Himself those whom He begot without trusting this to another.”<sup>39</sup>

The Saviour wants to abide and stay in us, to be inside us. He wants to enter and participate within our being, in the Holy Spirit, through the Holy Eucharist. In this regard, we read in the Holy Scripture that after His Resurrection from the dead, on the road to Emmaus, He appears to two disciples – Luke and Cleopas (Lk. 24:13ff). They did not know Him, despite the fact that the Good Saviour expounded unto them the things in the Scripture about which they were talking concerning Him. When He ‘made as though’ He was to continue on the road to Emmaus, the two disciples besought Him earnestly to abide with them. When they sat at the table He blessed the bread, broke it (only the master of a Jewish house would do that) and He gave to them. Then “their eyes were opened“ and they knew Him, but, at that very moment He vanished from their sight. He had mysteriously entered the bread He had blessed that was in front of them. Christ did not want to remain a reality situated outside man, but He wanted to enter man, to enter his mind and heart and all his being, through the Holy Spirit, in a mysterious and unseen way, yet, a very real one, thus becoming the Life of his life.

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<sup>38</sup> Blessed Augustine, *Ennaratio in Psalmum 81*, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina (P.L.) XXXVII*, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, col. 1081.

<sup>39</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Commentarium in S. Matthaeum Evangelistam*, LXXXII, 5, in *P.G. LVIII*, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1862, col. 744.

**”Your Lord is more affectionate than a father and more caring than a mother“**

The love based relationship between man and God is compared in the Holy Scripture with more types of relationships that we encounter in our everyday life. When Christ the Saviour teaches His disciples how to pray, He shows them that God should be considered ‘our Father’: ”After this manner therefore pray ye...” (Mt. 6:9; Lk. 11:9ff). Likewise, God compares His love with a mother’s love: ”Will a woman forget her child, so as not to have compassion upon the offspring of her womb? But if a woman should ever forget these, yet I will not forget thee“ (Is. 49:15). Saint John Chrysostom says:

“Your Lord is more affectionate than a father and more caring than a mother, Who loves more than a groom loves his bride, Who considers that His rest is your salvation and Who rejoices more than you over deliverance from perils and death... and Who will make manifest every kind of love: parents’ love for their offspring, a mother’s love for the offspring of her womb, a farmer’s love for his vineyard, a builder’s love for his trade, a groom’s love for his bride, a young man’s love for a young woman, that love that will take away from you all the afflictions as far as the sunrise is from the sunset, as high as the sky is from the earth – as I have showed – or, better said, not only all these, but even more that these, as I have showed by approaching this topic and by advising you not to focus exclusively on images, but to go beyond them through rational thought. As God’s providence is beyond understanding, His care for us is infinite, His goodness is unspeakable and His love for people is beyond our senses and understanding.”<sup>40</sup>

Only our God can love us with a loyal and unalterable love, no matter the circumstances. The relationship based on love and sacrifice between Christ and His Church is the model when it comes to the way husbands should love their wives: ”Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it.“ (Eph. 5:25). How impressive it is to see that the Almighty God, the Creator of heaven and of the earth, loves His creatures so much!

One of the most profound and self-sacrificial loves in the world is, certainly, maternal love. There are many things that might intervene between a husband and his wife thus separating them; a father might turn his back on his child; brothers and sisters might alienate from one another and might even become hostile to one another; but a mother’s love will last forever. Regardless of the circumstances or situation, good or bad, a mother will love her child, she always hopes that he or she will repent and will return to the right path. She will not believe and does not want to believe that her beloved

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<sup>40</sup> Idem, *Scrisori din exil*, VIII, 6-9, translation by Ioan I Ică jr., Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 2003, p. 288-289.



child is lost. There is nothing that could touch a mother's love, which is stronger than death. When the little baby is ill, she would voluntarily take the illness on herself – if only she could – from her beloved child! Nevertheless, maternal love in itself pales in comparison with the height and the profoundness of God's love.

