

Piety of the Laity in Byzantium

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Over fifty years ago the historian Norman Baynes noted a dual ethic of lay and monastic ways of life in Byzantium, “two standards, one of the ordinary Christian living his life in the work-a-day world and the other standard for those who were haunted by the words of Christ: ‘if thou wouldst be perfect’”¹. This dualism still faces the Orthodox Christian who is steeped in the ascetical ethos of the Fathers of the Church and has the opportunity to visit flourishing Orthodox monasteries in Europe and America. The event that, for me, crystallized the question of this duality and led me to make it the focus of my dissertation was that great classic of the Orthodox monastic tradition, the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Klimakos, abbot of Mt. Sinai.

The *Ladder* is a work of extraordinary literary beauty and uncompromising monastic austerity. I wondered how this paradoxical work could both attract the lay faithful and keep them at a distance. If the *Ladder* is supposed to be climbed by monks, do laypeople have to remain eternally at its bottom step gazing up? Ecclesiologically speaking, how can the Church be One and Holy, if such a differentiation makes it impossible for all to share a single consciousness of Christian holiness?

By now some of you may be wondering why I am discussing the relations of laypeople to monks and not to clergy. My reasons are largely historical. The role of the clergy was certainly important in Byzantium, but it was the holy monk who captured the Byzantine imagination and was, as Baynes says, “the realization of the Byzantine ideal.”² Having through extraordinary ascetic effort achieved a state of untroubled tranquility, he transmitted God’s favor to the laypeople, who toiled away in a life of socio-economic duty. To quote Baynes again: “The Christian faith becomes a religion of mediation, but not distinctively of priestly mediation; the priest in your village, married, with all the anxieties of wife and children, carrying on a trade, it may be, to secure his livelihood—he is far too near to your condition.”

Of course the relationship of laypeople to monastics is not merely of historical interest, since Orthodox Christians look to holy Tradition as a guide for action now. Till recently, we in America have been able to escape the practical implications of monasticism. But with the revival of monasticism in traditionally Orthodox countries, the growth of monasteries in North America, and the dissemination of translated monastic texts, we can no longer ignore the question. Already, tensions have arisen between some of our monastic communities, parishes, and bishops.

In response we need a new articulation and interpretation of the wisdom of the Church Fathers, one that remains faithful to the mind of Christ that they expressed but which answers the needs of our perplexing times. In what follows I can only offer a brief

¹ Norman H. Baynes, “The Thought-World of East Rome,” in *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1974), 26.

² Baynes 27.

review of some of the important patristic sources for an understanding of the place of laypeople in the Church.

Returning to the first chapter of the *Ladder*, we find that John Klimakos does not think of monastics and laypeople monolithically. Instead, he sketches the different states of spiritual life in a spectrum, ranging from the closest friends of God to his bitterest enemies. A Christian is designated as “one pleasing to God” and is described as one who avoids sin and does not neglect virtue, according to his ability. Such a person would presumably be married. The “continent,” on the other hand, looks not to the family man for a model, but to the monks, struggling to imitate their way of life as much as possible in the midst of worldly cares. Then the monk himself:

A monk is an angelic order and state achieved in an earthly and soiled body. A monk is one who holds to the rules and words of God in every time and place and matter. A monk is constant forcing of nature and unceasing guarding of the senses. A monk is a chaste body and a purified mouth and an illumined mind. A monk is a deeply afflicted soul that both awake and asleep is continuously occupied with the remembrance of death.³

Whereas the laypeople strive to bring their lives into line with virtue in the natural conditions of human life, the monk is struggling to do violence to nature, to continually force his physical nature—not to destroy it, but to transcend it and eventually draw it up into the spirit’s glory: “Withdrawal from the world is voluntary hatred of vaunted material things and denial of nature for the attainment of what is above nature.”⁴ The result of this striving is that “Angels are a light to monks, and the monastic life is a light to all men.”⁵ For John, the monk has indeed chosen a loftier way of life, but this ascent is rooted in an appreciation of weak and mortal human nature.

A somewhat different perspective is found in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite. This mysterious figure, who is most likely not the disciple of St. Paul in Acts, in fact coined the term *hierarchy*. For him, the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies constitute a great chain of being whereby the illuminating energies of God proceed into the world in order to gather it up into his mystical unity. The emphasis here is not on the superiority of one rank to another, but on their common participation, each according to its ability, in the divine light. Created beings are not passive recipients in this process, but co-workers with God in initiating those lower in the hierarchy: they are both purified and purifier, illumined and illuminator, perfected and perfecting, to use the triad found in Dionysios. For him, monks are not right below the angels. That place is reserved for the bishops, as earthly “hierarchs,” the leading principles and initiators of the earthly Church, themselves illumined by the angelic orders above them. The other clergy, priests and deacons, are also placed above monks, in a first, clerical triad of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The monks finally make their appearance at the head of the second triad, with the fully initiated laypeople below them, and those in various stages of penance and purification in the lowest place. The lay members of the middle order are

³ Ladder 1.4, p. 4.

⁴ Ladder 1.4, p. 4.

