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A Theologian Is One Who Prays

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The title of this article, as requested by *Word & World* and reflected in my work, derives from a maxim from a monk of the Eastern Church named Evagrius of Pontus (345–399) who was a student of the ascetical masters in the Egyptian deserts. It occurs in his book *Chapters On Prayer*, in the midst of describing the state of prayer in short, punctuated paragraphs. After describing the warfare with demons over spiritual prayer and the requirement of dispassion for the state of prayer, Evagrius arrives at this statement: "If you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray you are a theologian."[1] I wonder if it is harder for us to imagine prayer as theology, or theology as prayer? I doubt either is very easy, due to the fact that we have associated each word with definitions that do not easily adapt to Evagrius's challenging statement. He seems to associate them almost under the commutative principle in math wherein changing the order of the terms does not change the result, whereas we take theology and prayer to be different species, perhaps different genera, and by no means exchangeable.

On the one hand, we tend to think theology is for academics, specialists, PhDs, those who arrange a systematic bouquet of rational propositions concerning God collected from books in the library. Those whom we call theologians work in

[1]Ponticus Evagrius, "Chapters on Prayer," in *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, trans. John Eudes Bamberger (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1981) ¶60.

A theologian is someone who has been shaped by the cooperative exercise of grace and ascetical submission, whose eyes can see after their light has been restored, whose heart wills only one thing, whose mind has changed, whose life has been reconnected to the source of life. This does not require a PhD, it requires a conversion of life.

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departments housed in liberal arts departments or in divinity schools. We may or may not prefer our theologians to approach their subject with existential commitment. I recall hearing a scholar at an American Academy of Religion meeting say, "I do not have to do what they do, or believe what they believe, in order to study their cult and creed." On the other hand, we think prayer is for simple believers, practitioners, disciples, and is practiced in often emotional and usually unregulated form. It either arises out of personal situations of need, or else is practiced by people with exceptionally devout temperaments. We tend to associate it with women, children, and the elderly, because prayer is often thought to be escape from difficulties and duties that real men should face head-on. According to these definitions, why mention prayer and theology in the same breath? Indeed, there are sophisticated theologians who are embarrassed about prayer, and simple believers who are embarrassed by theologians, so why associate them at all?

***Sin is a sickness of the spirit unto death, and Christian* askesis *is in the service of life. It clears away the passions and vices for the sake of a greater good.* Askesis *is the refreshment of the* imago Dei.

Evagrius does so because the patristic, ascetical-liturgical tradition has a different understanding of each term, which I suggest comes from a connection unfamiliar to us. The point of connection between prayer and theology is asceticism. That word is accompanied by its own challenges, I know. Asceticism conjures up pictures of a bad-tempered Puritan up the family tree, or of holier-than-thou arrogance, or of an overzealous piety that cripples one from enjoying even innocent pleasures. One does not usually speak wistfully and enthusiastically of wanting to become an ascetic. And yet the tradition naturally and normally connected liturgy, asceticism, and theology when it spoke about prayer. What I would like to do here is enter through the door of asceticism to a definition of theology that will show its relationship to prayer.

Askesis

The root of the word in Greek (*askein*) had to do with training, or discipline, especially of athletes. It involves self-discipline, but not for purposes of masochism. Rather, one disciplines one's appetites, one's regimen, one's body, even one's mind in order to attain a certain end. If the athletic ascetic trains in order to play the game, toward what end does the Christian ascetic train? Holiness. Deification. Sin is a sickness of the spirit unto death, and Christian *askesis* is in the service of life. It clears away the passions and vices for the sake of a greater good. *Askesis* is the refreshment of the *imago Dei*, in the words of the Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément.

> Ascesis then is an awakening from the sleep-walking of daily life. It enables the Word to clear the silt away in the depth of the soul, freeing the spring of living

> waters. The Word can restore to its original brightness the tarnished image of God in us, the silver coin that has rolled in the dust but remains stamped with the king's likeness (Luke 15:8–10). It is the Word who acts, but we have to co-operate with him, not so much by exertion of will-power as by loving attentiveness.[2]

Askesis appears negative only if we restrict our attention to the initial steps, when our clenched hands are being pried open. Made in the image of God, we were designed to grow into the likeness of God, into holiness and union with God (*theosis*: deification). Sin is choosing other than God, disrupting that growth either by inhibition or excess. *Askesis* liberates—like a statue is liberated from the stone. The metaphor comes from John Behr. "We are a work in progress; our blueprint, the statue lying in the block of marble waiting to be sculpted, is already in the image of Christ, though for now hidden with him. We are being worked on, so that when he appears, we will appear with him."[3]