Making an effort to understand this divine thirst for love, we cannot come close to the limits of comprehension. Of all the metaphors we use when talking about God, the most frequently used word is *Father* and we believe and experience that our relationship with God is similar with that between a child and his or her father.<sup>41</sup> Yet, if this is the case, if we might dare to say this without speaking blasphemy, those of us who are fathers could share the same perspective on the paternal relationship from the father's point of view. My relationship with my children is, from certain perspectives, similar to the relationship between God and His creatures. Before anything else, children owe their life and everything they possess to God and to us, their parents. Furthermore, I love my children from an ontological impulse that is innate to my human nature and this does not depend on their excellence. Furthermore, is there anything that they can offer me in return? They cannot give me material goods. And, yet, they can give me something – in fact, the only thing I want from them – their affection or their love that is expressed through good deeds, actions and words. My children, being very young, cannot offer me gifts at Christmas, but I would be extremely disappointed if they did not offer me a gift, their love, the only thing I could not buy, no matter how much money I have. And this present from them is, in fact, the expression of their love. Even the youngest child will intuitively admit that, although he or she depends on his or her parents for everything he or she has, his or her parents are *dependent on* him or her for the only thing without which, regardless of how *omnipotent* they might seem, their life would be empty and deserted, yet, as they are surrounded by their child's love, no matter what disaster might occur, their life is fulfilled. A parent does not need this love as a *sine qua non* condition for his or her love, but he or she will strive toward it with a spiritual thirst.

Perhaps, to a certain extent, our relationship with God is similar. The nature of love is characterized by its unconditional and spontaneous dissemination, without expecting anything in return; without asking for something in return and yet, it needs something in return. After all (is it not like this?), this is the very nature of love, to expect love from the one we love. To be loved, not to be appreciated. The nature of love does not consist in being recognized and admitted or wanted as a source of love, in a superior sense of the word. It consists in being loved in an identical way, with the same type of love and, as a consequence, as an equal. As between me and my

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<sup>41</sup> This analogy is encountered at George Bosworth Burch, in his study *The Christian Philosophy of Love*, published in 'The Review of Metaphysics', Vol. 3, No. 4, 1950, p. 426.

child there is a relationship based on love, even if he was born to me and he takes the source of his love from my love for him, and we mutually support one another, doing together what we could not do separately, I fulfil my nature through love – its most inspiring activity – and, in a certain ineffable way, I fulfill his nature. This does not mean that, in case love is not reciprocated, it will be prevented from manifesting itself. It will not cease to exist because this is its nature, as I have already mentioned, to exist as an attitude of affection, to share and to sacrifice unselfishly.

Thus, in various and numerous manners:

“Through inscrutable means and paths, God brings about salvation to humankind. He prompts those who will and thirst for salvation to be more fervent and there are others whom He compels even if they are not willing. He will either help us fulfil our wishes He considers beneficial or He instils in us the beginnings of holy intentions, endowing us with the inspiration for good deeds and perseverance in them. For this reason, when we pray we call the Lord not only our protector and Saviour, but also our strength and help. Through the fact that He will call us first and, without us knowing it, we are brought nearer to salvation, He is our protector and saviour and through the fact that He will support us in our endeavours and He will rise and strengthen us when we ask for His help, He is our refuge and strength. Thinking of this great abundance of God’s mercy and seeing that he was surrounded by God’s love as if he stood in the centre of a sea whose bottom and shore could not be seen, the apostle will exclaim: ‘O, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord’ (Rom. 11:33f). Anyone who would dare to believe that he or she could know with a human mind the depth of this unsearchable profundity will attempt to void the admiration of this quest that distressed that great teacher of the Gentiles. For the man who thinks he or she might know with the mind or express through words all the love with which God works the salvation of man will, undoubtedly and rejecting the truth in the words of the apostle, assert, with iniquitous boldness, that the judgments of the Lord could be searched and known and that His ways could be found out. With the intention to convey through a human sentiment the care and the love God has for us with unwearable devoutness and because he does not find in the world such love with which he could compare it appropriately, the apostle compared God’s love with a devout mother’s love. Using this example, because there is nothing more precious (...) he will say: ‘Will a woman forget her child, so as not to have compassion upon the offspring of her womb?’ As this comparison is not satisfactory from his point of view, however, he continues by adding: ‘But if a woman should even forget these, yet, I will not forget thee.’ (Isaiah 49:15)<sup>42</sup>

