

The Pneumatology of Symeon the New Theologian

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Symeon was a monk and spiritual father at St. Mamas monastery in Constantinople who lived from 949 to 1022. The appellation “Theologian” puts him in the exalted company of St. John the Evangelist and St. Gregory Nazianzen, the only other Saints given this title in the Eastern Church. The qualification “New”, however, may originally have been given him by his opponents, to cast doubt on the orthodoxy of his theology,¹ though it may be only an indication that six centuries had passed since St. Gregory. Symeon was at one point condemned by the Holy Synod of Byzantium. In 1008 he stood trial before the bishops for publicly venerating his late spiritual master, Symeon Eulabes, as a Saint, and also for some of his theological teachings, both on the nature of authority in the Church and on the nature of what he describes as a “second baptism”.² Symeon was not intending to revive any heresies, however, and insisted that his teaching was in keeping with the tradition.³ He may have been misunderstood precisely because his theological teaching was based so heavily on his own mystical experience.⁴ It is this mystical experience and spiritual doctrine which became a great influence on the later hesychast movement and was the inspiration for the writings of Gregory Palamas.⁵ However “New Theologian” was meant at first, it became a title of honour.

The pneumatology of Symeon the New Theologian can be difficult to pinpoint, because whatever kind of theologian Symeon was, it was not a systematic theologian, and he did not write a systematic treatise on the Holy Spirit. This does not mean, however, that he has no pneumatology, for the Holy Spirit is mentioned, either explicitly or implicitly, on almost every page of his writings. Symeon

¹ Hilarion Alfeyev, *St. Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.

² Symeon and Paul McGuckin, *The Practical and Theological Chapters and Three Theological Discourses* (Kalamazoo, Mich: Cistercian Publications, 1982), 23.

³ Alfeyev, *Symeon and Orthodox Tradition*, 219.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 24.

treats of the Holy Spirit under various aspects both of Trinitarian theology and of the divine economy. He uses various images and analogies to explain both the nature and actions of the Holy Spirit and man's experience of Him. Many of his teachings are quite traditional, though some are indeed innovative, and it is understandable that he was subject to so much suspicion in his lifetime. This paper is an effort to systematize Symeon's pneumatology as it is found in his various discourses, chapters, hymns, and letters. It will describe, however briefly, Symeon's teaching on the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, in His action on man, and in man's experience of Him. It is hoped that, in the process, it will become more clear why this aspect of his teaching was a source of uneasiness for the authorities as well as inspiration for future mystics.

The Holy Spirit in the Trinity

Symeon's teaching on the Holy Spirit insofar as Trinitarian theology is concerned is typical of the tradition of the Christian East, namely, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are One God in Three Persons, and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. "The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father with the self-same nature as the co-essential Father and Son."⁶ As the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Son in every way, so that it is absurd even to speak of a First, Second, and Third.⁷ "No one [of the persons] has ever pre-existed the others so that one becomes prior to another, not the Father in relation to the Son, nor the Son to the Father, nor both of them in relation to the Spirit. They have a simultaneous beginning which is coeternal and without origin."⁸ The Persons are "identical in essence and glory"⁹ and the Holy Trinity is One God, "Father, Son, and Spirit, being undivided in three persons without confusion, Who are according to the divine nature,

⁶ Ibid., 130. (*2nd Theological Discourse*)

⁷ Ibid., 110. (*1st ThD*)

⁸ Ibid., 112. (*1st ThD*)

⁹ Ibid., 135. (*3rd ThD*)

of one dominion, glory, power, and one will,”¹⁰ “inexpressible, without beginning, uncreated, incomprehensible, undivided, and beyond all human thought or speech.”¹¹ Symeon himself maintains that he only speaks this way “following the teachings of the divine apostles and our fathers inspired by God.”¹²

Though the Trinity is beyond human speech, Symeon does give a few images of this mystery. He compares our knowledge of God to a man standing on the shore of the sea at night holding a lantern. Though he cannot see the whole ocean, he can still see some of the water and know that what he is looking at is in fact the ocean, for he forms an idea of the whole from the part that he can see.¹³ He compares the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father to a river coming forth from a spring.¹⁴ Though he often speaks of God as light, he is wary of St. Gregory’s image of the three suns, because of the confusion it can cause. “And how will you be able to say that three suns are one? Since, if you do unite them, they will become one and the three only one. If not, then you have sinned against the Unity.”¹⁵ This is not to say that he completely rejects the image, but is only “arguing against an overly rationalizing and literal confidence in something which, after all, was offered simply as an image and not as a detailed “map” of the godhead.”¹⁶ Symeon also offers a psychological image of the Trinity, similar to that of St. Augustine, by analogy to the soul, reason, and intelligence. Since man is made in the image of God, he argues, he has within himself something of a Trinitarian structure. “Reason exists entire in

¹⁰ Symeon and Daniel K. Griggs, *Divine Eros: Hymns of St. Symeon, the New Theologian* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2010), 69. (*Hymn 12*)

¹¹ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 112. (*1st ThD*)

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 132. (*2nd ThD*)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 137. (*3rd ThD*)

¹⁵ Symeon and Alexander Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), vol. 2, 115. (*9th Ethical Discourse*)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, vol.3, 132.

that entire intelligence which you possess, and yet the soul is in both without any division or separation.”¹⁷ But a man with a soul, reason, and intelligence is a single being and we treat him as such, and so should we think of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is integral to the Trinity, for “just as intelligence and reason cannot exist without the soul, so there is no way of naming the Son and the Father apart from the Holy Spirit. How could the living God exist without life? It is the Holy Spirit which is the Life and the Life-Giver.”¹⁸ In all this, Symeon is careful to maintain that there is much about the Trinity we cannot know. “But as to his essence of his form, or where he is, or how great, or how he shares his essence, or the manner in which it is united – these are things which are never given to man to understand.”¹⁹ All images fall short of the reality which is God.

