

Genuine and False Experiences of the Grace of God

A recorded speech of Archimandrite George of our Holy Monastery of Saint Gregory of the Holy Mountain at Stratoní of Halkidiki, on 14/27 January 1989, at the invitation of the Most Reverend Nikodemos, Metropolitan of Hierissou, of the Holy Mountain and Ardameri.

I am very pleased seeing at this evening's meeting, a holy and blessed gathering, the honorable presbytery led by the preacher of the Holy Metropolis, but also yourselves, a pious crowd, who through the blessing and invitation of your Most Reverend Metropolitan and Head Shepherd, you are gathered here this evening so that all of us confess our true faith to our God-man Lord. Your presence this evening is not only the attendance for a lecture but also the testimony of the Orthodox faith, which my humility will profess by mouth while you profess it with your presence. And as the Lord said in the Holy Bible: "Whoever confesses Me in front of men, I shall confess him in front of My Father in the Heavens".

The purpose of our life, as you know, is our union with God. As the Holy Bible says, man was created "in the image and likeness" of God, namely to unite with Him. The likeness of man with God, our holy Fathers call it "theosis". Can you see how great is the purpose of man's life? Not simply to become better, more virtuous, more courteous, but a god by grace. And what is the difference between the Holy God and deified man? That our Maker and Creator is God by nature and according to His nature, while we become gods by grace, for although by nature we remain men, with His grace we are deified.

When man unites with God by grace, he receives also the experience of God, he feels God. For otherwise how could we unite with God without feeling His grace?

The first-created in Paradise, before they sinned, could converse with God, could feel divine grace. God created man to be a priest, prophet, king. **Priest** to accept His existence and the world as gifts of God, and to offer in return himself and the world to God eucharistically and doxologically. **Prophet** to understand the mysteries of God. **King** to reign in the material creation and himself, and to use nature not as a tyrant but as a ruler. Not to abuse creation, but to use it thankfully. Today man does not use nature logically but acts selfishly and foolishly, with the result of destroying his natural surrounding and within it destroying himself.

If man had not sinned and replaced his love and obedience to God with his selfishness, he would not have separated from God, but would have been king, priest and prophet. However, our Holy God who hurts for His creature, wishes to return man back to the state where he again can become a true priest, prophet and king. To be able to again

receive the experience of God and to unite with Him. For this, in the history of the Old Testament we see God preparing slowly the salvation of man with the coming of His Only Son. He thus gives graces like those that man had before his fall, like the grace of prophesy. In the Old Testament there were men, like the prophet Elijah, the prophet Isaiah, the prophet Moses, who received the prophetic grace and saw the glory of God. Except this grace was not generally given to all, nor was it for the full period of their lives, but was a partial grace that God gave them for a specific purpose and for defined occasions. Namely, whenever God wished these just men to declare the coming of Christ to the world or to declare His Will, they were given the capacity to receive some experiences and revelations.

However, the prophet Joel prophesied that a time will come when God will give the grace of the Holy Spirit not only to select men and for a specific purpose, but to all people. Here is what the prophesy of Joel says: "I shall pour My Spirit upon all flesh", I shall give My Spirit to every person, "and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions" (Joel 2:28). Namely, my people will see spiritual visions, will see the mysteries of God. This pouring of the Holy Spirit happened during Pentecost. Then the grace of the Holy Spirit was given to the whole Church. This grace was not given during the period of the Old Testament because Christ was not yet incarnate. The communion of man with God had to first be restored for God to give the grace of the Holy Spirit to all the people. This communion our Saviour Christ achieved through His Incarnation

The first union that God had with man in Paradise was not hypostatic and for this it failed. The second union is hypostatic, namely personal. In the hypostatic person of Christ, human nature was united undisturbed, properly, indivisibly, inseparably, with the divine nature forever. No matter how much men sin, it is no more possible for human nature to separate from God, because in Jesus Christ, the God-man, it is united forever with the divine nature.

For man therefore to be able to receive the Holy Spirit, to become priest, king and prophet, to know the mysteries of God and to feel God, he must become a member of the Body of Christ, of the Church. Jesus Christ is the only one, true and perfect priest, king and prophet. What Adam and Eve were created to do, they failed due to sin and selfishness, but was done by Christ. Now all of us, united with Christ, can partake in the three offices of Christ - the royal, the prophetic and the priestly. At this juncture we must clarify that with Holy Baptism and Chrismation, the Christian receives the priesthood but not the special priesthood that is obtained through tonsuring and through which the liturgists of the Church receive the grace to perform in the Church and to shepherd the laity.