God loves us so much that His love surpasses even our parents’ love; and this love is as strong and profound as it is the triumph of good over evil. ”If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how

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<sup>42</sup> St. John Cassian, *Convorbiri duhovnicești...*, Part II, chapter XVII, p. 549.

much more shall your Father Who is in heaven“ (Mt. 7:11). The Lord did not utter this ”to despise human nature, nor to punish man, but, in comparison to His goodness He calls His wrath parental love. So great is His love for man.“<sup>43</sup> Although we say we love God, His love for us surpasses our love for Him. Venerable Old Man Panais (Hagiionas) from Greece said about this: ”No matter how intensely our children might want to love us, we love them more. Parents will always love more. And God is our Father. He loves us more.“<sup>44</sup>

### **God’s ultimate purpose is man’s benefit**

Because God has loved us first with an unspeakable ardour, love is an essential divine attribute, offered to man as a gift out of mercy and affection, so that man should be in union with God and participate in the triune communication. This feeling, that is beyond human nature, rightly belongs to God; and, as God is eternal, love is eternal in its course; and, as God is infinite, love is unbounded and it extends beyond this life and it becomes perfected in eternity. Although God does not need anything that belongs to us, God will not cease to love us, He descends from the heavenly heights and comes to search for us, on Earth. God does not spare any means to communicate with us in accessible terms borrowed from our human language as He does when He says: ”For I am a jealous God“ (Ex. 20:5). He will do this to reveal Himself and to make us understand the fervour of His love. Everything that God has done and made is a reason to love Him.<sup>45</sup> When we say that God has always loved us, we understand why He has loved us even before we were created. For this reason, before the beginning of time, He planned to create the earth with all His riches and splendours over which man would be master and which he would enjoy. When man himself strives to please God:

“His love for us will go beyond any limit. In fact, the special place man holds in the world is not the result of man’s worthiness before God, but of the unbounded divine love. God Himself has shown humility not only through the Incarnation of His son, but even since the creation of man when He gave love as a common connection, as a shared characteristic of both Him and man. As God is love and man was made in the image of God, this means that love is a reflection of God’s

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<sup>43</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Omiliile la Matei*, homily XXIII, IV, translation, introduction and indices by Rev. Fr. D. Fecioru, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 23, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1994, p. 299.

<sup>44</sup> Klitos Ioannidis, *Patericul secolului XX*, translation by Daniela Filioreanu, Cartea Ortodoxă Publishing House, Galați, s. a., p. 341.

<sup>45</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homélie sur l'épître aux Romains*, vol. XVI, p. 209 *apud* Rev. Fr. Teodor Damian, „Virtutea dragostei la Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur“, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, XCVII (1979), No. 5-6, p. 676.

image in man and this is the beginning of the divine kenosis that will never end in this stage.”<sup>46</sup>

As a matter of fact, there are three expressions of love: bodily beauty, the greatness of benefaction and love that is expressed. Each of these could bring about inside us this wonderful feeling; even if we have not been provided with a benefit from a person, it is enough to know that he or she loves us with an unaltering love which leads to the establishing of a spiritual attachment to that person and to an attitude of love as for a benefactor.

“In God there are these three reasons to such an extent that no words can convey their intensity and the beauty of this most-blessed nature of God, which cannot be surpassed by anything, is beyond speech or thought... . Should we consider and remember the beneficence shed upon us and His love for us, we shall become aware of our duty to be grateful and thankful that represents the source of virtuous practices.”<sup>47</sup>

Even if love is not based on *do ut des*, we will wonder, thankfully, if there is any kind of love that we might offer as a response to the profound love of God for us. Even though we would die repeatedly while fulfilling His commandments and keeping His teachings unaltered, our love would still not rise to the height of God’s love. Although we worship God during religious services, our worship represents a form of gratitude and a necessity, while God’s beneficence is an act of kindness that confirms the greatness of His goodness.<sup>48</sup>

Our Lord, Who is quintessentially love, will always work, through all His actions, toward man’s benefit and He loves him more than man could love himself and His gifts always exceed man’s thoughts and expectations.

