

## **Your Grace Transforms the Universe, Part One**

*By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

The Bible says, “Your spirit renews the face of the earth” (Ps. 104:30). Into what does God transform the world? How does He transform it? What is the nature of this transformation? What is its purpose? These questions and others go to the core of Christian theology, which calls for the salvation of humanity along with the universe and everything in it.

In order to approach this matter from an Orthodox perspective, we must talk a bit about the creation and fall of man, because the concept of fallenness is the point of departure in the theology of transformation—that is, “transfiguration.”

To begin with, it must be noted that Orthodox theology prefers to use this term: “the transfiguration of the world.” This action is derived from the Transfiguration event, “the Transfiguration of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ on Mount Tabor.” The transformation of the world by the Spirit of God means the restoration of the world to the deifying grace of God—the restoration of the world to its original life, which was lost through the Fall, when it lost the divine grace. Restoration of God’s grace is the world’s transformation into the fullness of divine light, just as happened with Christ on Mount Tabor: “And He was transfigured before them, and His clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them” (Mark 9:2-3).

### **The Creation of Man**

“God created man in His own image and likeness.” The image is, in short, that something of God which is present in man. Man is called to develop this image until it reaches its divine likeness.

In the Fall, man lost this potential, as the divine image was distorted in him, and consequently the soul of man was darkened and was no longer able, not only to grow spiritually, but also to know God.

Man, according to the Bible, is the king and priest of Creation. Did not God entrust him with the task of naming the animals? Didn't He give him authority over what is in Creation, including the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea? As is often the case when a king is corrupt, corruption spreads throughout his kingdom. Thus,

Creation was corrupted by the corruption of man. Harmony has been lost, enmity has spread, and devastation has prevailed. This is in nature. As for man, his passions turned into the opposite of what God wanted.

A terrible schism occurred in man involving a schism within himself, a schism between him and others, and a schism between him and the natural world. God gave him freedom, but he refused it to other human beings. And whereas God gave him power to make the world and give it a new meaning—a new freshness again—he misused it to distort and destroy the world.

Let us take love, for example. Instead of man loving God, he loves himself. Selfishness and the sins and vices it generates have dominated him. Accordingly, man began to use nature and his fellow man for his own benefit. And you all know the countless evils man has caused, and still causes, in this regard.

### **Salvation in Christ**

When a person knows that a loved one has become unable to walk, he himself goes to him. This is what God did to humanity in Christ. Man is no longer able to turn to God, because of his fall, so God Himself came to him. This is what Christian theology has been repeating since the second century: “God became a man so that man might become a god.” The Fall made the goal of Creation unattainable, so God came to restore “His image that was lost from ancient times,” according to the description of a hymn in the Orthodox funeral service.

In Christ, the possibility of deification was restored again, and the way to the Kingdom was opened. Rather, the Kingdom has become a living reality, from now on, even if it is only “as in a mirror” (1 Corinthians 13:12).<sup>1</sup> The workshop for the reconstruction of the world, so to speak, has started and continues to operate since the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. And it will continue with Christians until the Last Day. Until then, the world will have a foretaste of the Heavenly Kingdom, hoping to achieve it fully when we meet God face to face, on the Last Day. Then heaven and earth will pass away, because a new heaven and a new earth will succeed them. Until that time, the Church seeks to make the earth and what is on it a divine kingdom as much as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> St. Paul used this expression because, at that time, mirrors were made from polished metals and were not so clear as today.

## **The Beginning of the Journey**

Orthodox theology teaches us that this journey must begin with the human being, not any human being but only an immaculate, purified, and holy person—those who seek to restore their passions to their original state, bypassing the effects of the Fall every day, until the Holy Spirit dwells in them, so that they shine with the light of God and radiate it upon the earth and upon everything on it.

In other words, the baptized believer begins to prepare himself, soul and body, to be fit for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. With this, he restores the divine image, reshapes it, develops it, and brings it to the divine ideal, achieving the purpose of his creation.

Therefore, Orthodox theology emphasizes the three degrees of holiness: “purification, illumination, and deification.” This emphasis stems from its postulation that the glory of this lost world can only be restored by the light of God. That is why its liturgy constantly and tirelessly emphasizes repentance. For there is no purification without repentance, and no enlightenment without purification. For how would God live in homes that are not suitable for Him?

So the way is to reveal the schism that has happened. In other words, the way is the restoration of unity and communion on the human level—within himself, with his neighbor, and with nature.

## **Our Salvation and Our Neighbor**

Will the world be transfigured while hatred is lurking in our souls? Of course not. For a step towards fellow humans is simultaneously a step towards God and oneself. “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or a sister is a liar. For whoever does not love his brother and sister, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20).

The circle of St. Dorotheos of Gaza (fourth century) is essential here. The person, represented by a point on the circumference of the circle, walks toward God, represented by the center. The closer each one’s path, symbolized by the radius in the circle, approaches God, the more the radii approach each other. Our salvation lies in our neighbors.

The neighbors are the test of our virtues and vices. In them we know the measure of anger or peace, hatred or forgiveness, selfishness or self-sacrifice. Our relationship with them is a reflection of our relationship with God. It is not in vain that Christ asked for love of neighbor as self-love in the second commandment, placing it directly after the first commandment, the love of God.

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