Laity, again, is not only the non-priestly but those who through Holy Baptism and Chrismation receive the right to be members of the people of God and the Body of Christ, to participate in the three offices of Christ. In fact the more healthy, conscious and active a Christian member of the people of God and of the Body of Christ is, that much more closely he participates in the priestly, prophetic and royal right of Christ, and that much greater experience and feeling of His grace he receives as we see in the lives of the Saints of our Faith.

Forms of experience of the grace of God

What are the experiences of grace that a Christian can receive so that his faith and Christian life not be for him something mental and external, but a true spiritual feeling of God, a communion with God, a habitation of God in which the complete man participates.

It is foremost an internal information that through faith in God he finds the true meaning of his life. He feels that his faith in Christ is a faith that comforts him internally, that gives meaning to his life, and guides him, that it is a strong light that illumines him. When he perceives the Christian faith within himself this way, he begins to live the grace of God. God is not something external to him.

Another experience of the grace of God man receives is when he hears in his heart the invitation of God to repent of his dark and sinful deeds, to return to the Christian life, to confess, to enter on the path of God. This voice of God he hears inside him is an early experience of the grace of God. All those years he lived away from God he could not understand anything.

He starts to repent: he confesses to the Confessor for the first time in his life. After confession he feels a great peace and joy that he never felt before. And then he says: "I have been comforted". This comfort is the visit of divine grace in a soul that has repented and God wishes to comfort it.

The tears of a repenting Christian when he prays and asks to be forgiven by God or when he confesses are tears of repentance. Those tears are very comforting. They bring lots of peace to the soul of man. Then man feels that these are the gifts and experiences of divine grace.

The deeper man repents and comes to a greater love of God and prays with godly eros, that much more those tears of repentance become tears of joy, tears of love and divine eros. Those tears that are higher than the tears of repentance, are also a higher visitation and experience of the grace of God.

We approach to commune the Body and Blood of Christ having repented, confessed, and fasting with spiritual preparation. After Holy Communion what do we feel? Deep peace in our soul, spiritual joy. This too is a visitation of Divine grace and an experience of God.

There are however other higher experiences of God. The higher experience of God is the vision of the uncreated Light. This Light the disciples of the Lord saw on the Mount of Transfiguration. They saw Christ shine like the sun with heavenly and divine light, which is not material, created light, like the sun and the other created lights. It was the uncreated Light, namely the Light of God, the Light of the Holy Trinity. Those who are completely cleansed from their passions and sin, and pray with true and pure prayer, they are found worthy of this great experience to see the Light of God in this life. This Light is what will be shining in eternal life. Not only can we see eternity from now, but we can also see from now this Light. For this Light envelops the Saints. We do not see it, but the pure of heart and saints do see it. The bright halo that is painted around the faces of the Saints is the Light of the Holy Trinity that has illumined and sanctified them.

In the life of Basil the Great we read that Basil, when he was praying in his cell, he could be seen entirely shining as well as his cell which was illumined by the uncreated Light. We see the same in the lives of many saints.

So, therefore, for someone to be found worthy to see the uncreated Light is one of the highest experiences of God, which is not given to everyone but to very few, those who have progressed in spiritual life. According to Abba Isaac, in every generation almost one man manages to see lucidly the uncreated Light. There are however even today Christians who are worthy to have this unique experience of God.

Of course we should also say that everyone that sees light does not mean that he sees the uncreated Light. The devil deceives and shows them other lights, demonic or psychological, to believe that it is the uncreated Light, when it is not. For this every Christian that hears something or has a certain experience, must not accept it as if from God, because he could be deceived by the devil. He must however confess it to his Confessor who will then tell him whether it is from God or if it is a deceit of demons. A lot of caution is needed in such cases.

Determination of a pure experience of the grace of God

Let us now look at the conditions which ensure whether different experiences we have are genuine and not false.