This is the vocation of monks, but it is not an exclusively monastic vocation. All monks are ascetics, but not all ascetics are monks. *Askesis* was perfected in the sands of the desert, but it is born in the waters of the font wherein free sacramental grace begins the unseen warfare against the passions. In this tradition, the word "passion" has a different meaning than it developed in the West, where it came to mean simply "strongly felt" (there can be a passion for art or an adulterous passion). In the East, a passion is any blight that corrupts the shoot that ought to grow into the flower of holiness. The term is almost always used to describe something that causes human nature to function improperly. Our faculties were well made, and they were made good, and should have opened us up to return God's love, as a flower is opened by the sun. But the passions are, in the words of Maximus the Confessor, "a movement of the soul contrary to nature."[4] "Evil is not to be regarded as in the substance of creatures but in its mistaken and irrational movement."[5] "The one who has self-love has all the passions."[6] No thing is sinful, but any thing can be used sinfully because the root of the passions is self-love. So the ascetical authors repeatedly affirm that it is not food, but gluttony, that is bad; not money, but attachment to it; not speech, but idle talk and vainglorious talk and backbiting gossip; not wine, but drunkenness; not anger if used in a just cause, but anger vented excessively in measure or unjustly directed. The problem is not money, sex, or beer; it is avarice, lust, and gluttony.

Evagrius's name surfaces here because he systematized the tradition discovered by ascetics through experimentation on their souls. This is not "his theory"; it

[2]Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (New York: New York City Press, 1996) 130.

[3]John Behr, "The Eschatological Dimensions of Liturgy," *Assembly: A Journal of Liturgical Theology* 36/1 (January 2010) 3.

[4]Maximus the Confessor, "Four Hundred Chapters on Love," in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) II.16.

[5]Ibid., IV.14.

[6]Ibid., III.8.

is an ordered account of the ascetical tradition. Evagrius traced the passions back to eight primary sources, like tracing the stream to the headwaters, which he called "the eight *logismoi,*" meaning eight evil thoughts that could awaken other passions.

> There are eight general and basic categories of thoughts in which are included every thought. First is that of gluttony, then impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, *acedia* [sloth], vainglory, and last of all, pride. It is not in our power to determine whether we are disturbed by these thoughts, but it is up to us to decide if they are to linger within us or not and whether or not they are to stir up our passions.[7]

Our faculties should operate as God intended them, but if they are displaced from their proper orientation, then they need curing. Curing, or overcoming, or containing, or correcting, or purifying these passions is the aim of *askesis*. It will bring one into a state of "dispassion," which does not mean being listless or disinterested, but standing aright: having our faculties operate in accordance with human nature as God intended human nature to operate. Since the Greek word for the passions is *pathein*, this state of uprightness is called *apatheia*, but it is a long way from what "apathy" has come to mean. *Apatheia* is the restoration of purified love. Therefore, Aidan Kavanagh can write, "The ascetic is simply a stunningly normal person who stands in constant witness to the normality of Christian *orthodoxia* in a world flawed into abnormality by human choice."[8]

This, then, is the context for Evagrius's maxim. If you truly pray you are a theologian, but the kind of prayer he is talking about comes from a purified heart. Blessed are the pure in heart, said our Lord, which means "to will one thing." Purity of heart was how Evagrius's pupil John Cassian translated *apatheia* for the West's understanding. It consists of a single-mindedness in prayer that is not divided between God and something else, and this brings Evagrius nearer his definition of theology.

Theologia

The way of the soul is seen under three stages. The first is called *praktike* because it is filled with very practical activity. This is the time of the most active battle against the passions, although the warfare will never truly end. Following a Platonic model, the ascetics speak of three faculties in a person: human beings can reason (the intellective faculty), they can desire (the concupiscible faculty), and they can be stirred to feeling (the irascible faculty). These faculties are a gift from God, and if they were to operate in harmony and under God's direction, the human being would act properly in the world. Maximus the Confessor describes a healthy state by saying, "The soul is moved reasonably when its concupiscible element is qualified by self-mastery, its irascible element cleaves to love and turns away from

[7]Evagrius, "Praktikos," in *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, ¶6.