As for the Holy Spirit’s particular role, “Symeon teaches the traditional Greek patristic doctrine of ... His mission in the world through the Son by grace.”²⁰ He compares the grace of the Holy Spirit to the rations given by an emperor to his soldiers. God, the heavenly King, gives us “the bread which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world, that is, the grace of the Spirit – for this is the spiritual ration by which they are nourished who campaign with Christ and with which they are spiritually clothed in place of weapons.”²¹ So God not only feeds us but arms us for spiritual battle by the Holy Spirit. Elsewhere, he identifies the Holy Spirit with the kingdom of heaven within us, by comparing Him to the mustard seed of the parable.²² This image may be slightly problematic because of the growth the seed undergoes, but Symeon is here referring to the growth of grace within us, not of the Holy Spirit

¹⁷ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 127. (2nd ThD)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 126. (2nd ThD)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 131. (2nd ThD)

²⁰ Basil Krivocheine, *In the Light of Christ: Saint Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) Life, Spirituality, Doctrine* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), 260.

²¹ Symeon and Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 2, 101. (7th EthD)

²² *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 119. (3rd EthD)

Himself. “Before being sown in us, I mean in our hearts, the divine seed remains itself, wholly God, neither accepting addition nor suffering subtraction.”²³ The Holy Spirit’s mission to the world through the Son stems from His procession from the Father with the Son: “with the Son and co-essential with him, the divine Spirit proceeds from the co-essential Father.”²⁴ His mission is intimately connected to the Son’s Incarnation, so much so that “to deny that at this present time there are some who...have been granted the Holy Spirit...that wholly subverts the Incarnation of our God and Savior Jesus Christ!”²⁵ So it is through the Holy Spirit that the Father keeps the universe in being,²⁶ gives life to the world, and feeds and arms the soldiers of Christ. This will be examined more closely in the next section.

The Holy Spirit’s Action on Man

We have seen that the Holy Spirit is given to man as grace. What does this grace do? What Symeon mentions again and again about the action of the Holy Spirit is that He makes the Father and the Son known, and that He effects our union with Christ and makes us sons of God by adoption.

The Holy Spirit makes the Father and the Son known.

The Holy Spirit reveals God to us, “for the things that are sealed up and closed, unseen and unknown by all men, are opened up by the Holy Spirit alone.”²⁷ Symeon calls the Holy Spirit a key, the key to the kingdom of heaven promised by Christ to Peter, for He “opens our minds and teaches us the things concerning the Father and Son.”²⁸ Since God dwells in unapproachable light, His house is unapproachable, and so is the door of the house, and therefore so is the key, for otherwise “that which is approachable will be consumed by that which is not, nor will the key ever be able to open it, unless it

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 126. (2nd ThD)

²⁵ Symeon, *The Discourses*, trans. C.J. deCatanzaro (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 336. (32nd Catechetical Discourse)

²⁶ (Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 126. (2nd ThD)

²⁷ Symeon, *The Discourses*, 264. (24th CatD)

²⁸ Ibid., 342. (33rd CatD)

too is unapproachable and partakes of the same nature.”²⁹ So God cannot be known except by the Holy Spirit, Who is Himself God. Symeon also speaks of this in his Ethical Discourses (“These are mysteries which are unveiled through an intelligible contemplation enacted by the operation of the Holy Spirit in those to whom it has been given...to know them by virtue of the grace from on high”³⁰; “nor does [one] see a revelation unless he has been illumined by the Holy Spirit”³¹) and Hymns (“but in the Spirit we see You, the unbegotten Father, and the begotten Logos, proceeding from You”³²; “so also one who is enlightened by the divine Spirit in their soul at once comes into participation and contemplation of the light, the light of God, and most certainly God”³³).

In his Epistles and the Theological Discourses, Symeon’s focus is on the authority to teach about God possessed by those who have the Holy Spirit. So he speaks of his own teaching: “it was by means of the wisdom from above, that is, the grace given through the Spirit, that we were taught in a mysterious way”³⁴, the teaching of the apostles: “for assuredly it is the honour proper to the apostles, to teach through the Holy Spirit”³⁵, and others: “all these whom the Holy Spirit established for us – I mean leaders, pastors, bishops, and teachers – these who bring with them the teachings and traditions of the holy apostles.”³⁶ He insists that God fills the faithful with the Holy Spirit, just as He did the apostles, and that “all knowledge and discernment, every wise word and mystical understanding, come to us only

²⁹ Ibid., 342-43. (33rd CatD)

³⁰ Symeon and Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 2, 114. (9th EthD)

³¹ Ibid., vol. 1, 157. (10th EthD)

³² Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 157. (Hymn 21)

³³ Ibid., 224. (Hymn 29)

³⁴ Symeon, H. J. M. Turner, and Joseph Paramelle, *The Epistles of St Symeon the New Theologian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 29. (Epistle 1)

³⁵ Ibid., 167. (Ep. 4)

³⁶ Ibid., 93. (Ep. 3)

through the teaching of the Spirit,"³⁷ but he warns against the pride of trying to teach others without this gift of the Spirit, "for to speak about God and divine things without illumination, while deprived of the Holy Spirit, simply shows our ignorance about ourselves."³⁸ He even says that it would be a sin to do so, for only once we have passed from death to life "do we draw the Spirit into our inmost being, and by his illumination declare the things of God in the degree that this is possible."³⁹ Thus the Holy Spirit causes man to see the Father and the Son by His light and makes it possible for him to teach the things of God to others.

The Holy Spirit causes union with Christ and our adoption as children of God.

The other main action of the Holy Spirit on man is to make him a son of God by adoption. This, of course, is a biblical idea that Symeon merely reaffirms. He says that God "deifies by the Spirit those to whom He has been ungrudgingly united...and renders them children of God...co-heirs of Christ, and heirs of God, gods joined to God in the Holy Spirit,"⁴⁰ following St. Paul in the letter to the Romans. As can be seen, adoption is closely linked to the idea of deification and union with Christ. Just as the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary when she conceived Christ, so is He "the agent of our entry into the union between God and man effected by Christ."⁴¹ This union and deification is accomplished primarily by purifying us from our sins and evil passions. Symeon primarily uses the image of fire and light to illustrate this. He describes The Holy Spirit as a consuming fire, painful at first, but "afterwards, when it has completely cleansed us of the filth of the passions, it becomes food and drink, light and joy without

³⁷ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 114. (1st ThD)

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 116. (1st ThD)

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 125. (2nd ThD)

⁴⁰ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 363. (Hymn 51)

⁴¹ Symeon and Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 3, 144.

ceasing within us, and by participation, it makes us light ourselves.”⁴² This fire is “unbearable”, but man’s participation in it effects his purification. He “becomes entirely God by grace” and “is delivered from passionate desires and pleasures.”⁴³ Those who possess the Spirit perfectly “are not only free from all lusts and passions and unseemly *logismoi*, but also are themselves gods abiding in God, and have come to exist outside the reach of the flesh and the world.”⁴⁴ The light of the Holy Spirit completely transforms us, for when He comes to us, the Holy Spirit “shall inspire, and dwell, and in essence He shall pitch his tent, and illuminate, and make brilliant, and refashion you entirely.”⁴⁵

The purification wrought by the Spirit to effect our union with God, is not, according to Symeon, an altogether comfortable thing, as can be seen by his use of the image of fire. Though it frees us from our passions, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit does not give us rest. It does not fulfill our desire, but enflames it. Symeon says that the Holy Spirit within a man “drives him on towards the flames of an ever deepening desire for the Godhead as if he were being consumed and devoured by fire” and his mind “feeds within itself a longing that knows no bounds and a love that can never be satisfied.”⁴⁶ The Holy Spirit also produces purifying tears, for a man having the light of the Holy Spirit within him cannot bear the sight. He collapses in fear, and sheds copious tears. His tears stir up his desire for God, and “when he is purified in their flood, he shines with a greater brilliance.”⁴⁷ Symeon even goes so far as to say that the presence of the Spirit causes suffering. He begins one of his hymns saying “Who shall comfort the suffering of my heart?” and identifies this suffering with his longing for Christ, going on to say that “the yearning is the energy of the Spirit, or rather it is essentially his presence substantially seen as light

⁴² Ibid., vol.2, 99. (7th EthD)

⁴³ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 89. (Chapter 3.59-60)

⁴⁴ Symeon, Turner, and Paramelle, *Epistles*, 177-9. (Ep. 4)

⁴⁵ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 320-1. (Hymn 44)

⁴⁶ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 35. (Chp. 1.7)

⁴⁷ Ibid., 77-8 (Chp. 3.21)

within me.”⁴⁸ But even so, all the Holy Spirit’s actions are for our good, for the goal of life is “to be pleasing to Christ our God and to receive our reconciliation with the Father through communion in the Spirit” and this Symeon identifies with salvation.⁴⁹

The Holy Spirit gives the power to forgive sins.

Symeon’s teaching about the knowledge and union with God that the Holy Spirit brings were not particularly controversial, but his stance on the power to forgive sins certainly was. It is indisputable that Christ gave his apostles power to forgive sins by the Holy Spirit (John 20:22-23) and, traditionally, this power is seen to be passed on to bishops and priests by the sacrament of ordination, in which also the Holy Spirit is conferred. Symeon took a slightly different view of the matter. He acknowledged the traditional teaching, but then went on to say that when the priests became corrupt and “only the clothing and vesture of the priesthood was left amongst men, the gift of the Spirit passed to monks...because through what they did they were following the apostles’ mode of life.”⁵⁰ But then even the monks became corrupt and so Symeon asserted that “the right to forgive sins has not been granted by God either to those who are monks in virtue of their habit, or to those who have been ordained and included in the order of priesthood...but only to those amongst priests, bishops, and monks who can be numbered with the companies of Christ’s disciples because of their purity.”⁵¹ There are two problems with this statement. The first is the problem of monks being able to hear confessions even if they have not been ordained. Symeon based this on his personal experience with his own spiritual father, Symeon Eulabes, who was not an ordained priest, yet led him to God.⁵² His views were also in keeping with