The first condition is that we should be men of repentance. If we do not repent of our sins and cleanse ourselves of our passions we cannot see God. As the Lord says in His beatitudes, "Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God". The more man cleanses himself from his passions, repents and returns to God, that much better he could feel and see God.

To attempt to receive experiences of God with artificial ways and methods as is done in the heresies of Hinduism and in Yoga is false. Those experiences are not from God. Those are experiences that are derived from psychological ways.

The Holy Fathers tell us: "Give blood and receive the Spirit". In other words, if you do not give the blood of your heart with your repentance, prayer, fasting, and asceticism, you cannot receive the grace of the Holy Spirit. True spiritual experiences are given to those who through humility do not ask for spiritual experiences, but ask God for repentance and salvation. To those who are humble and say, "My God, I am not worthy to receive a visitation of Your grace, and divine and heavenly solace and spiritual pleasures". To those however who through pride ask God to give them experiences, He will not give them true and genuine experiences due to their pride. So therefore the second is humility.

The third condition to receive a true spiritual experience is to be in the Church. Not outside the Church. For outside the Church the devil will deceive us. When a sheep becomes separated from the flock, it will be destroyed by the wolf. Within the flock there is security. The Christian inside the Church is secure. However, when he leaves the Church, he is exposed to the deceits of other people and of demons. We have many examples of many people who did not obey the Church and in their spiritual state they fell into deceits. And they believed that they saw God or that they were visited by God when in reality the experiences they had were demonic and destructive to them. Also it helps greatly to have pure and warm prayer. The truth is that at the time of prayer God gives most spiritual experiences to man. For this, those who pray with longing, zeal and patience, receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the feeling of the grace of God.

As you may know, there is a prayer we say at the Holy Mountain and which you may also be saying: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, the sinner". This prayer which is characterized as noetic, heartfelt and unremitting when it is said with humility, with longing and persistence, brings in the heart of man the feeling of the grace of God.

False experiences of the grace of God

People have false experiences of God when they believe that by themselves, with their own powers, in heresies, in groups, in religious gatherings, outside the Church, they can

receive the grace of the Holy Spirit. They gather and some new "prophet" acts the leader and they believe they are receiving the grace of God.

It happened that I was present at a gathering of Pentecostals in the United States in 1966 while I was there. Their "church" was a hall of a school. First someone started to play some music with soft and gentle sounds, which as it went on it was becoming progressively more intensive, deafening and frantic so that it caused excitement. The music finished and the preacher started. He too started gently and as he continued he would scream louder. At the end he too created an excited atmosphere. And then when all the people suffered from auto-suggestion and hysteria, they started to scream and move their hands and give out unintelligible shouts. I felt that the Spirit of God was not there, which is a Spirit of peace and not of disturbance and excitement. The Spirit of God does not come with artificial and psychological ways. Instead I felt sorry for the children that were there with their parents for they could suffer the consequences of this mass neurosis.

A young man who became a monk at the Holy Mountain and who first went through the Hindu yoga (you should know that there are approximately 500 Hindu heresies in Greece), described to me what experiences they try to have there. When they wished to see light they would rub their eyes so that they could see little stars. When they again wished to hear unusual sounds they performed some sort of pressuring of the ears so that they would create sounds.

Similar psychological experiences that are produced artificially, some heretics attribute them to the Holy Spirit.

Other experiences in heretic gatherings are not only psychological. They could be demonic. The devil manipulates the seeking of such experiences by some people and presents them different signs which are not of God but theirs - diabolical. They cannot understand that they are victims of the devil.

They believe these signs are heavenly and from the Holy Spirit. The devil also can give them some prophetic capability as he gives to the "mediums". The Lord has however forewarned us, "There will rise false christs and false prophets and will give you great signs and wonders, insomuch that if it were possible they shall deceive the very elect (Matt. 24:24), They won't simply do miracles and wonders, scary signs. Like the Antichrist when he will come he will not do bad things. He will do benefactions, healing of the sick and other impressive things to deceive the people, if possible even the elect, to believe him as savior and follow him.

That is why we must be careful. Everyone who can do signs and prophesies is not always from God. Again as the Lord says: "Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord have we

not prophesied in Your name? And in Your name cast out devils? And in Your name done many wonderful works? And then will I say unto them, I never knew you: depart from Me you that work iniquity" (Matt. 7:22-23).