[8]Adrian Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology: The Hale Memorial Lectures at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1981* (New York: Pueblo, 1984) 161.

hate, and the rational element lives with God through prayer and spiritual contemplation."[9] The soul enters an unhealthy state when passions excite the concupiscible, disturb the irascible, and darken the rational.[10] Therefore, combating the vices will have to be done on all three fronts: "Almsgiving heals the irascible part of the soul; fasting extinguishes the concupiscible part, and prayer purifies the mind and prepares it for the contemplation of reality."[11]

This struggle is never totally left behind, of course, because one must be on continuous guard. But it does lead to a threshold which opens out on deeper contemplation (*praktike* leads to *theoria*, or contemplation). Evagrius says this turns on the transitional hinge of *apatheia*: "Now this *apatheia* has a child called *agape* who keeps the door to deeper knowledge."[12] If our faculties could be refreshed by dispassion, then a deeper knowledge would be opened up to us. Knowledge of what? Two objects.

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In the second stage, the object of contemplation is the created universe, so Evagrius calls it *physike*. It is what we might call cosmology, or a kind of metaphysics which looks into the nature of beings, but this is not philosophy, it is still theology. It is viewing creation through the lens of scriptural revelation; or perhaps stereoscopically alongside revelation. The tradition has spoken of two books of revelation, nature and scripture, and one cannot read one without the other. *Physike* "includes penetration into the meaning of Scripture. Also included is the structured order of the universe, the varieties of natural phenomena and the natural symbols that fill our world—all these provide material for the pure of heart to grow in understanding of the ways of God with men, and so reveal something further about the nature of God himself."[13] More than just an emotional appreciation of the animals and the stars, *physike* is the capacity to discern the providential hand of God in all things. It is seeing the world as cosmos, not chaos, which we can do because we have met the *Logos* in scripture and can now detect his fingerprints (the *logoi*) in creation.

But can we contemplate any more deeply? Creation can bear witness to the Creator for us if the cataracts of the passions have been removed from our eyes, but are we invited to go any further? Augustine dares to imagine:

> Imagine a man in whom the tumult of the flesh goes silent, in whom the images of earth, of water, of air and of the skies cease to resound. His soul turns quiet

[9]Maximus, "Four Hundred Chapters on Love," IV.15.

[10]Ibid., III.20.

[11]Ibid., I.79.

[12]Evagrius, "Introductory Letter to Anatolius," in *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, 14.

[13]Introduction to *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, lxxxix.

> and, self-reflecting no longer, it transcends itself. Dreams and visions end. So too does all speech and every gesture, everything in fact which comes to be only to pass away. All these things cry out: "We did not make ourselves. It is the Eternal One who made us." And after they have said this, think of them falling silent, turning to listen to the One Who created them. And imagine Him speaking. Himself, and not through the medium of all those things. Speaking Himself. So that we could hear His word, not in the language of the flesh, not through the speech of an angel, not by way of a rattling cloud or a mysterious parable. But Himself. The One Whom we love in everything. . . . Eternal life would be of a kind with this moment of understanding.[14]

In such a state we would do more than look at the gift, we would look at the Giver. No, that is not quite right, either. The metaphor of "looking" assumes a distance, and it is precisely the character of this third stage to have overcome all distance. It is communion. It is unity. And the name Evagrius gives to this third stage is *theologia*.

Maximus says, "The mind that has succeeded in the active life advances in prudence; the one in the contemplative life, in knowledge. . . . Then at length it is deemed worthy of the *grace of theology* when on the wings of love it has passed beyond all the preceding realities, and being in God it will consider the essence of himself through the Spirit, insofar as it is possible to the human mind."[15] Theology is not something we produce, it rather is a gift synergistically received. Theology is direct communion with God in pure prayer. To theologize is to pray in spirit and in truth. For the Fathers, theology is the science of the true God, known through Christ by the Holy Spirit (which is why Athanasius uses the term *theologia* to refer to the *sacra doctrina de Trinitate*). In his marvelous history of how the word "theology" has been used, Yves Congar summarizes it this way:

> The word *theologia* takes on a special meaning with the monks and mystical writers. For them it means a knowledge of God which is either the highest form of the gnosis or of that illumination of the soul by the Holy Spirit which is more than an effect since it is the very substance of its divinization or godlike transformation. For Evagrius Pontikus, followed by Maximus Confessor and others, *theologia* is the third and the most elevated of the degrees of life. In short, it is that perfect knowledge of God which is identified with the summit of prayer.[16]

Theology and Prayer

Theology and prayer turn out to be interconnected, after all, and the mediating link is asceticism. A journey through *askesis* arrives at a view of theology and prayer united. If you are a theologian, you truly pray; and if you truly pray, you are a theologian. Theology is not just a kind of knowing, it is better understood as a kind of participation, which is why I follow Kavanagh in calling liturgical theology a case of *theologia prima*. The reason why the one who reaches the summit of

[14]Augustine, *The Confessions*, IX.10.25. This translation is Colm Luibheid's in the preface to John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982) xvii–xviii.