⁴⁸ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 366. (*Hymn 52*)

⁴⁹ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 91. (*Chp. 3.67*)

⁵⁰ Symeon, Turner, and Paramelle, *Epistles*, 55. (*Ep. 1*)

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 57. (*Ep. 1*)

⁵² Krivocheine, *In the Light of Christ*, 137.

standard monastic practice,⁵³ but they pose the problem of how this power is conferred if not by ordination. Symeon admits the necessity of apostolic succession, but says that this succession is given by the Holy Spirit to those who imitate the apostles.⁵⁴ He admits that a charism of the Holy Spirit is conferred in ordination,⁵⁵ but also advises against accepting ordination “before receiving the Holy Spirit, which is not identified with ordination itself.”⁵⁶ This leads to the other problem, that of the “purity” of the minister. This certainly sounds like Donatism, though Symeon never made a direct statement that sacraments administered by unworthy priests were not valid.⁵⁷ While it is likely that he was merely exhorting priests to be more worthy of their office, rather than challenging the efficacy of the sacraments, it is odd that someone who spoke so eloquently of the power of the Holy Spirit in the soul should call that power into question in the case of an unworthy minister.

The Holy Spirit makes man's works fruitful.

One final aspect of Symeon's teaching on the action of the Holy Spirit on man is that He makes his works fruitful. This is, of course, a consequence of Jesus' statement “without me you can do nothing,” (John 15:5) meaning that we need grace to animate our works, or else they are worth nothing. Symeon identifies this grace with the Holy Spirit. In the seventh Ethical Discourse, he compares the soul and its works to dead bones joined together, which cannot live unless the Spirit gives them life. “For only when the Latter [i.e. the Holy Spirit] comes and makes a home in us does He then come and bind together with nerves of spiritual might the acts of virtue which were dead and, like soulless limbs, lying

⁵³ Alfeyev, *Symeon and Orthodox Tradition*, 117.

⁵⁴ Krivocheine, *In the Light of Christ*, 137.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

scattered from each other, and unite them to the love of God.”⁵⁸ He uses a different image in one of his Hymns to make the same point, comparing the virtues to firewood, in which “the divine light of the Spirit takes hold.”⁵⁹ He also speaks of the virtues as a smith’s tools, with which he can only produce anything if he also has fire.⁶⁰ Elsewhere, he speaks of the Holy Spirit bringing the future judgement to pass in the soul, illuminating it to see the truth about its works, and purifying it completely, to the point that “such a man is not judged at the judgement and justice to come, for he has already been judged.”⁶¹ Thus, the Holy Spirit enables a man to judge himself and amend his works accordingly, so that he need fear nothing at the last judgement. It is clear from these images that at least some foundation of virtues and good works must be laid before the Holy Spirit can animate them, but there is no real separation between man’s action and the Holy Spirit’s. “The grace of the Spirit cannot remain with us without the practice of the commandments, but the practice of the commandments is of no help or advantage to us without the grace of God.”⁶² Symeon prays to Christ that “a soul cannot be moved without your Spirit, nor, Savior, keep your commandments, nor can she see You, nor be present to You, nor wisely sing your glory,”⁶³ understanding that without the Holy Spirit, he can do nothing at all. But “when we possess him completely as our guest and teacher, he can command any of us, no matter how great may be the task with which he entrusts us, and we shall simply stretch out our hand to it and accomplish it.”⁶⁴ Without Him, we can do nothing; with Him, we can do anything.

⁵⁸ Symeon and Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 2, 92. (7th EthD)

⁵⁹ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 164. (Hymn 22)

⁶⁰ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 80. (Chp. 3.29)

⁶¹ Symeon and Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 1, 146. (10th EthD)

⁶² Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 88. (Chp. 3.56)

⁶³ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 336. (Hymn 47)

⁶⁴ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 93. (Chp. 3.72)

Man's Experience of the Holy Spirit

So far, we have been examining Symeon's thought on what the Holy Spirit does in the soul objectively. We now turn to man's subjective experience of the Holy Spirit, an area in which Symeon has some unique insights. The first is his description of the spiritual senses by which man perceives the Holy Spirit within him, and the other the possibility and even the necessity of being conscious of this experience.

The spiritual senses.

The idea of the spiritual senses is relatively simple. Just as man has five corporeal senses and by them experiences a sort of union with material things, so each of these senses has a spiritual counterpart, by which man experiences union with God.⁶⁵ This union is real, but inexpressible, and Symeon resorts to oxymorons to express it. He speaks of "the mystical and truly inexpressible contemplations, the transcendently splendid and unknowable knowledge given by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, by which we mean the invisible visions of the glory and divinity, beyond light and transcending knowledge, of the Son and Word of God."⁶⁶ So even though analogous to the material senses, the spiritual senses are quite other, and give only imperfect knowledge here below. Symeon points out that even though St. Paul was caught up to the third heaven and heard "ineffable speech" he acknowledges that now he knows only in part.⁶⁷ If the light of God is the sun, what we see now is only "a little sunbeam" compared to its full light "when it will wholly reveal itself."⁶⁸ The spiritual senses differ from the corporeal senses also because the two tend in opposite directions, insofar as they lead to the desire of their respective objects. "The more a man responds to the attraction of material objects

⁶⁵ Bernard Fraigneau-Julien, *Les Sens Spirituels et la Vision de Dieu selon Syméon le Nouveau Théologien* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985), 125.