Christ the Lord applies all means that could be used to watch over, to call and to bring men to salvation. There is nothing that God values more than the salvation of man’s soul. This is also put forth by Paul the Apostle who says: “Who will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). And once more, God Himself states this through the intermediary of one of the great prophets of the Old Testament, Ezekiel: “Shall I at all desire death of the sinner as I desire that he should turn from his evil way and live” (Ez. 18:23). This was the purpose of bringing into existence everything that exists. He made man not to lead him to perdition, nor to send him into hell, but to lead him to salvation, to save him from deceit and to endow him with the joy in the kingdom. He prepared this kingdom for men before the creation of the world as He Himself says: “Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of

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<sup>46</sup> Rev. Fr. Teodor Damian, *op. cit.*, p. 676-677.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 678.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

the world“ (Mt. 25:34). Once more, from this text as well, we can understand how long has God loved men. So that we could become worthy of what He has promised, God the Lord ”exerts Himself, strives, applies all His actions to this purpose.“<sup>49</sup>

Saint Gregory of Nyssa suggests that, from his perspective, we intend the salvation of our souls as nourishment for Christ. This is what the One Who takes delight in our life says: ”My will is to do the will of My Father” (Jn. 4:34) ... and this denotes the purpose of God’s will, “Who will have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). Thus, this is the nourishment prepared for Him: us to be saved.“<sup>50</sup> Reverend Fr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae who commented on this text writes that our salvation is nourishment for Christ Who takes delight in it, Who is spiritually nurtured and this brings Him delight because He loves us. This is comparable to the spiritual nourishment that a mother gets from her children’s well-being and happiness. He continues by adding: ”The Word of God Incarnate rejoices in our salvation although He has had all delight in Himself and He was not driven by an inner need to create and to redeem us. However, when He decided to take human flesh, His humanity became even more blessed through the happiness and bliss of His brothers.“<sup>51</sup>

When St. Maximus the Confessor describes, for example, the purpose of the creation of the world, he does this, of course, aiming at awakening in our souls the trembling that will overcome passions and cultivate a fervent love for God, a love that brings men to a complete union with the Creator even in this life:

“God, Who is superabundant in His perfection, did not bring into existence the things He created because He lacked anything, but to bring delight to them, to allow them to partake in Him in proportion to their qualities and to rejoice in His creation when seeing them rejoicing and taking delight and being satiated without satiety by the One in Whom they cannot partake enough.”<sup>52</sup>

We do not know what is beneficial for us as He knows, we are not as concerned with doing what is appropriate for our own good as He is concerned with our salvation, we do not want to cleanse ourselves of our sins

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<sup>49</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Omilii la Facere*, homily LV, IV, translation, introduction, indices and notes by Rev. Fr. D. Fecioru, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 22, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1989, p. 219.

<sup>50</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Tălcuire amănunțită la Cântarea Cântărilor*, homily X, translation by Rev. Fr. Professor D. Stăniloae, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 29, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1982, p. 250-251.

<sup>51</sup> Rev. Fr. Professor Dumitru Stăniloae, Ph. D., explanatory note, no. 210, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 29, ed. cit., p. 251.

<sup>52</sup> St. Maximus the Confessor, *Capete despre dragoste*, the third hundred, chapter 46, translation, introduction and notes by Rev. Fr. Professor Doctor Dumitru Stăniloae, in *Filocalia ...*, vol. II, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 111.

to the extent "God endeavours to expiate our sins and to bring us to salvation."<sup>53</sup> Not only does our Good Saviour directs us to the heavenly goodness, but He also protects us and "leads us in such a way, even without us being aware of this, to salvation."<sup>54</sup> Christ "will bring to light things that cause harm, He will talk about the causes of passion, He will cut the roots of thriftless desires, He will reveal to us what we should avoid and He offers to the sick the remedies for salvation. This is the greatest and the most majestic of all God's works: the salvation of humankind."<sup>55</sup> He will do everything to raise man ever higher even for the least significant deeds and He will watch over man, aiming at finding reasons and occasions to deliver him from wickedness.<sup>56</sup>

