

**Excerpts from The Way of Spiritual Transformation  
by Hieromonk Damascene**

**1. Transformation, Salvation, Deification**

*Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind* (Rom. 12:2). These words from the Epistle of the Holy Apostle Paul to the Romans help to introduce a Divinely inspired teaching on spiritual transformation.

The theme of transformation points to the purpose of our life. That purpose is unending union with God—deification, *theosis*. But deification is not a static condition: it is a never-ending growth, a process, an ascent toward God. We do not reach the end in this life, nor even in the life to come. St. Symeon the New Theologian, who attained what might be called the highest possible degree of union with God in this life, said: "Over the ages the progress will be endless, for a cessation of this growing toward the end without ending would be nothing but a grasping at the ungraspable."

Our union with God is a continual *transformation* into the likeness of God, which is the likeness of Christ.

Harry Boosalis of St. Tikhon's Seminary writes: "...salvation is more than the pardon of sins and transgressions. It is more than being justified or acquitted for offenses committed against God...salvation certainly includes forgiveness and justification but is by no means limited to them. Salvation is the acquisition of the Grace of the Holy Spirit. To be saved is to be sanctified and to participate in the life of God—indeed to become *partakers of the Divine Nature* (2 Peter 1:4)." Salvation means not simply changing God's attitude but changing ourselves and being changed by God. Salvation ultimately means deification; and deification, as we have seen, entails transformation. It is being united with God ever more fully through His Grace, His Uncreated Energy, in which He is fully present. As we participate ever more fully in God's life through His Grace, we become ever more deified, ever more in the likeness of Christ. Then, at the time of our departure from this life, we can dwell forever with Christ in His Kingdom because we "look like Him" spiritually, because we are shining with the Grace of God.

With his Incarnation, death and Resurrection, Christ redeemed human nature, opening the path to deification and even to the redemption of the body that will occur at the General Resurrection. That is the *objective* dimension of our salvation. But while our *nature* has already been saved, we have to *personally* appropriate that salvation. That

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is the *subjective* dimension of our salvation. Christ has already come to us; it is up to us to come to Him and be united with Him.

When we read Orthodox teachings on transformation, holiness, and deification—and even more when we read of people who have reached a high degree of holiness—all of it can seem far beyond us. In one sense, it *should* seem beyond us; that is, we should feel we have a long way to go, because we do. However, we should not feel that holiness and deification are ultimately out of our reach. Each one of us is called to it.

## **2. Living Sacrifices**

St. Paul's exhortation: *Be not conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.* This is part of an entire chapter of Scripture that discusses spiritual transformation. St. Paul's teaching on spiritual transformation—Romans, chapter 12—begins by telling us of the preconditions for such transformation. St. Paul writes to the Christians at Rome: *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.* St. John Chrysostom asks: "How is the body to become a sacrifice? Let the eye look on no evil thing, and it has become a sacrifice. Let your tongue speak nothing filthy, and it has become an offering. Let your hand do no lawless deed, and it has become a whole burnt offering. But this is not enough. We must have good works, also. Let the hand give alms, the mouth bless those who oppose one, the hearing find solace in Divine teachings. For sacrifice allows no unclean things: sacrifice is a first-fruit of other actions. Let us then from our hands, our feet, our mouths, and all our other members, yield a first-fruit to God." St. John Chrysostom says that, in the Old Covenant, animals offered in sacrifice were dead after the sacrifice was performed. "Not so," he says, "with our sacrifice. This sacrifice makes the thing sacrificed to be living. For when we have put to death our members, then we shall be able to live." [5] St. John is here referring to Colossians 3:5, where St. Paul says: *Put to death therefore your members which are upon the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.*

So, according to St. Paul's teaching, we are to present ourselves as living sacrifices to God. In so doing, our "old man," our "man of sin" dies, and our "new man" lives (cf. Rom. 6:6; Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9). We put to death our sinful passions, so that Christ can live in us. We die to ourselves, so that we can be reborn in Christ. We are to *continually* put to death

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the remnants of our "old man," in order to be continually transformed into the likeness of Christ. That is why St. Paul said: *I die daily* (I Cor. 15:31).