⁶⁶ Symeon and Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 1, 121. (3rd EthD)

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 127. (3rd EthD)

⁶⁸ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 70. (Hymn 12)

perceived by his corporeal senses, the less he is capable of exerting his spiritual senses.”⁶⁹ This is why even though the spiritual senses are given at baptism, Symeon insists on purification and the practice of the commandments as a condition for their exercise.⁷⁰ In this way, man’s desires are drawn away from the material things he experiences with his corporeal senses to the God he perceives with his spiritual senses.

Given his propensity to use the image of light for the Holy Spirit, it is not surprising that for Symeon, the chief of the spiritual senses is the one analogous to corporeal vision. Symeon usually describes the Holy Spirit’s revelation of the Father and the Son as a light which makes us see God. He urges those who want to become holy to “open the spiritual eyes of their heart, and look upon the light which never sets and has not evening,” for no one ever became holy “unless his intellect was first enlightened, illuminated by the all-holy Spirit of God.”⁷¹ God is often compared to the sun: “What our sun is for this visible and sensory world, God is for the invisible and intelligible world;”⁷² “the grace of the All-Holy Spirit, shall shine like the sun in all the saints.”⁷³ And just as the sun produces its own light, and is not enlightened by anything else, so God enlightens us by His glory, but does not receive glory from outside Himself.⁷⁴ Moreover, by our spiritual vision we can see God’s glory but not His essence, just as we cannot see the sun directly, but only its rays.⁷⁵ In the same way, God is both the object of our spiritual vision and the light by which we see, and so by using this image Symeon emphasizes the

⁶⁹ Fraigneau-Julien, *Les Sens Spirituels*, 141.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁷¹ Symeon, Turner, and Paramelle, *Epistles*, 153. (*Ep. 4*)

⁷² Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 69. (*Chp. 2.22*)

⁷³ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 40. (*Hymn 1*)

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 35. (*Hymn 1*)

⁷⁵ Fraigneau-Julien, *Les Sens Spirituels*, 110.

“absolute priority of God’s revelatory action over the cognitive activity which man exercises in His regard.”⁷⁶

Even though vision is the primary spiritual sense described by Symeon, the other senses are in no way denied. Symeon says that God is “both seen and heard, is sweet to the taste and perfume to the sense of smell; He is felt and so made known.”⁷⁷ But more so than the corporeal senses, the spiritual senses are unified as one, so that they are not really distinguishable: “You will hear with your sight, and see with your hearing.”⁷⁸ This feature compensates for the possibility that Symeon’s description of the experience of God by vision may seem less intimate than he means to convey, for the objects of our corporeal vision are necessarily at some distance from us, while those of taste or touch are near. But all the spiritual senses are one, so that, to Symeon, when a man has the light of the Holy Spirit in him “it is as if his entrails were touched by fire and scorched with flames”⁷⁹ and he speaks to God of “the Spirit Whom You encamped in my guts.”⁸⁰ In fact, the light of God is both exterior and interior, appearing at first external to the visionary and then interior to his being,⁸¹ the unity of the spiritual senses allowing him both experiences.

The conscious experience of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps the most controversial of Symeon’s teachings is that those who have the Holy Spirit must experience Him consciously. The arguments of those who say that He can be possessed unconsciously simply do not make any sense to him. If in baptism we have “put on Christ,” he says, then surely we must be conscious of being clothed in Him, for “only the dead feel nothing when they are

⁷⁶ Ibid., 195.

⁷⁷ Symeon and Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 1, 123. (3rd EthD)

⁷⁸ Ibid., 126 (3rd EthD)

⁷⁹ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 77. (Chp. 3.21)

⁸⁰ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 336. (Hymn 47)

⁸¹ Fraigneau-Julien, *Les Sens Spirituels*, 192.

clothed” and those who say they feel nothing are most likely both dead and naked.⁸² Or if the Spirit is “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” then “clearly the river which is coming out and flowing down is visible to those who see.”⁸³ And again “if the Holy Spirit is also light...how can you say you do not see Him and yet think that He is within you without your being aware of it?”⁸⁴ To Symeon, such statements are blasphemous because they imply that God’s power is somehow diminished when He unites Himself to the human soul. “But if I have become wholly imperishable and united to the Imperishable from my perishable condition, then how would I not perceive it with my senses?”⁸⁵ To say the opposite means that instead of giving life to men, God “pulls himself down by their mortality.”⁸⁶

This conscious experience of the Holy Spirit within the soul is for Symeon a permanent and habitual vision of God by the spiritual senses of the soul. It is a superior, but normal, stage of the spiritual life,⁸⁷ which everyone should seek to obtain.⁸⁸ When one has “the consciousness of God impressed once and for all like a seal on the superior part of his soul...he can rejoice always, pray ceaselessly, return thanks in every circumstance, and refer all things to the glory of God.”⁸⁹ It is not identical to the beatific vision of God in heaven, but it is the pledge of it. Symeon compares Christ’s gift of the Spirit to the Church as the betrothal pledge of a bridegroom to his bride. The Church “has to wait

⁸² Symeon and Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 2, 46. (5th EthD)

⁸³ Ibid., vol.1, 158. (10th EthD)

⁸⁴ Ibid., 161. (10th EthD)

⁸⁵ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 267. (Hymn 34)

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Fraigneau-Julien, *Les Sens Spirituels*, 165.