⁵ Ladder 26.31.

described in very positive terms, as possessing a high spiritual state. But a higher state is reserved for the monks:

That which is entirely open to those of the middle order is often forbidden to monks, because theirs is a single-minded type of life and they have the duty to be at one only with the One, to be united with the sacred unity, to imitate so far as they may the life of the clerics to whom they are much more akin than are the other ranks of initiates.⁶

Although in the last phrase Dionysios assigns monks certain almost sacral qualities, elsewhere he makes it clear that they are not to presume to have any authority over the clergy, but only to follow their lead in being uplifted to divine contemplation.⁷

The ascetical insights of John Klimakos and the cosmological insights of Dionysios the Areopagite were drawn together by St. Maximos the Confessor. He anchors lay piety through three ideas: Christ the God-man as mediator of all divisions, the liturgy as the place of mediation, and the role of asceticism in enabling us to partake of this gift of God in Christ.

In *Difficulty* 41, Maximos lays out his vision of how man as microcosm is intended from the beginning to mediate between the four natural dichotomies of creation: male/female, paradise/world, heaven/earth, intelligible/sensible. This is accomplished, even in the face of sin and death, by the Word of God incarnate, who recapitulates all things in himself, uniting them without destroying their natural principles and differences. The culmination of this economy is Christ's mediation of the ultimate chasm separating created beings from their Creator. Within this plan, the overcoming of the division between male and female stands out as the most directly relevant to the question of lay piety. However intractable the tension may seem on sociological grounds, the economy of Christ accomplishes it paradoxically, through the mystery of his own birth from a virgin Mother. This mediation is offered to the believer through the cosmic celebration of the Divine Liturgy. In his *Mystagogy*, Maximos aligns the drama of the Divine Liturgy with his concept of mediation, and shows how this is conveyed through the partaking of the Eucharist. But this mystical communion requires the eyes of spiritual contemplation, which are prepared by the practical life of repentance and purification from the passions, outlined in the *Centuries on Love*. This ascetical discipline is explicitly directed to laypeople as well as monastics, with differentiation where necessary between their specific duties. For example, the monks must renounce all possessions and the associated worries, while laypeople are supposed to practice poverty by being wise stewards of the wealth that they earn, for godly purposes.

St. Maximos did not create a theological system in the scholastic sense, but the breadth and profundity of his vision earn it the honor of being a true synthesis of Greek patristic theology. If he provides the broad theological outlines for Byzantine lay piety, the details were filled in by countless other bits of patristic and practical wisdom. Of these, the Father who might deserve the designation of doctor *par excellence* of lay piety

⁶ EH 6.3.2, p. 117-18.

⁷ EH 6.3.1, p. 117.

is St. John Chrysostom. Though himself a monk, his pastoral experience gave him a deep appreciation for the intricacies and challenges of the Christian married state; in season and out of season he exhorted and reproved and consoled laypeople on how to live authentically Christian lives. In a characteristic passage, Chrysostom anticipates the common objection that “I am a layman, I have a wife and children, that is for priests, that is for monks.”⁸ He has no time for such excuses; with his constant emphasis on willpower, he urges laypeople to order their lives and households in order to enable them to live like monks. Yet if the content, the *what* of salvation was the same for both ascetic and artisan, the practical means of achieving it, the *how* of holiness, could differ somewhat. He waxed eloquent on the pure pleasures of domestic and neighborly harmony, and he even argued in several cases that the lay vocation was more useful insofar as holy laypeople living in the world were a more effective and more constant witness to Christianity than the withdrawn monks. And last but not least, there was Chrysostom’s persistent, almost monotonous emphasis on almsgiving as the primary virtue, distinctly superior to mere bodily virginity and thus in some ways the great equalizer between the monks and the married.

Chrysostom’s emphasis both on monks as exemplars for laypeople, and on the lay duty to give alms, reflects faithfully the reality of the symbiosis between the two ways of life in Byzantium. This can be glimpsed in the lives of monastic saints themselves. Instead of aloof figures looking down in contempt from their pillars and caves on the crowds of lay pilgrims below, we find them intimately involved with the life of their brethren: exhorting, counseling, healing, arbitrating, interceding with men and with God. And in turn the great labors of the great holy men and the vast monastic communities that sprang up in admiration and imitation of their labors would not have been possible without the material support offered by laypeople. It is in these webs of mutual dependence, this spiritual and material economy, that the theological vision of the Church as the Body of Christ is incarnated socially and historically.

Currently in his final year of the PhD program in the History Department at Princeton University, Nicholas Marinides is also the Bliss Prize Junior Fellow in Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks. His research and teaching interests cover the Greco-Roman, Syriac, and Arabic cultural traditions of the late antique and medieval periods and focus on the effect of theology in the daily practice of religion. Nicholas is also the cofounder of the Florovsky Theological Society at Princeton, which seeks to promote the study of the Church Fathers through the writings of the great twentieth-century Orthodox theologian Fr. Georges Florovsky. Nicholas was born and raised in Buffalo NY, attending Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church there, and has traveled widely in North America, Europe, and the Middle East for pilgrimage, study, and leisure.

⁸ *Adversus Judaeos* 8.4 (PG 48: 932).