Christ offered Himself on the Cross as a sacrifice for us. In order to truly know Christ, we must enter into His self-emptying and offer a sacrifice in return. An inward sacrifice which is the *act* and *sign* of our love for God and neighbor. It is the sacrifice of our hearts and minds to God. The sacrifice of our egos, our pride, our earthly attachments and our passions. The sacrifice of our time and energy for our fellow human beings, to whom we dedicate ourselves for the sake of Christ.

As we allow Christ to put our egos to death, our fleshly selves are consumed on the altar of love, and the sacrifice rises like incense to God. And as this occurs, we are actually *re-created* by Christ into new beings: spiritual beings with an entirely new way of seeing reality, different from that of lovers of this world. Here we see the basis, the foundation, of spiritual transformation: We have to offer our whole lives to Christ in sacrifice, so that He can burn off the dross and re-create us in His likeness.

**3. Not Conformity but Transformation**

First comes sacrifice, then comes transformation. That is why, in Romans chapter 12, the first precedes the other in direct sequence: *Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God—and be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.* "Be not conformed to the world" can be understood to mean "Be not conformed to the passions." The Fathers say that all of us have our own favorite passions: our first favorite, our second favorite, etc. We are to examine ourselves to see what our favorite passions are, so that we can confess them in the Sacrament of Confession and root them out with God's help. The word for "conform" comes from the root *schema*, which means an external pose, an appearance, an outward image, the putting on of an outward habit. It denotes not something lasting and fixed, but something unsubstantial that passes away. Another translation for this word might be "fashion," as in another passage of St. Paul, where he uses the same word: *The fashion of this world passeth away* (I Cor. 7:31). This translation has the connotation that our English word "fashion" has: that is, something that changes all the time, like fashions in clothing, etc. According to St. John Chrysostom, when St. Paul says, "Be not fashioned according to this world," he chooses the word "fashion" in order to indicate the fleetingness of this world of passions. "Be not fashioned according to the passions," one might say.

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Not so with spiritual transformation. St. Paul says, "Be *transformed* by the renewal of your mind." The word for "transformed" is *metamorphosis* in the original Greek. This denotes something lasting and enduring: not the change of one's appearance or image, as in worldly fashions, but the change of one's organic and substantial form. In other words, do not live for what passes away, but for what endures for ever. Our Lord Jesus Christ said: *Labor not for the food which perisheth, but for the food which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of Man shall give unto you: for Him hath God the Father sealed* (John 6:27).

**4. The Renewal of the Mind**

St. John Chrysostom writes: "Since it is likely that, being men, they would sin every day, St. Paul consoles his hearers by saying 'renew yourselves' from day to day. This is what we do with houses: we keep constantly repairing them as they wear old. You should do the same thing to yourself. Have you sinned today? Have you made your soul old? Do not despair, do not despond, but renew your soul by repentance, and tears, and Confession, and by doing good things. And never cease doing this."

From the theological point of view, it is important to point out that the "renewal of the mind" that St. Paul speaks about is actually the "renewal of the *nous*." In the original Greek, the word for mind here is *nous*. In Orthodox theology, the *nous* is the highest faculty or power of the human soul. It is the faculty that knows God directly; it is the seat of our personhood, which experiences the Person of God in a communion of love. St. Gregory Palamas and other Holy Fathers say that it most precisely defines what is the "image of God" in us. But every time a baptized Christian commits sin, he soils his baptismal garment, as it were. He dampens the Light of Grace inside of him; he once again darkens or sickens his *nous*. Instead of turning to and uniting with God, his *nous* turns aside to the passions, to self-love and love of sensual pleasure. By turning to the passions, the *nous* repels the Grace of God; it prevents the Christian from continuing on the path to deification in Christ.

The sickness of the *nous* leads to spiritual death. The darkness of the *nous* leads to spiritual darkness, in which we cannot see things clearly and soberly. We cannot see things as God sees them; instead, we see them through the filter of our passions. Thus, we grope about blindly in life, hurting ourselves and hurting others, either wittingly or unwittingly. We stray far from our purpose in life, which is union with God. Although we

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might think we have lots of important things to do, we wander aimlessly through life; and all our busyness only serves to distract us from our diseased spiritual state, from the fact that we are *not* fulfilling our life's true purpose. Our *nous* is sick because we have separated ourselves from God, because we have sought after our passions rather than Him.

