

Notes and Comments

The Holy Transfiguration: A Mystagogical Catechesis

O Word and unchangeable Light, O Light of the unbegotten Father, today we see in your light on Tabor the light of the Father and the light of the Spirit which gives light to the whole world (Hymn of Light/ Exapostilarion, Byzantine Matins for the Feast of the Holy Transfiguration).¹

This striking liturgical hymn goes right to the heart of the mystery of the Holy Transfiguration. Through the radiance of light the glory of Christ's divinity is revealed to the Apostles. Though it is curious that St. John the Evangelist, who was one of the three chosen Apostles to be with our Lord on Mount Tabor, does not give an account of the event of the Transfiguration in his gospel as do the other evangelists in their respective gospels (Mt 17:1–9, Mk 9:2–9, Lk 9:28–36), he does, however, give clear testimony to the indubitable glory of the Incarnate Word of God, writing in the prologue to his gospel “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen *his glory*: the glory of an only Son coming from the Father, filled with enduring love”

¹This and all other liturgical quotes are according to the translations of the Byzantine Catholic Nuns of St. Basil the Great of Uniontown, Pennsylvania. For the texts cited here, see *Festal Menaion*, 1985, and *The Office of Vespers*, 1982.

(Jn 1:14, emphasis mine). Both the Scriptures and the liturgical texts for the Byzantine Office for the Feast of the Holy Transfiguration as well as in the pre-festive and post-festive observances highlight the mystery of divine light through which the Holy Trinity is manifested to the Apostles. The Transfiguration is the second time the mystery of the Holy Trinity is revealed, the first being at the moment of our Lord's Baptism when the skies of heaven themselves open up with the Holy Spirit descending upon the Lord and the voice of the Father being resoundingly heard: “You are my beloved son. On you my favor rests” (Lk 3:23, Mk 1:11; cf. Mt 3:17). The Father declares the same upon Jesus's Transfiguration before the eyes of Peter, James, and John (Mt 17:5, Mk 9:7, Lk 9:35). Whereas Jesus's humanity is highlighted at his Baptism, it is his divinity that is manifested in its full radiance at his Transfiguration with St. Mark remarking that “his clothes became dazzlingly whiter—whiter than the work of any bleacher could make them” (Mk 9:3). In the words of St. Matthew, “his face became as dazzling as the sun, his clothes as radiant light” (Mt 17:2). In one of the pre-festive troparia for the Transfiguration what is chanted (cited in part) is: “Behold the day of heavenly joy draws near for the Lord goes up to Mount Tabor to shine with the light of his divinity.” Similarly in one of the verses at the litiia during the Great Vespers for the feast we participate in and celebrate the very light that is Christ: “Christ, the light that

shone before the sun, dwelt on earth in a human form. Wishing to fulfill the divine work of salvation before his Cross, today He mystically reveals the image of the Trinity on Mount Tabor. He took aside his three chosen disciples, Peter, James, and John, *and for a short time He concealed his incarnation. He was transfigured before them, manifesting the splendor of the original beauty...*" (emphasis mine).

The liturgical texts for the feast are, at once, pedagogical as they are mystagogical, initiating the worshipper into the very mystery of the Divine Light of Mount Tabor. Imbued with this light, we grasp heavenly truths more clearly; we affirm the path of virtue that accords the moral life; we rejoice in line with the Apostle Peter at our being able to be "sharers of the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4). Indeed, the epistle reading for the Byzantine Feast of the Holy Transfiguration reiterates Peter's eyewitness testimony and his catechesis about the deifying grace coming from Mount Tabor:

It was not by way of cleverly concocted myths that we taught you about coming in power of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we were eyewitnesses of his sovereign majesty. He received glory and praise from God the Father when that unique declaration came to him out of the majestic splendor: "This is my beloved Son, on whom my favor rests." We ourselves heard this said from heaven while we were in his company on the holy mountain. Besides, we possess the prophetic message as something altogether reliable.

Keep your attention closely fixed on it, as you would on a lamp shining in a dark place until the first streaks of dawn appear and the morning star rises in your hearts (2 Pt 1:16–19).

Let us only cite some of these liturgical hymns that convey the moral, spiritual, theological, and cosmological moments emanating from Mount Tabor.

Let us ascend the holy mountain with Jesus; we shall hear the voice of God the Father who without beginning gives witness to the consubstantial Son through the Divine Spirit. *Being enlightened, we shall see the divine brightness* (pre-festive vespereal hymn, emphasis mine).

Wishing to transform the nature of Adam, Christ ascends Mount Tabor today so that He may reveal the divine nature in a mysterious way (pre-festive aposticha hymn, emphasis mine).

O Lord, *as a preparation to your crucifixion*, You led some of your disciples to a high mountain and became transfigured before them, enlightening them with the light of your glory. In this way, You showed the reality of the resurrection You are to grant to us in your love for all and in your almighty power as God. Make us worthy of this resurrection, O God, for You are gracious and the Lover of Mankind (festive vespereal hymn, emphasis mine).