⁸⁸ Symeon, Turner, and Paramelle, *Epistles*, 177. (Ep. 4)

⁸⁹ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 123. (2nd ThD)

until she leaves this earth to receive the everlasting gifts and the kingdom of heaven.”⁹⁰ Meanwhile, the pledge is “something ineffable, understood in a way beyond understanding, held without being contained, visible without being seen.”⁹¹ Though it is habitual, it must be tended and protected: the seed of the kingdom of heaven, which is the grace of the Holy Spirit, must not be choked with weeds or abandoned to the birds or left unwatered.⁹² Indeed, Symeon conceives of the vision of God in this life as proceeding in stages, from an initial union with God, to illumination, vision, and perception of this union, to divinization.⁹³

Symeon often speaks of the consciousness of the gift of the Holy Spirit as a second baptism. In doing so, he does not deny the efficacy of the Sacrament of Baptism, but he is not sanguine about our ability after Baptism to avoid the loss, through sin, of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit conferred by the sacrament. So he says that “baptized infants are, by the Holy Spirit, both sanctified and kept safe” and “completely delivered from the Devil’s tyrannical rule,”⁹⁴ and that “he who today baptizes me...has filled me with the Holy Spirit” and “freed me from my sins,”⁹⁵ but also that “since we have been baptized as children who were unaware, as unperfected persons we received the grace imperfectly.”⁹⁶ Hence the necessity of a second baptism, which Symeon identifies with the baptism that Jesus speaks of in the Gospel of John when He says that a man must be born of water and the Spirit.⁹⁷ This birth of water and the Spirit follows upon tears of repentance, and perfects the first baptism. “In the first baptism, water

⁹⁰ Ibid., 86. (*Chp. 3.50*)

⁹¹ Ibid., 87. (*Chp. 3.53*)

⁹² Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 117. (*Hymn 17*)

⁹³ Fraigneau-Julien, *Les Sens Spirituels*, 194.

⁹⁴ Symeon, Turner, and Paramelle, *Epistles*, 143. (*Ep. 4*)

⁹⁵ Ibid., 125. (*Ep. 3*)

⁹⁶ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 389. (*Hymn 55*)

⁹⁷ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 42. (*Chp. 1.35*)

symbolizes tears and the oil of chrismation prefigures the inner anointing of the Spirit. But the second baptism is no longer a type of the truth, but the truth itself.”⁹⁸ The Sacrament of Baptism “is not yet that perfect grace of which the Scripture speaks: ‘I shall dwell in them and walk therein,’”⁹⁹ and so the Christian still needs “the spiritual transformation which is effected and beheld in the Baptism of the Holy Spirit... By this Baptism the baptized become as light in the light, and they know the One Who has begotten them because they also see Him.”¹⁰⁰ It is important to note that the idea of a second baptism is already present in the Fathers; what is unique to Symeon is the insistence on its being a conscious spiritual experience.¹⁰¹

The description of the conscious experience of the Holy Spirit as a baptism implies its necessity for salvation, and Symeon states this implication quite explicitly. For Symeon, “an intellectual perception of the Holy Spirit in this life is the indispensable sign of the reality of His gift.”¹⁰² Since without this gift we cannot attain heaven, those who are not conscious of it cannot be saved.

And those who suppose that they have You, the light of all the cosmos, yet say that they do not see You, that they do not live in the light, they are not enlightened, they do not continually contemplate You, O Savior. May they learn that You have neither enlightened their mind, nor have You dwelt in their dirty hearts, and in vain do they exult in their empty hopes, expecting that they will see your light after death.¹⁰³

They should say to themselves: “If I am therefore now in darkness, I shall also be in darkness after my death.”¹⁰⁴ This is because we do not “receive a Holy Spirit Who is not revealed and seen by the

⁹⁸ Ibid. (*Chp. 1.36*)

⁹⁹ Ibid., 85. (*Chp. 3.45*)

¹⁰⁰ Symeon and Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 1, 156. (*10th EthD*)

¹⁰¹ Krivocheine, *In the Light of Christ*, 146.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 37. (*Hymn 1*)

¹⁰⁴ Symeon and Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 1, 148. (*10th EthD*)

intellect”¹⁰⁵ and each person either possesses the Holy Spirit or “carries around in himself the wicked devil,”¹⁰⁶ unless it be that “he is carrying his soul’s house around, unoccupied and swept clean, and supposes that for salvation he needs nothing more.”¹⁰⁷ Those who have not “entered into the knowledge and contemplation” of God cannot even be called Christians, for “how can one who has become a man by physical birth, but has never thought or believed that one must be born spiritually or striven for this, ever become spiritual and count himself among spiritual men?”¹⁰⁸ The merchant who sold all his possessions to buy the pearl of great price had, after all, to see it and find it first.¹⁰⁹ In the kingdom of heaven “the measure of their illumination, the measure of their love, and the measure of their contemplation shall be the measure of their grandeur and glory,”¹¹⁰ and those who did not have these in this life will not have them in the next either.