**5. Watchfulness and Prayer**

When a sinful thought comes to us and we cut it off at once, it is not a sin. But when we *entertain* a sinful thought, when we cherish it and develop it because we are attracted to it, then it becomes sin, then it separates us from God. When we entertain impassioned thoughts, our *nous* becomes darkened, deprived of the Light of Divine Grace. These thoughts lead to impassioned feelings, and the feelings fuel more thoughts. Soon we are caught in a passion, and the passion becomes habitual. That is why we must cut off the sickness where it starts, in our thoughts.

We must realize that they can separate us from God. For example, when we have a resentful or judgmental thought against our neighbor, we must recognize that entertaining this thought will put us at enmity with God. So we *refuse* to entertain it. We just let it go. And if it comes back again an hour later, or even (as often happens) a few minutes later, we again cut it off.

When we practice watchfulness with the help of the Jesus Prayer, we make our soul open to receive the Grace of the Holy Spirit, which transforms us and deifies us. We are no longer repelling Grace but attracting it. We are calling upon Christ to have mercy on our darkened souls, to dwell within us more fully, to fill us with His unending Life, with the Light of the Holy Spirit Whom He has sent from the Father (cf. John 15:26). The effects of this Prayer are twofold. In the first place the Prayer helps us to cut off and turn away from impassioned thoughts. And in the second place the Prayer helps us to turn and keep turning to Christ our Savior at all times.

Thus our darkened *nous* is illumined by the Light of the Uncreated Grace of God. "Only the Holy Spirit can purify the *nous*," writes St. Diadochos of Photiki in *The Philokalia*. "In every way, therefore, and especially through peace of soul, we must make ourselves a dwelling-place for the Holy Spirit. Then we shall have the lamp of spiritual knowledge burning always within us."

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In addition to saying the Jesus Prayer, we should cultivate the habit of calling out to God in our own words. This should be done throughout the day. We should pray simply, from the heart. We can call out to Him either verbally or mentally, depending on the situation. Of course, we should call out to Him when temptations assail us, but we should by no means wait for such moments before we speak to Him. . Archimandrite Sophrony, the disciple of St. Silouan of Mount Athos, had the practice of praying to God each time he was about to see and speak to someone. He prayed that God would bless the encounter that was about to take place, so that God's Grace would be upon it. If we were to follow this very simple practice, just think how our daily encounters with people would be *transformed*, and how our lives would be different.

Also, together with praying throughout the day as we go about our daily tasks, it is important to devote certain times of the day to prayer, that is, to a rule of prayer. Setting aside time for daily prayer is an indispensable part of spiritual life.

### **6. The Primary Mark of Spiritual Transformation**

[In Romans Chapter 12 St. Paul] tells us what we are to be transformed *into*. He tells us we are to *show mercy with cheerfulness, to let love be without hypocrisy, to be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality*. Then the Apostle goes on to say: *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Set not your mind on high things but associate with the lowly. Be not wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.... Be not overcome by evil but overcome evil with good* (Rom. 12:8-18, 21).

What a profound and beautiful blueprint of the Christian life! It is the blueprint of a life not conformed to this world but transformed and renewed in Christ. Each point in St. Paul's exhortation deserves a discourse of its own, but here I will only discuss all the points generally. What is it that all of them have in common? Clearly, it is that we are *to have love* for one another, and even for our enemies. St. Paul is only expounding on the great commandments of Christ.

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The most essential mark of spiritual transformation is that we have love. Our Lord tells us: *By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another* (John 13:35).

For Fr. Isaaky, as for St. Paul, transformation means being able to love in the most authentic way.

