

Second Sunday of Great Lent Gregory Palamas

On the Second Sunday of the Fast, we celebrate the memory of our Father among the Saints, Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica.

The situation in St. Gregory's time was that Orthodoxy was being debased; it was becoming worldly and being changed into either pantheism or agnosticism. Pantheism believed and taught that God in His essence was to be found in all nature, and so when we look at nature we can acquire knowledge of God.

Agnosticism believed and taught that it was utterly impossible for us to know God, just because He is God and man is limited, and therefore man was completely incapable of attaining a real knowledge of God.

In the face of this great danger St. Gregory Palamas developed the fundamental teaching of the Church concerning the great mystery of the indivisible distinction between the essence and energy of God.

All spiritual life is a result and fruit of the energy of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the saint taught, we cannot participate in God's essence, but we can know and participate in His uncreated energies.

In this way St. Gregory preserves the true teaching of the Church. The common mind of the Church recognizes St. Gregory Palamas as a great Father of the Church, an Ecumenical teacher, and includes him among the great Theologians of the Church.

Gregory Palamas was born in 1296 and educated in Constantinople. He became a monk and spent much of his life on Mount Athos. He was ordained a priest at age 30. Palamas practiced hesychasm, an ascetic and mystical life of silence, rigorous bodily discipline, fasting and the continuous repetition of the Jesus Prayer. Through this method of prayer, the hesychasts were often granted spiritual graces. Palamas achieved a balance between his personal spiritual life and communal prayer by going to his monastic community for the liturgy and sacraments on Saturdays and Sundays.

Palamas became the defender of hesychasm in a controversy led by the philosopher Barlaam, who denied the possibility for men to experience genuine union with God. Palamas made a distinction between the essence of God, which is unknowable, and the divine energies of God, such as the uncreated divine light experienced at the Transfiguration. The debate over hesychasm went on for more than 20 years, but Gregory's position as that of the Orthodox Church has withstood the tests of time. Palamas became the archbishop of Thessalonica in 1347. Respected as a pastor and teacher, he was canonized in 1368, just nine years after his death.

A Journey Through Great Lent

Very Rev. Stephen Belonick