There is not much that we do for God while He does so much for us. "How He is driven by love and generosity when He gives us everything! Is there anything that He could not do?"<sup>57</sup> As Rev. Fr. Professor Dumitru Stăniloae<sup>58</sup> asserted: for us, Christ is present through the Holy Eucharist and the Holy Mysteries, through the priests' blessings, He is present with His uncreated energies through all prayers. As an Haghiorite father underlined, if we knew God's love, we would be in Heaven. "This was true for Father Porphyrius. Once he said these words that are worthy of remembrance: "If God decided that I should be sent to hell, I would go there gladly and willingly, because God knows what is best for me." (this is what Panagiotis Sotiris – a journalist and writer – wrote).<sup>59</sup> Of course, God will not allow the afflictions of hell to torment the faithful and the righteous; this witty remark originates in the profound humility that filled the Haghiorite father who uttered is, as we think it is the case too in the situation of the man who said: "If God condemned me to hell, I shall speak there as well about His love." The fathers will emphasize and bring to light the fact that the intrinsic and unspeakable love of God for us will compel each of us to respond with love to the Lord's love. The closer man gets to God and the more profound he internalizes even in this world the Kingdom of God and the multitude of the heavenly goodness, the more obvious to him his smallness and sinfulness that make him unworthy of such gifts becomes.

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<sup>53</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Omiliile la Facere ...*, homily XXIV, VIII, p. 300.

<sup>54</sup> St. John Cassian, *Convorbiri duhovnicești ...*, Part I, Chapter VIII, 2, p. 419.

<sup>55</sup> Clement of Alexandria *Pedagogul*, book I, chapter XII, 100.1., translation, introduction, notes and indices by Rev. Fr. D. Fecioru, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 4, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1982, p. 224.

<sup>56</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Omiliile la Matei ...*, homily sIII, IV, p. 42.

<sup>57</sup> Pious Paisius the Aghiorite, *Cuvinte duhovnicești. Viața de familie*, translation from Greek by hieroschemamonk Ștefan Nuțescu, Evanghelismos Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003, p. 72.

<sup>58</sup> Rev. Fr. Stăniloae, in *7 dimineți cu părintele Stăniloae*, interviews taken by Sorin Dumitrescu, Anastasia Publishing House, Bucharest, s.a., p. 80.

<sup>59</sup> Klitos Ioannidis, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

So that we could live in love, the Creator does not issue despotic commands, but He will advise us and call us to love. "How irresistible is God's love for men! He does not lecture us like a teacher in front of his students, nor does He admonish like a master when talking to his domestics, but He will advise us as a good-hearted father."<sup>60</sup> Blessed Augustine, a great encyclopedic personality, gifted with a keen intelligence for the most abstract matters and also with a heart filled with goodness, wrote these wise words that are for us today the core of the Christian teaching: „Dilige (ama) et fac quod vis“<sup>61</sup> which means "Love and do what you will", because if someone loves God and his neighbours, he may not make mistakes. God does not prohibit, He will not impel us to choose what is good, but He would rather recommend us life-giving directions. "God, the most abundant in goodness, will not urge us, because being impelled we might disobey and the more severe the punishment is."<sup>62</sup> Each of the actions carried into effect by the Lord of creation is "a reason and premise for loving men"<sup>63</sup> and every kind of chastening is full of goodness as He is quick to help us and slow to anger. Yet, the more the sinner will suffer unless he is remorseful and punished or if his deeds remain overlooked by God, because there are more pains that gather through sinking in sins and departing from God – the Spring of Life, of good and rejoicing. However, He will not intervene brutally in the liberty of persons who may choose between living separated from God or in communion with Him. Thus, His love always maintains its sacrificial status. Love shall not be imposed by force. "Eventually, all love is crucified" said Pavel Evdokimov.<sup>64</sup> Yet, man's soul cannot rest until he feels Christ's love in him and until he reciprocates His love, because the human soul is thirsty for love and this thirst may be quenched only through ascending to Christ Who will satisfy it by filling it once again with the desire of our heart for His love. For this reason the Holy Spirit was sent into the world, to endow us with the water of the spiritual renewal, so that we "drinking from the Spirit, could receive and love Christ"<sup>65</sup> and through Christ, the Father. Paraphrasing St. Nicholas Cabasilas, we might say that if the eye was created to look for light and enjoy it, the ear for sounds and all the other things created for their