Lest we despair of obtaining eternal life, Symeon does point out how the conscious experience of the Holy Spirit may be obtained: by repentance, tears, and the practice of the commandments. “Everyone who strives to keep all God’s commandments without fail becomes both a child of God and a son of God born from above,”¹¹¹ though “it was never without many toils and labors, sweat and violence, difficulty and tribulation, that anyone was able to break through the darkness of the soul or see the light of the all-holy Spirit.”¹¹² Tears are also necessary, for they are a sign of our repentance and conversion, and without these a man “cannot be united with the Holy Spirit, and if he is not united with

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 157. (10th EthD)

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., vol. 2, 122. (9th EthD)

¹⁰⁷ Symeon, Turner, and Paramelle, *Epistles*, 159. (Ep. 4)

¹⁰⁸ Symeon, *The Discourses*, 146. (8th CatD)

¹⁰⁹ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 109-11. (Hymn 17)

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 40-41 (Hymn1)

¹¹¹ Symeon, *The Discourses*, 147. (8th CatD)

¹¹² Ibid., 122. (6th CatD)

him through purification, he cannot come to the knowledge and contemplation of God.”¹¹³ We must practice the virtues, for “he who with toil and tears has planted the virtues in himself and has harvested the fruits of the Spirit...tastes of all their sweetness.”¹¹⁴ The virtues form the foundation and walls of a house for which the grace of the Holy Spirit will act as a roof, and we cannot neglect a single virtue, or else our house “cannot be roofed over by the grace of the Spirit.”¹¹⁵ Most of all we must beg God for this great gift, for God is a mystery “unknown to those who do not beg to receive in the fervor of their heart the divine Spirit, unknown to those who do not believe that even now the divine Spirit is given to those who seek Him.”¹¹⁶ But the fervor must be real. In speaking of the Holy Spirit as the drink Christ promised to the Samaritan woman at the well, Symeon gives this advice to one who has not yet been given this drink:

prostrate yourself, weep, entreat, lament, strike your own face like Adam once did, pluck out the hairs of your head. Do not lie down on a bed...do not give sleep to eyes...never fill your stomach with food. Do not sweeten your throat with delicacies or drink to satiety... Let Him see your lack of washing, your extreme want of possessions, your refusal of money... Let Him see you struck and not returning the blow, insulted and not replying in kind, reviled and blessing those who revile you, not looking for glory, nor honor, nor rest, but simply doing and accomplishing all things without flagging in any way or turning backwards, until He have compassion on you and grant that you drink that fearful and ineffable and unnameable drink.¹¹⁷

This is a tall order, but Symeon has little sympathy for those who complain that they cannot fulfill it, because he sees it as impossible “for him whose heart is dominated by the least little passion to possess Christ indwelling him by the tabernacling of the Holy Spirit.”¹¹⁸ To those who think they have the light of the Holy Spirit in them but that He is concealed by their passions, he has only a sharp rebuke: “You

¹¹³ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 78. (Chp. 3.23)

¹¹⁴ Symeon and Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 2, 121. (9th EthD)

¹¹⁵ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 88. (Chp. 3.57)

¹¹⁶ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 322. (Hymn 44)

¹¹⁷ Symeon and Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 2, 95. (7th EthD)

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 161. (10th EthD)

spend your life in darkness, are unwilling to get up and do God's commandments and chase away the cloud of the passions, but instead make light of the One Who has come down from heaven for your salvation and Who now lies in your filthy heart covered by slime."¹¹⁹ These people have "persuaded themselves that it is impossible for a man to be perfectly purified of the passions and receive the Comforter in himself wholly and substantially,"¹²⁰ but Symeon knows that the Holy Spirit will only make you see "in proportion to the purification of your soul, and you will be made like God by exact imitation of his works."¹²¹ He has, however, a note of comfort for those who are trying their best and have not yet seen the light of God: "Blessed are they who seek with all their soul to come to the light, despising all other things, for, although they may not succeed in coming to the light while yet in the body, still in all likelihood they shall pass away with firm hopes and, though it be little, yet shall they enter into it."¹²² This is one of the very few places he acknowledges the possibility of salvation without the conscious perception of the Holy Spirit in this life.

Concluding Remarks

The pneumatology of Symeon the New Theologian is both traditional and innovative. In saying that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and is given to men through the Son, he hands on the tradition he inherited from the Fathers, though perhaps using slightly different images to express the same reality. That in His action on man the Holy Spirit makes the Father and the Son known, causes union with Christ and deification, and makes man's actions fruitful is also traditional, and Symeon's creativity comes out only in the images he uses to explain these concepts. Even his doctrine on the Holy Spirit's granting unordained but holy monks the ability to remit sin, while "never officially approved by

¹¹⁹ Symeon and Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 1, 162. (10th EthD)

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 124. (9th EthD)

¹²¹ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 319. (Hymn 44)

¹²² Symeon and Golitzin, *On the Mystical Life*, vol. 1, 167. (10th EthD)

the Orthodox Church,” was also “never condemned by the Church, directly or indirectly, nor was it rejected by clerical opinion, particularly in monastic circles,”¹²³ and so can be seen as belonging to the Orthodox tradition.

