

FROM THE LIFE OF OUR HOLY FATHER ST MAXIMOS KAPSOKALYVITIS

The divine Gregory of Sinai met St Maximos one day, and spoke with him. Among other things he said: 'O my venerable Father, I pray you, tell me, do you have the intellectual prayer in you?'

He smiled and said to him: 'I will not hide it from you, venerable Father, the miracle that the Mother of God has done for me. I have always had, since my youth, a great confidence in the Mother of God. I prayed her in tears to give me the grace of intellectual prayer. One day when I had gone, as was my custom, in the church consecrated to her, I prayed to her once more with all my heart. And at the moment when I embraced her holy icon, I felt a warmth in my chest, such a flame which came from the icon, which did not burn me, but covered me like dew, surrounding me with sweetness, and put into my soul an immense tenderness. It was from that moment, Father, that my heart began to speak down there underneath the prayer and that my intellect knew the sweetness of the continual recollection of Jesus and of the Mother of God. After that, he prayer never left my heart. Forgive me.'

The divine Gregory then said to him: 'Tell me, at the moment when you said the prayer 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me', did you notice a divine change, or an ecstasy, or some other fruit of the Holy Spirit?'

The divine Maximos replied to him: 'O Father, if I have gone to a deserted place, if I have always desired the life of stillness, it is justly so as to enjoy the better the fruit of the prayer, which is an immense love of God and a ravishment of the intellect into the Lord.'

St Gregory said to him: 'I pray you, Father, tell me. You have in you that about which you speak?' The divine Maximos smiled again and said to him: 'Give me something to eat. Do not enquire about my illusions.'

The divine Gregory said to him then: 'I would like to have in me that illusion of yours, too. But I pray you to tell me what your intellect sees with its own eyes at the moment when it is ravished in God; and if it is possible for it to raise prayer at the same time as the heart.'

St Maximos replied to him: 'No, it cannot do so. When, through prayer, the grace of the Holy Spirit comes in man, prayer ceases. For the intellect is entirely dominated by the

grace of the Holy Spirit. It can no longer act by itself. It no longer does anything. It is overcome by the Holy Spirit, and it goes where the Holy Spirit wants: in the immaterial air of the light of God, or in an other contemplation which is not possible to say, or often also in the hearing of divine words. The Comforter, the Holy Spirit, comforts its servants, as it wants. It gives to them its grace according to what is appropriate to each person.

'One can see clearly what I want to say if you consider the prophets and the apostles to whom it was given to have such contemplations, even if men mocked them and called them lost and drunken (cf. Acts 2 : 13). The prophet Isaiah say the Lord elevated on a throne, and the seraphim which surrounded him (cf. Is. 6 : 2). Stephen, the first martyr, saw the heavens open and Jesus on the right hand of the Father (cf. Acts 7 : 56). In the same way, even today, it is given to the servant of God to have visions. Certain people don't believe this, and deny their reality. They hold them to be illusions. And they consider that those who have visions are being led astray. I wonder at how hard such people are. With blinded soul, they do not believe what God himself, who cannot lie, has, by the mouth of the prophet Joel, promised that he would give when he said: 'I will spread the grace of my Spirit on all the faithful, on my servants and on my people' (Joel 3 : 2). It is this grace which is come that the Lord gives. He gives it again today. And he will give it until the end of the world to his faithful servants, as he has promised. When this grace of the Holy Spirit comes on anyone, it does not show him what he is used to seeing, it does not show him sensible things of this world, but it reveals to him what he has never seen, what he never imagined. Then the intellect of this man receives from the Holy Spirit the teaching of the most high mysteries, hidden mysteries that the bodily eye of man can never see, nor his intellect understand by itself, as the divine Paul says (cf. 1 Cor. 2 : 9).

'To understand how the intellect can see the mysteries, consider what I have tried to say. In so much as it is distant from the fire, the wax is solid and is ready to be taken by the fire. But if you put it in the fire, it melts, it shines and burns in the flame, it becomes light and is consumed completely in the fire. It cannot avoid melting in the fire, nor avoid becoming like water. Just so the intellect of man, in so much as it is alone and has not encountered God, can only conceive of things which are under its own control. But if it approaches the fire of the Divinity of the Holy Spirit, it is from that moment onward totally under the direction of the light of God,

it itself becomes the light, it burns in the flame of the Holy Spirit and melts under the divine thought. And it is thereafter impossible, in the fire of the Divine, to conceive for itself what is purely its own and what it wants.'

The divine Gregory said to him then: 'Could other things exist which appear to be the same as these, but which would belong to the order of illusion?'

And the great Maximos replied to him: 'Some things are the signs of illusion, and other those of grace. For the malign spirit, the spirit of lies, when he approaches man, disturbs and exacerbates the intellect. He hardens and darkens the heart. He arouses laziness, fear and pride. He puts frightening things before the eyes. He causes chaos in the brain. He makes the entire body shiver. He reveals to his eyes in fantasy a light impure and unclear, but red. He makes the intellect beyond itself and renders it demoniac. He pushes him to say ill-intentioned words and blasphemies with his lips. He who sees this spirit of illusion is the greater part of time in a spirit of irritation, he is full of choler, he totally ignores humility, true grief and tears, he throws himself away from what is good for him always, he is full of vanity. Without the least reserve, without fear of God, he lives constantly with his passions. He ends up by escaping entirely from himself and losing himself entirely. May the Lord, through your prayers, deliver us from such illusion.

'As for the signs of grace, they are: When the grace of the Holy Spirit comes to a man, it gathers his intellect, it makes him humble and attentive, it carries in it the memory of death and of sins which he has committed, of judgement to come and of eternal punishment. It fills his soul with compunction. It makes him weep, embrace grief. It rends his eyes soft and full of tears. The more it approaches a man, the more it calms his soul which it consoles with the holy sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ and through his infinite love of man. It awakens the highest contemplations in his intellect, true contemplations. Then the contemplation of the incomprehensible power of God: how through a single word he has created the whole universe and has led it from nothing to being. Then the contemplation and the infinite power through which he holds and governs everything, leading everything in his providence. Finally the contemplation of mystery of the Holy Trinity and of the bottomless ocean of the divine Being. When the intellect of man is ravished by the divine light, brightened by the splendour of the spiritual knowledge of God, then his heart becomes serene and gentle, he bears the fruits of the Holy Spirit, the joy, the peace, the patience, the goodness, the compassion, the love, the humility (cf. Gal. 5 : 22). And his soul exults, ineffably rejoicing.'

St Gregory of Sinai, amazed, admired what he heard, what the divine Maximos told him. And he no longer spoke of him as a man, but as a terrestrial angel.