"At the beginning of our spiritual journey," Fr. Isaaky said, "when we are spiritually immature, our entire religious attitude is ego-centered, emotional, and rational. The deeper level of awareness, the noetic consciousness [that is, the consciousness of the *nous*], has not yet been fully opened. We are our egos, defined by our passions. We are far from being authentic *persons* because we are caught up in our isolated individualism. [But] as we grow, and gain more control over our passions, and our souls become purified, Grace illumines our noetic consciousness. We become more aware of God's presence, and more aware of the *other*. We move away from self-centeredness. The focus of our attention is on God. As this happens, our own personal 'I' expands and encompasses others, so that we cannot conceive of ourselves in isolation from God and our brothers. This is the bond of authentic spiritual love, empowered by Grace. The more we grow in this noetic consciousness, the more our love embraces all of those around us. We pray from the heart for them, and for the whole world. We are purified by Grace, so that we can authentically love in a purely unselfish way. This is the essence of what it means to be a Christian: to authentically love.

"By truly loving God and our neighbor—we are purified, illumined, and deified. We are restored from our fallen state, from our ego/self-centeredness, and from the tyranny of our rational and emotional consciousness. The passions come under control, subordinated to the love of the *Other*. We become purified of all that focuses us on ourselves and of all barriers to love."

### **7. On Getting Out of Ruts**

What hinders us from growing *unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*, as St. Paul says (Eph. 4:13)? It is our egos, our passions, that hinder us. The problem lies with us. The problem is that, deep down, we feel that we have a "right" to our favorite passions. "I have a right to be angry," "I have a right to be resentful," "I have a right to this sinful little pleasure," or whatever it is. Deep down, we do not want to give up our passions. So the

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question comes down to this: What do we really want? Do we want to stay in our ruts, so that we can freely indulge our pride, our self-love, our self-righteousness, our desire to be right, our anger and resentments, our sinful pleasures? Are they so important to us that for their sake we will abandon the possibility of an authentic life in Christ... To get out of our ruts and get back on the path of transformation and deification, we must cast off everything that separates us from God... Then we will be able go forward, toward that which we were created for: union with God.

**8. On Not Measuring One's Progress**

The Holy Fathers counsel us that we are not to try to measure our spiritual progress. Trying to measure our progress can lead to pride on the one hand, and to despair on the other. If we think, "I'm making great progress, I'm becoming holy," we can be sure that we are *not* making progress, because we are being prideful, and pride separates us from God. On the other hand, if we despair about what seems to be our lack of progress, this despair also separates us from God.

So, let God do the measuring of our progress. Let God be the judge, both of ourselves and of others. We are not supposed to count up our virtues and good deeds and then congratulate ourselves, for Christ said, *Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth* (Matt. 6:3). In fact, we are supposed to do the opposite: we are to look at our own sins. "Grant me to see my own sins, and not to judge my brother."

Transformation by the Grace of God is imperceptible at the time that it occurs. We are being changed, but we do not know it. Therefore, we should not attempt to experience states or moments of transformation. Such an attempt can, after all, only lead to pride and delusion. It is ours only to leave behind all that separates us from God, to turn to God with our whole being, and to let God do the rest.

Spiritual transformation is only perceptible in hindsight. One day we may be able to look back and consider how things have become different. Perhaps we will notice that we are no longer enslaved to a particular passion that once held us tightly. Perhaps, although the circumstances of our lives might be even more difficult than they were in the past, we will notice that we are not reacting to them as negatively as we used to, and that we have a greater sense of trust that our lives are in God's hands. If we notice such things, let us give thanks to God and not take credit ourselves.



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Then, continuing to practice inner watchfulness, let us look more deeply into ourselves, there to discover more hidden and subtle passions, which we must also put to death on the altar of sacrifice for the sake of Christ.

It is a difficult path, this path of continual re-creation into the likeness of Christ, this path of sacrifice that leads to deification. Our Lord has told us: *Narrow is the gate, and difficult is the way, which leadeth unto life* (Matt. 7:14). But this is the only way we can follow in order to fulfill the true designation of our existence.

Therefore, following the exhortation of the Apostle Paul, let us not be conformed to this age, let us not follow after the fashions of this world, let us not fashion ourselves according to the passions. Rather, let us be transformed, transfigured into new beings through repentance, through the healing and purification of our *nous*. Through this transformation, may we come to genuinely love God and our neighbor, may we be united with God through His Grace, and may we dwell forever in perfect love with Christ and His saints. Amen.