I knew a young man who was led astray by occult and Pentecostal heresies, who confessed that the different experiences he had when he was a members of these heresies, were diabolical.

A previous Pentecostal man for example confessed that at the Pentecostal gatherings, when some "prophetess" would prophesy, he felt a demonic disturbance and that when he tried to say the prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me the sinner", the speaking in tongues would start and drown him, impeding him from saying the prayer.

Because the devil transforms to an angel of light, we must be careful with experiences. The Apostle John advises us: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1). Not all the spirits are from God. Those who have the Apostle Paul's gift of discernment of spirits (1 Cor. 12:10) can discern the spirits if they are from God or if from the devil. The Confessors of the Church have this gift. That is why when we have such problems we must seek our Confessor and he will determine the source of every experience.

Even the monastics can be deceived. We have cases at the Holy Mountain where monks were deceived by such experiences. For example, an angel appeared to a monk - while it was the devil - and told him: "Come to the peak of Athos to show you great miracles". He guided him there and he almost fell over the cliff, had he not invoked divine help. He made the mistake to believe the vision as if of God when he shouldn't have. The monastics know when they have a vision they must tell it to their Elder and he will tell them if it is from God or from the demons. Where there is pride, therefore, deceit is very possible.

About Pentecostals

The experiences of the Pentecostals are not from God. For this, not only are they not helped to come to Church but instead they are driven away from the Church. For only the devil is interested in driving people out of the Church.

Also their divisions in many heresies and groups is proof they do not comprise the true Church of God. Protestantism consists of thousands of heresies. One of the protestant heresies is Pentecostalism. Only in the USA there are over 39 different Pentecostals. Many of the Pentecostal heresies have no relationship between them. Here are some titles of some of the Pentecostal groups: "Congregation of the Church of God of the

Mountain", "Integrated Congregation of the Church of God", "Theater Gar", "Sleepless Mission", "Church of Mother Horn", "Church of Mother Robertson", "Jesus and Sleepless Mission", "Remainder of the Church of God", "Fire born Church of God's sanctity of America", "Church of Mogara Cook", "National Spiritual Davidic Union Temple Church of God", "Church of the Square Bible".

If the Spirit of God existed in these groups, there would have been a union, there would have been one Church and not so many different and opposing groups.

Also, some of the demonstrations that take place at their gatherings, such as trembling, dropping to the ground as if dead, screaming unrecognizable sounds, are not from the peaceful Spirit of God. Similar phenomena we find in idolatrous religions. There are also many similarities with the Spiritualist phenomena.

They also cultivate a spirit of pride believing that the whole Church of two thousand years is deceived, while they discovered the truth in 1900. The first one who created the group of Pentecostals is an American. The first Pentecostal in Greece, Michael Gounas, preached, "After so many centuries in the land of Greece the outset of the visitation of God happened like the day of the Pentecost". According to him, the visit of Christ started in Greece by him like in the day of the Pentecost! All these years there was nothing. Do you see the satanic egoism and pride?

What now with the sought after gift by them of "speaking in tongues"? In truth, in the New Testament there is reference to "speaking in tongues". The Holy Apostles on the day of Pentecost spoke the tongues of the people who had come for pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to teach them the Good News. The gift of speaking in tongues is a grace given by God to the Apostles for a specific purpose: To convert the non-Christians to the Christian faith. The Holy Apostles, when speaking in tongues, did not speak meaningless sounds like demoniacs. They spoke tongues, not any tongues, but the tongues of those who were in Jerusalem and could not speak the Jewish language, so that they could hear of the greatness of God and believe. So the meaningless cries have no relation to the gift of "speaking in tongues" which the Pentecostals maintain.

The Orthodox Church is the place of the genuine experience of the Grace of God

The Church of Pentecost is our Orthodox Church. And why is she? Because she is the Church of the Incarnation and Humanity of Christ, of His crucifixion death, His Resurrection, and of Pentecost. When from the complete work of Christ we isolate only one part, we overemphasize it and falsely explain it, this becomes one-sided and a heresy. Only the Church that accepts and lives the whole work of Christ, including Pentecost, is the true Church of Pentecost. Can there be a Resurrection without a Cross? Unless man

crucifies himself with fasting, prayer, repentance, humility, asceticism, could he see God? The Cross precedes in the life of Christ and of the Christian and the Resurrection and Pentecost follows. They want a resurrection and spiritual gifts without crucifying themselves through repentance, asceticism, fasting and obedience to the Church. That is why they do not comprise the Church of Pentecost.