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<sup>60</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Cuvânt de îndemn către eleni (Protrepticul)*, chapter IX, 82.2., translation, introductions, notes and indices by Rev. Fr. D. Fecioru, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 4, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1982, p. 136.

<sup>61</sup> Blessed Augustine, *In epistolam Ioannis*, VII, 8, in *P.L.* XXXV, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, col. 2033.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Damascene, *Învățăturii duhovnicești*, in coll. *Filocalia ...*, vol. V, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001, p. 38.

<sup>63</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Omilii la Facere ...*, homily XVIII, III, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 21, ed. cit., p. 212.

<sup>64</sup> Paul Evdokimov *apud* Olivier Clément, *Introducere*, in Marko Ivan Rupnik, *Cuvinte despre om...*, p. 18.

<sup>65</sup> St. Athanasius the Great, *Epistolae ad Serapionem*, in *P.G.* XXVI, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1857, col. 576.

purpose, then the desire of the soul will be fulfilled only when it finds God because the soul is *meant* to find its peace only in Christ, because He alone is both the Good and the Truth and everything that could make man rejoice.<sup>66</sup>

The purpose and the meaning of the Christian's life is to ground one's life in Christ and His Gospel, so that there should be no distance between him and Christ, otherwise man departs from the Spring of Life, of the good and of joy. "For, behold, they that remove themselves far from Thee shall perish: Thou hast destroyed every one that goes a-whoring from Thee" (Ps. 72:26). As the grapevine draws its sap from the trunk, the construction is stable because it rests on its foundation and in the event there is a gap, it will shatter and collapse as it does not have enough support to bear its weight. Thus, it is vital that we, the faithful, come and stay close to Him and, when cleaving to Him, keep His commandments as He tells us: "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in Me" (Jn 15:10).

"He is the head and we are the body; should there be any separation between the head and the body? He is the foundation and we are the construction; He is the trunk and we are the branches of the grapevine; He is the bridegroom and we are the bride; He is the shepherd and we are the sheep; He is the way and we are those who walk in it; again, we are the church and He dwells in it; He is the First Begotten and we are His brothers; He is the heir and He shares His inheritance with us; He is the life and we live it; He is the resurrection and we are those who have risen; He is the light and we are enlightened. All these above demonstrate unity and there is no empty space between them, no matter how insignificant it might be. For if even the smallest part is taken apart, in time, the biggest will come apart. The body, if it receives a small cut or if a small part is taken apart from it, it will perish; likewise, the building will collapse if even a narrow crack appears in its walls, the grapevine will become useless if its root is cut off a little. What we consider to be of almost no importance, is not small at all, but it is almost the entirety."<sup>67</sup>

For these reasons, Christ the Lord gave us the commandments to love God 'with all' our heart, 'with all' our soul, 'with all' our mind and 'with all' our conviction, lest a part of our heart or soul be deprived of the love for God, because the evil attacks that very point intending to control the entire heart of man. This is just as enemies sneak into a fortress whose surrounding wall has just a small fissure or breach and they take it over.

God is so exceptionally good that He expects no reward from us, but He would rather be loved by us for what He bestowed on us. However, man,

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<sup>66</sup> St. Nicholas Cabasilas, *Despre viața în Hristos*, an introductory study and translation from Greek by Rev. Fr. Professor Teodor Bodogae, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997, p. 92.

