

Meditations on the Feast of the Transfiguration

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The Feast of the Transfiguration is the feast of glory. It is the feast of glorification, of man's glorification by his return to how he was in paradise, before the fall of Adam and Eve. Indeed, it is the return to the perfection of glory that they would have attained had they not fallen.

If man was created just to live and act for some number of years on earth, what is the meaning of his life? He was created for divine glory. He was created to put on this glory.

Seeking for glory is the deepest and most deeply-rooted need in man's heart. It is the need that is constantly attached to his nature. Even children long for glory (even if unknowingly), as when they want to stand out. Adults find in it a motive for excelling and for great deeds or, if they are wicked, a motive for evil deeds.

Man cannot be satisfied with his situation and accept it. He constantly longs for something better. Man is better than his situation, even if he doesn't know this. Within him is a beauty that he covers with ugliness. But he senses this beauty and feels it in special cases. He strives for it by seeking glory, but while he is far from God, he continues to long for it, no matter what glories he achieves.

There is glory, and then there is glory: the glory of the world and the glory of the kingdom, the glory of man and the glory of God, momentary glory and eternal glory, outward glory and inner glory, glory established upon the cross and glory established on the crucifixion of others, glory that comes through the cross and glory that rejects the cross. Do you know what kind of glory you desire?

The glory that God has promised us is to "partake in the inheritance of the saints" (Col. 1:12). It is the glory of holiness, which God has made possible for us through the cross. "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18), and "our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:17). Therefore, Moses and Elijah spoke with Him "of His exit which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31).

The word exit, in Greek exodos, indicates His death. Christ's death is intimately tied to the glory of the transfiguration because Christ is glorified in His death (cf. John 12:23). In the annual liturgical cycle, the Feast of the Transfiguration comes forty

days before the Feast of the Cross, demonstrating the connection that exists between Christ's glory and the cross. The word exodos reveals that Christ's passion is the realization of the Passover of the Old Testament and the true exodus from slavery to salvation.

The unveiling of this divine glory likewise confirms that Christ's imminent death is, not something forced on Him by outside powers, but rather a free offering of love, for no soldier would have been able to resist such a glory when Jesus was arrested, had Christ not remained silent (cf. Matt. 26:53). We chant in the kontakion for the feast, "Your disciples, insofar as they were able, beheld Your glory, so that when they should see You crucified, they would remember that Your suffering was voluntary."

The account of the event of the transfiguration is preceded by the Lord's speaking to His disciples about His impending passion and of the value of self-denial for salvation. The account begins with the words, "After this discussion." This is an indication of the connection between the cross and the resurrection. The event of the transfiguration was an anticipatory revelation of Christ's glory in order to strengthen the disciples who saw Him and to make firm their faith in their teacher and His being the Messiah. The Gospel recounts that the Lord took His chief disciples (Peter, James and John), so that they might see this glory of His.

The apolytikion for the feast says, "When You were transfigured on the mountain O Christ God, You revealed Your glory to the disciples as much as they were able." This confirms that the disciples saw to the degree that they were able to see. The Holy Spirit had not rested upon them yet.

This glory is attained by one who has passed through the glory of the cross. That is, one who has been freed of the hateful ego and from self-love. Rejecting the cross causes a person to seek glory in self-affirmation, and thus his glory remains a worldly glory destined to fail. It does not give him the fullness and satisfaction that he seeks. This is evident in his dissatisfaction with any profit that he gains and in his constant striving for more of what he already has.

"For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things" (Phil. 3:18-19). "The things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). We do not limit the word "eternal" to the life after death, as it also includes earthly life.

Earthly glory is by definition passing, a mirage of the life to come and a cause of perdition. But the promised glory—the glory of man’s transfiguration in God’s light—is the perfection of the image with the divine likeness, the lasting and original glory, the reason for the creation of man. If this glory does not exist, then what justifies human life? And what makes people bear their personal suffering and the suffering of others? And what gives them the capability to continue with the painstaking effort of life? Life without this divine purpose becomes a heedless passing between strangers who uselessly go along their way, life from the womb to the grave. History becomes merely a succession of vain mirages. Life, the life of every person, is a short series of events with no justification for its past, no meaning to its present, and no possible end to its suffering. Mention of human suffering and the torments of humanity becomes something unbearable.

But we know that this is not the case. God manifests this in His having also become human. He will show His disciples the transformation that will happen to mankind in His kingdom of heaven, when they too will enter into glory. “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it... For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works” (Matt. 16:25, 27; cf. Luke 9:24, 26); and also, “But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:27), “till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom” (Matt. 16:28).

The transfiguration, then, is a sample of man’s natural state. It is the beauty of humanity restored, the beauty of original, undistorted creation. Many knew this beauty, this glory, and experienced it here on earth. The Prophet Moses knew it when his face shined and the Hebrews were not able to look upon him. Many enlightened persons knew it, those who in the purity of their life and their struggle were liberated from the corruption of their fallen nature and became temples for the indwelling of God, such as Saint Seraphim of Sarov and many others.

May God make us worthy to seek this glory. Amen.

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