

The Transfiguration of the Lord and Spiritual Life

This lesson is a beautiful lesson that shows us a new horizon in our understanding of the Bible, and more specifically Jesus, our Spiritual Life and the Transfiguration.

The Greek Fathers' Light

The two Theological Traditions of the Church (Western (Latin Fathers) and Eastern (Greek Fathers of the Church) have a different understanding on the Transfiguration of the Lord. As westerners we need to learn to breathe with the other lung as John Paul II has invited us to do.

The Greek/Byzantine Spiritual and Theological Traditions have remarkable observations on the Transfiguration. They say that the Transfiguration embodies the entire mystery of prayer and spiritual life. Understandably then, the Iconographer starts his mission in the Church with the Icon of the Transfiguration, thereby training himself to manage the mystery of the Uncreated Light.

Let us take a closer look in order to understand their position. While the western tradition follows a common sense reading of the text, saying that Jesus was really and objectively transfigured (his clothes, his face...), the eastern tradition says that in fact Jesus is transfigured from the first moment of his Incarnation and that the Apostles are the ones who have their being transfigured, thus becoming capable of seeing Christ as He is. Therefore, they give great importance to the Ascent of the Mountain, the four words used in it, and they consider that it summarises the Spiritual Ascent. Finally, they say, as well, that the light the Apostles saw is the Uncreated Light of Jesus' Divinity and not a created light.

Study of the Text (Mt 17:1-9; Mk 9:2-10; Luke 9:28-36)

- a- The main content of the Transfiguration is a Vision (see text, Mt 17:9).
- b- The Text starts with a Promise (see the verse before). The Promise is about a Vision. The Transfiguration is the fulfilment of this Promise of vision, on earth. It opens a new horizon for us, that we, as well, could have such an experience.
- c- The two parts of the Transfiguration event: on top of the mountain:
 - i- Jesus' clothes, Face; Moses, Elijah, Jesus; Peter's words.
 - ii- The overshadowing of the Cloud, the Father's Words.
- d- Why does Jesus ask the apostles not to mention the Transfiguration before the Resurrection? The people who are narrating the Transfiguration are not witnesses. The only witnesses hardly mention it, namely, Peter and John.
- e- Transfiguration and the Second Letter of Peter: relationship between being a witness/preacher and the personal experience of the Transfiguration of the Lord.

Transfiguration and Spiritual Life

We reach now the most important point which is to understand the relationship between the Transfiguration and our Spiritual Life. We need to notice the practical implications we can draw from the Mystery of the Transfiguration as seen by the Greek Fathers. The following are various points that we should focus on.

- a- Transfiguration is a Promise of a vision: to **see** the uncreated nature of God. In spiritual life, St. John of the Cross presents the growth of our desire to "See God", the very nature of God (see *Spiritual Canticle*) as an essential pattern in the soul that follows Jesus and grows spiritually. It is good to study the Grace of the Spiritual Betrothal (see *Spiritual Canticle* Stanza 13: "Turn them away, O my Beloved!") under that perspective, seeing it as the achievement of that growing desire to see God. The love of God and the desire with great yearning to see the Jesus' Divine Nature grows tremendously. One day, then, God reveals some rays of His divinity which take one out of oneself..
- b- Understanding this desire to see God as a central part of our Spiritual Journey and growth.
- c- This desire is the core of the Transfiguration.
- d- The similarities between the Transfiguration and the Mass:
 - i- "Six/eight days later". Allusion to the Weekly Celebration/Meeting with Jesus.

ii- Introduction, First Part, Second Part, Sending us.

iii- First part: similarities.

iv- Second Part: similarities.

e- The Feast of the Transfiguration comes exactly 7 months after the Epiphany: indeed, the small light appeared on the 6th of January (the Baby Jesus) and reaches its zenith on the 6th of August.

f- The Transfiguration according to the Greek Fathers is about “seeing the uncreated nature of God” (see St Gregory Palamas Homilies on the Transfiguration) Therefore, it is good to deepen, according to Catholic tradition, our awareness that the result of our participation in spiritual growth is to become more Godlike.

Pending Questions

This lesson doesn't claim to explain and address all the points related to the mystery of the Transfiguration in itself and its implications in our spiritual life. Various questions remain to be looked into more deeply. We need to go deeper, for instance, into these points:

a- Transfiguration and St John: going from ‘one event’, to restructuring all his Gospel around it.

b- Transfiguration and Mary: if Mary is pure, full of the Holy Spirit, this means that she “sees” Jesus all the time transfigured. She is the New Eve; she belongs to the new world.

c- Inspired by St Peter's account on the Transfiguration we should deepen the relationship between being a witness, evangeliser, and our spiritual life, seeing God.

d- One needs to widen our understanding of the relationship between Transfiguration and Liturgy, from the angle of spiritual life.

Practical Consequences

As a conclusion of that exploration of the relationship between Transfiguration and Spiritual life, at the end of this lesson we should retain the following points:

1- Jesus' Promise to see God is to be taken seriously, and we need to use it to nourish our Act of Hope.

2- The Greek Fathers' contribution invites western Spirituality and Theology to open its horizons and have a more balanced approach, linking them with the personal spiritual experience. (We need to open the right Lung, and learn to breathe with it: i.e. also see things like the Greek Fathers did.)

3- As the Byzantine Living Tradition suggests, we need to put the Transfiguration at the Core of our Spiritual Life, like the Mass is at its core.

4- Seeing the Mass as the Real Transfiguration.

5- Deepening the desire to “See God”.

Jean Khoury