<sup>67</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Comentariile sau Tâlcuirea Epistolei întâi către Corinteni*, homily VIII, translation from Greek of Oxonia edition (1847) by Archimandrite Theodosie Athanasiu, Bucharest, 1908, Edition revised by Constantin Făgețean, Sofia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2007, p. 85-86.



in general, will succumb to the siren call of this secularized and sinful world, running in the paths of perdition and in the absence of authentic Christian living, unwilling to cleanse his soul from the alluvial moral impurity and to follow Christ's exhortations. Paradoxically and inexplicably, there are people who separate from God although His love for human kind is made more manifest.

"When I consider all these – writes St. Basil the Great – I become enveloped in fear and my soul is elevated, so that I must take heed not to, by ignoring reason or by labouring in vain, fall away from God's love and to bring shame upon Christ. For he who deceives us and exerts himself by all his cunning means to make us forget about our Benefactor through worldly delusions, tormenting us in order to ravish our souls and beset us, (he) will bring our disdain before God as a shameful thing and he will take pride in our disobedience and fall. He, who did not create us, who did not die for us, made us follow him in disobedience and to transgress God's commandments. This offence against God and this pride of the evil one are far worse than the torments in Geena; for (through these) we provide evil with ammunition for vanity and pride and we give him the occasion to raise against the One Who died for us and was resurrected and to Whom we owe the most, as it is written (Rom. 8:12). It is only this I may say about God's love. For the purpose, as I have mentioned above, was not to say everything as this is beyond man's capacity."<sup>68</sup>

A father who is held dear by the Romanians, Venerable Teofil Părăian, from Brâncoveanu Monastery – Sâmbăta de Sus, born blind, in a family of peasants in the village of Topârcea, the county of Sibiu, but having his soul enlightened by the light of love, of beauty and longing for God, during one of the conferences organized by the Romanian Orthodox Students' Association in Iași, in 2000, insisted on instilling into our souls the conviction that Christ will help us from inside. And, as Father Teofil said:

"My God is the God Who washes man's feet. Christ would rather continue His incarnation within us, the faithful. My God will become a part of man to help him wherever he is and, in particular, to help support and help him from within, outwardly. Dwelling within the souls of the faithful, He is more intrinsic and intimate with them than they are with themselves.

God was incarnate from love, to stay closer to man. Let our words be God's words, let our works be accomplished to praise God. My God is God the Father, He is God the Brother, He is God the Friend, He is the Benevolent God; my God is the God Who blesses those whom He makes worthy of His blessing. My God is the God Who brings blessedness. As the sun will inherently shine, God will inherently accomplish and bestow the good."

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<sup>68</sup> St. Basil the Great, *Regulile mari*, chapter II, question 2, answer III-IV, translation, introduction, indices and notes by Professor Iorgu D. Ivan, in coll. *PSB*, vol. 18, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 1989, p. 223-224.

I remember, from the same period of my academic studies, that, during a conference on spiritual topics organized by the same Christian students' association in Iași – which I have mentioned above – where the guest speaker was Rev. Fr. Professor Constantin Coman, the speaker put forth, under the form of a question that later proved to be a rhetorical one, an idea. Because the matter and the answer are particularly outstanding, I will quote them:

“What does God mean? He is a Person Who loves you so much. He is in love with you, He bestows everything on you, on one condition: turn to Him so that you can receive; the meaning of existence is to unite with the person whom you love; when you work, you do not want to waste time, you work for the person whom you love and it is the same with sacrificing... . One day, there was a little girl who asked her grandmother, who was teaching her to praise God: How is God? What is He, where is He?, etc. And her grandmother answered: I do not know what He is, I do not know where He is, but, God is like this: she embraced and hugged the little girl. So, He is inexpressible. Yet, God is present here, as I embrace you, God is here.”

Overwhelming!<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> L'expression est utilisée par Françoise Barbeau par rapport au monde compensatoire du Morois dans les textes français de la légende tristanienne ; voir *Les Romans de Tristan et Iseut: introduction à une lecture plurielle*, Paris, Larousse, 1972, p. 154 sq. .

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