Come, let us ascend the mountain of the Lord and go into the house of our God. Let us contemplate

the glory of his Transfiguration, the glory of the only-begotten Son of God the Father. *From his light let us receive light*; and raised up by the Holy Spirit, let us sing the praises of the consubstantial Trinity forever (festive vesperal hymn, emphasis mine).

Moses who saw God, and Elijah who was taken up in the flaming chariot, contemplated You in the cloud, O Christ our God; *for You are the author of the Law and the fulfillment of the Prophets*. They were witnesses of your Transfiguration. With them make us worthy of that same brightness, that we may sing your praises forever, O Lord (festive vesperal hymn).

He who mysteriously spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai and said: I am who I am, today manifests himself to his disciples on Mount Tabor and reveals through his person that human nature is reestablished in its original splendor. As witnesses to this grace and partakers of this joy, He raised up Moses and Elijah, the forerunners of the glorious and saving resurrection made possible by the cross of Christ (vesperal aposticha hymn, emphasis mine).

You were transfigured on Mount Tabor, O Jesus; a bright cloud covered your apostles with your glory as with a tent, O Lord. *They cast their faces to the ground, unable to gaze upon the inaccessible glory of your resplendent face*, O Christ our God and eternal Savior. As You covered them with your brightness, also send your light upon our souls (matinal sessional hymn II, emphasis mine).

Having revealed a small ray of your divinity to those who climbed the

mountain with You, O Savior, You made them partakers of your boundless glory. Therefore, they cried out in awe to You: It is good for us to be here. Together with them, we shall forever praise You, O Christ our Savior, who was transfigured for us (festive matinal hymn, emphasis mine).

O Christ, *You have clothed yourself completely in the nature of Adam, thereby refashioning what had been corrupted*. Through your becoming human, You transfigured and glorified our nature (festive matinal hymn from Ode 3, emphasis mine).

When the glory of the Father bestows majesty to all creation, the Infinite Light that knows no evening, indescribably appeared in brilliant glory on Mount Tabor, He deified our human nature so that all may sing: All you works of the Lord, bless the Lord (festive matinal hymn from Ode 8, emphasis mine)!

Let us approach Mount Tabor in order to see the glory of Christ, who is our Redeemer and the King of all (post-festive aposticha hymn, emphasis mine).

These beautiful, awe-inspiring liturgical hymns easily can found the basis for a theological treatise on the mystery of the Holy Transfiguration in all its aforesaid moments. Only a theological “clod” could not be moved by them. They certainly merit more than a gloss, but—in the interests of mystagogical catechesis—let us conclude on this inadequate theological note. The Apostle Paul gives lim-

pid expression to what the internal dynamics of the Transfiguration are all about. In his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, he writes: “All of us, gazing on the Lord’s glory with unveiled faces, are being transformed from glory to glory into his very image by the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). Fathers of the Eastern Church, in their own way, have done their best to rearticulate this fundamental truth of Christianity in their theological elaborations. For reasons of “mystagogical” catechesis, only a few striking passages will be cited here. They will be from one unknown author, but an ancient one (dating at least from the fourth century), St. Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 295–373), and St. Basil the Great (ca. 330–379). As a theological “finale” a late Byzantine voice must be cited—that of St. Gregory of Palamas (1296–1359).

The central prayer of Great Vespers in the Byzantine Church at the moment of the Entrance of the celebrant into the sanctuary is the response to him of the congregation (choir/cantor). It is one of the oldest hymns in the Christian repertoire, but, as already mentioned, whose authorship is unknown:

O Joyful Light! (Gr., *Phos hilaron*;
Slav., *Svete tikhii*)
Light and Holy Glory
of the Father Immortal,
the heavenly, holy, the Blessed
One,
O Jesus Christ!
Now that we have reached the
setting of the sun,

and see the evening light,
we sing to God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
It is fitting at all times to raise a
song of praise in measured melody
to You,
O Son of God, the Giver of Life.
Behold, the universe sings Your
glory.

Given these truly poetic words, St. Athanasius’s oft-quoted theological maxim may sound a “bit” prosaic: “He [Christ], indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God.”² But even the “prosaic” can be outdone. St. Basil the Great proffers possibly an enigmatic, but even more bold articulation of this same insight. In his own words: “So too Spirit-bearing souls, illumined by Him, finally become spiritual themselves, and their grace is sent forth to others. From this come knowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of hidden things, distribution of wonderful gifts, heavenly citizenship, a place in the choir of angels, endless joy in the presence of God, *becoming like God, and, the highest of all desires, becoming God*”³ (emphasis mine).

But let not the “West” be deceived—the “East” is every bit “realistic” as well. Transfiguration/deification/*theosis* is an *ongoing* process. The

²St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), VIII, n. 54 (p. 93).