It is Symeon’s teaching concerning the human experience of the Holy Spirit as necessarily conscious that is his real point of innovation. Though he bases his arguments on Scripture and is “confident that the whole of Orthodox tradition...is on his side when he claims that the vision of God is possible and necessary for the human being”¹²⁴ it is obvious from his writings that there were many who disagreed with him. Symeon complains that “by them I am called a heretic because I teach everybody to seek for grace from above and for the advent of the Holy Spirit and their being conscious of it, and because I teach that without this no pardon for sins comes into effect in any way at all in any mortal being, nor severance from passions and lusts, nor the honour of adoption as sons, nor sanctification.”¹²⁵ Symeon teaches this because of his concern for souls; he does not want them to perish because of an ill-founded confidence in their possession of the grace of the Holy Spirit when they have not consciously perceived this grace. In short, he does not want us to rest on our laurels, especially when he does not think we have earned any, but to practice the virtues, obey the commandments, and pray that God might bestow the conscious experience of the Holy Spirit as our reward.

Bernard Fraigneau-Julien warns us that there are two things we need to keep in mind when considering Symeon’s insistence on the conscious nature of union with God. The first is that Byzantine mystics have written almost exclusively about only the very highest states of the spiritual life and that it would be a mistake to suppose that Symeon means that our consciousness of union with God should be to the same degree at all stages of our spiritual life. The other is that because of the depth of his own

¹²³ Krivocheine, *In the Light of Christ*, 139.

¹²⁴ Alfeyev, *Symeon and Orthodox Tradition*, 219.

¹²⁵ Symeon, Turner, and Paramelle, *Epistles*, 177. (Ep. 4)

spiritual experience, and because he had to refute his opponents, he “was naturally led to simplify and harden his affirmations” concerning the absolute necessity of being conscious of this union here below.¹²⁶ It is possible that because of his profound mystical experience, Symeon had a sort of optimism about the spiritual capabilities of his fellow men. Since he saw himself as a sinner, “unclean in thoughts, and deeds, and all my intentions,”¹²⁷ and yet knew the gift of God within himself, it would be natural for him to think that those who did not know it were just not trying hard enough. “With him experience is primary, doctrine explicating and to a certain measure justifying experience.”¹²⁸ Because his doctrine proceeds from personal experience, he does not take into sufficient account that God can work differently with different souls, and show Himself to them or hide Himself from them as He pleases. Moreover, for one so insistent on the necessity for repentance, he seems to put little faith in the efficacy of the Sacrament of Penance. Symeon says that if we have lost baptismal grace by sin “we must also receive the complete remission of our sins from our father and sponsor”¹²⁹ but disparages those who “reckon themselves to be sons of God, even if they do not consciously possess the Holy Spirit who confers adoption.”¹³⁰ However, this attitude misses the whole point of the Sacrament of Penance. A person who, having sinned, makes an act of contrition, has a firm purpose of amendment, and confesses his sins to a priest knows, by the virtue of faith, that having received absolution, his sins are forgiven and grace is restored to his soul, whether he “feels” anything or not. If he were to die right after receiving this sacrament, he would be saved, and receive the vision of God whether he had had it before or not.

Symeon maintains that sanctity is available to laypeople. He refers to the teaching of St. John Chrysostom that it is “possible for one who has wife and children, men and women servants, a large

¹²⁶ Fraigneau-Julien, *Les Sens Spirituels*, 189.

¹²⁷ Symeon and Griggs, *Divine Eros*, 77. (Hymn 14)

¹²⁸ Fraigneau-Julien, *Les Sens Spirituels*, 202.

¹²⁹ Symeon and McGuckin, *Chapters and Theological Discourses*, 85. (Chp. 3.46)

¹³⁰ Symeon, Turner, and Paramelle, *Epistles*, 165. (Ep. 4)

household, and great possessions, and who is prominent in worldly affairs...daily to weep and pray and repent; he can also attain to perfection of virtue if he so wishes. He can receive the Holy Spirit and become a friend of God and enjoy the vision of Him."¹³¹ The penitential practices he urges, however, for those who implore God to give them this vision, seem rather impractical for anyone who is not a monk. How can a person living in the world do all the fasting, weeping, watching, refraining from washing, and refusing of money and possessions he says are necessary to obtain a conscious possession of the Holy Spirit? It is true that a certain measure of penance is required for growth in the virtues and in charity, and that without the grace of the Holy Spirit we can do nothing with regard to our salvation. It is true that many mystics, and Symeon among them, have testified to a conscious experience of God within them, and there is no reason to disbelieve them when they say that such an experience is part of the normal flowering of the grace of baptism and the Christian life. What is troubling is Symeon's insistence on the necessity of such a conscious experience for salvation, because it does not take into account that a person may have knowledge, by his faith in the efficacy of the sacraments, of his possession of the Holy Spirit without the perception of it by his spiritual senses. Though in his account of the conscious possession of the Holy Spirit Symeon is probably describing only the pinnacle of the spiritual life, while passing over all the intermediate stages leading up to it, it would have been better if he had made this more explicit.

¹³¹ Symeon, *The Discourses*, 93. (5th CatD)

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