[15]Maximus, "Four Hundred Chapters on Love," II.26. Emphasis added.

[16]Yves Congar and Hunter Guthrie, *A History of Theology* (New York, 1968) 31.

prayer is called a theologian is not because he or she has a reasoned understanding of the divine, it is for knowing God experientially. This is not without cost. All self-love and vain conceit must be mortified first, killed by the sword of grace to which the sinner submits, before the summit of prayer can be reached. This theology is a gift, but one synergistically received. "This kind of penetration into the Divinity is an exalted state and as such is beyond the mere capacity of man. Man can only pray for it and humbly and gratefully receive it as a gift.…In this mysticism at its highest point it is the Blessed Trinity that is the object of vision.…Pure prayer brings the soul to a glorious experience of interior light."[17] In the introductory letter accompanying *The Praktikos*, Evagrius gives his summary of the spiritual life from which I quoted only a portion above. Here it is in full:

> The fear of God strengthens faith, my son, and continence in turn strengthens this fear. Patience and hope make this latter virtue solid beyond all shaking, and they also give birth to *apatheia*. Now this *apatheia* has a child called *agape* who keeps the door to deep knowledge of the created universe. Finally, to this knowledge succeed theology and the supreme beatitude.[18]

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Praktike prepares the person by refreshing the hidden image of God. In *physike* the world looks new and is received as sacramental gift from God, and experienced as theophanous self-revelation by God, and can be understood in its sacrificial potential as temple for God. Both of these are prerequisite for *theologia,* which is the communion of prayer.

A theologian is one who prays, all right, but this does not mean that good theologians are those who offer up a petition to heaven before they open a volume of St. Thomas. In order to understand the theologian as one who prays, the definition of theology had to be deepened, thickened. "True theology is always living, a form of hierurgy (an act of worship), something that changes our life and 'assumes' us into itself: we are to become theology. Understood in this way, theology is not a matter for specialists but a universal vocation; each is called to become a 'theologian soul.'"[19] A theologian is someone who has been shaped by the cooperative exercise of grace and ascetical submission, whose eyes can see after their light has been restored, whose heart wills only one thing, whose mind has changed (*meta+nous* = *metanoia* = repentance), whose life has been reconnected to the source of life. This does not require a PhD; it requires a conversion of life. That is

[17]Introduction to *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, xc–xci.

[18]Evagrius, "Praktikos," in *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, 14.

[19]Archimandrite Vasileios, *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church*, trans. Elizabeth Briere (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984) 9.

why it can be the state of every liturgist. It is an outcome of liturgical theology, so long as one puts oneself under its pedagogy. Theology is seeing all things by the light of Mt. Tabor, a light that still shines from the altar of the Lord. Mrs. Murphy can become a theologian because she has the capacity for receiving this light. Tomas Spidlik writes, "The ancient Christian East understood the practice of theology only as a personal communion with *Theos*, the Father, through the *Logos*, Christ, in the Holy Spirit—an experience lived in a state of prayer."[20]

There is a cost to prayer, and a cost to theology, but love gladly pays it. The heart must be expanded if it is to receive the Master who wishes to take up residence there. Then prayer makes theology possible. Then theology becomes prayer in motion. The Holy Trinity extends its circulation of love *ad extra,* in actions both creative and redemptive. It does so in order to descend to man and woman who, as freely willing creatures, can cooperatively consent to join this relationship and be raised into a deified state of union with God. This view has led me to define liturgy as "the perichoresis of the Trinity kenotically extended to invite our synergistic ascent into deification."[21] By that definition of liturgy, what have I described in this paper, theology or prayer? Yes. ⊕

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[20]Tomas Spidlik, *The Spirituality of the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Press, 2005) 1.

[21]David W. Fagerberg, *On Liturgical Asceticism* (Washington DC: Catholic University Press, 2013) 9.