³St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980), n. 23.

major hymns of the Feast of the Holy Transfiguration, the troparion and kontakion, clearly evidence this—and, most importantly, to the worshippers in Church who hear/chant these words to triumphal joy:

You were transfigured on the mountain, O Christ our God, *revealing as much of your glory to your disciples as they could behold.* Through the prayers of the Theotokos, let your everlasting light also shine upon us sinners. O Giver of Light, glory to you (Troparion, Feast of the Holy Transfiguration, emphasis mine).

And lest the worshipers in church not understand, the next hymn is only reiterative of this basic message:

You were transfigured on the mountain, O Christ our God, and your disciples *beheld as much of your glory as they could bear,* that when they would see you crucified they would preach to the world that you are truly the radiance of the Father (Kontakion, Feast of the Holy Transfiguration, emphasis mine).

Gradualism is, thus, seen to be an inherent feature to any vision of God's glory. Clearly we hark back to God's admonition to Moses: "my face you cannot see for no man sees me and still lives" (Ex 33:20). On Mount Tabor, however, the glory of God is sufficiently seen with the apostles themselves laying prostrate in fear before the Lord, whereas Moses and Elijah as representatives respectively of the Law and the Prophets—and thus

the full spectrum of Old Testament revelation—stand prominently at the Lord's sides, conversing with him. The three Old Testament lessons (the *paremi*) are no less pedagogical as they are prophetic in their prefiguration of the Holy Transfiguration. The first, Exodus 24:12–18, recounts Moses's experience of the glory of the Lord on a cloud-covered Mount Sinai. The second, Exodus 33:11–23; 34:4–6, 8, relates a similar encounter between the Lord and Moses in the meeting tent during which Moses is declared to be the Lord's "intimate friend," who even if denied a view of the Lord's face will be afforded one of his back. The last reading, 1 Kings 19:3–9, 11–13, 15–16, is a narrative of Elijah's stay in a cave on Mount Horeb where he too is granted an experience of the Lord, oddly enough, in a "tiny whispering sound" (1 Kgs 19:12). In the course of the passage, what one finds is a manifestation of the Lord that is less one of his person, but rather as a *presence in nature*. Analogously, the *cosmological* moment intrinsic to the Transfiguration comes to the fore. The presence of the glory of the Lord cannot but pervade all creation, restoring it to its original splendor as found in primal creation.

But, more significantly, the Holy Transfiguration is a feast celebrating deifying grace. This grace is imparted, as the aforementioned liturgical texts make clear, in moral virtue and acts of moral goodness, in prayer, and in spiritual contemplation. We are thereby transformed from within and enlightened by God's presence within us

and, thus, are rendered “lights onto other people.” In this regard, the Apostle Paul offers a wonderful statement of Christian mission: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts, that we in turn might make known the glory of God shining on the face of Christ. This treasure we possess in earthen vessels to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us” (2 Cor 4:6–7).

A feast of light, a feast of glory, a feast of grace, a feast of the cosmos, a feast of personal transformation, the Holy Transfiguration is a *theological* feast par excellence. A fulfillment of past creation, the Transfiguration is no less an anticipation of future glory, from the more immediate in Christ’s Resurrection from the dead to the distant Parousia when there will be “new heavens and a new earth” (Rev 21:1), a new Jerusalem with no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God will be its light (Rev 21:23). At the same time, on the other hand, the Transfiguration also foreshadows our Lord’s Passion and Crucifixion, thus indicating that his ultimate glorification is *not* of this world, but is wrought through redemptive suffering. This intrinsic link between the Transfiguration and the Passion is highlighted in the Catholic West with the gospel of the Transfiguration being the focus of the Second Sunday of Lent. In the Byzantine East, this connection is more subtly seen. The Feast of the Transfiguration (August 6) is forty days before the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14).

The ascent to Mount Tabor is not only a historical event in the life of Christ; it is an ascent that every Christian is invited to embark upon in virtue and prayer. By venturing on this ascent, the Christian mystically shares in the intimate bond between the Father and the Son and through the Holy Spirit is even allowed to participate in the very glory of the Godhead. In detailing the mystery of uncreated Glory in his classic treatise *The Triads*, St. Gregory Palamas categorizes the Taboric Light and deifying grace as being “enhypostatic”⁴ in terms of being energies of the Divine Essence, which itself remains inaccessible to our human cognition. As such, they are truly *theurgic* realities that are transformative of man. The thought of this consummate Byzantine theologian on the Taboric Light and the ultimate significance of the mystery of the Transfiguration may well be beyond the intellectual grasp of the typical believer, but the mystery itself of the Transfiguration remains accessible to any worshiper who would immerse himself in the festal rites of the Holy Transfiguration. That is the mystagogical import of a worthy celebration of the Divine Office for the Feast of the Holy Transfiguration. □

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⁴Gregory Palamas, *The Triads* (New York: The Paulist Press, 1983), 77–78.