At every Divine Liturgy of our Church we have Pentecost. How does the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ? Don't they become through the descent of the Holy Spirit? There is Pentecost! Every Holy Altar of the Orthodox Church is the table of Pentecost. At every baptism we have Pentecost. With the grace of the Holy Spirit, man becomes a Christian and becomes one with the Body of Christ. Every tonsuring of a Deacon, Priest, and of course a Hierarch is a new Pentecost. The Holy Spirit descends and makes a man a liturgist of God.

Every confession of a Christian is Pentecost. The moment the Christian kneels to his Confessor and with humility tells him his sins with repentance and the Confessor reads him the blessing of forgiveness, he is forgiven by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

At every gathering and at every Mystery of the Church it is a continuation of Pentecost, because they are performed in the presence of the Holy Spirit. For this almost all Services, the prayers and the Mysteries of the Church, begin with a prayer: "Heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of truth... come and abide in us...." We ask the Paraklete to come, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. And He comes. Wherever the Orthodox Church meets, the true Church of Christ, there also is the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Every Saint of our Church is a Spirit-bearing man, full of the gifts of the Holy Spirit - a man of Pentecost.

The Lord's Prayer requests: "Thy Kingdom come" meaning: "May the grace of Thy Holy Spirit come". The kingdom of God is a grace of the Holy Spirit. So with the "Our Father" we seek the Holy Spirit.

The prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner", this too is done through the grace of the Holy Spirit. For as the Apostle Paul says: "No one can say Lord Jesus, if not from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). No one can invoke Jesus Christ but only through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, only the Holy Water of the Orthodox remains unspoiled. Those who have Holy Water at your home, you know that no matter how old it is, it never spoils.

This is our faith, the true and Orthodox one.

To depart from this faith and follow some American recent "saviors" who believe that the Church starts with them, just imagine what demonic conceit they have! The Church exists for two thousand years and they say that from them, the Pentecostals and other heretics, begins the true faith.

When in the 14th century the western monk Barlaam fought the Orthodox teaching on the divine energies and the uncreated Light, as they lived it at the Holy Mountain, God brought forth the Hagiorite Hieromonk Gregory Palamas, a great theologian and teacher of the Orthodox Faith. As now, if the Pentecostal heresy did not exist we would not have gathered here. We would not have made our faith more profound. We would not have confessed our faith. Thus in the end it goes against the heresies and the devil what they set out to achieve against the Church. The Apostle Paul says: "For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be manifest among you" (1 Cor. 11:19). There must also exist heresies for the faith to appear in the persevering ones. Now that our holy Church is attacked by atheism, carnal pleasures, the heresies through the radio, television, newspapers and other means, this is the time that the faithful and true Orthodox Christians and fighters and witnesses of the Orthodox faith will appear.

In these very critical times, any Orthodox Christian who keeps his Orthodox faith in Christ, will receive great blessing and great reward from our Holy God. And this because in this evil and corrupt time he was not led astray by the contemporary idolatry and the false gods, he did not bend a knee to them but remained steadfast and immovable in our Orthodox Faith.

We wish therefore that no Greek Orthodox become a traitor, a Judas and apostate of our holy Orthodox faith. May all those that were led astray by the evil one due to their ignorance, into deceits and heresies, be illumined by God and return to our holy Orthodox faith that they may have the hope of salvation.

We may all be sinners, but when we are within our holy Orthodox Church we have the hope of salvation. On the contrary, even if we were "righteous" outside the Church we have no hope of salvation. All of us who are within the Church, we shall repent, we shall confess, we shall be forgiven and God shall have mercy on us. Outside the Church who will save us? What Holy Spirit will forgive our sins and which Church will intercede after our death for our souls? Therefore, any Orthodox who dies Orthodox should know he/she has a hope of salvation. However, anyone who departs from the Church, even if he believes he has done good works, has no hope of salvation.

For this, brethren, let us remain in our Orthodox Church faithful and immovable with a holy stubbornness to our end so that we may all have, with the grace of God and the blessing of the Theotokos, hope for our salvation.

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