

Transfiguring Voluptuous Choice

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Creation is indeed voluptuous. From the long-necked beauty of giraffes to the silent thundering of 150 ton blue whales; the vanishing community of towering giant sequoias huddled together along the coast and the myriad of creatures known and unknown that depend on the tiny ribbon of life hosted by our small planet, including the cherubic blessing of every newly formed human being, are all testimony to an inspiration of unfathomable proportions, worthy of eliciting an equally profound response. The vibrant wave-particle shimmering of quarks mirroring millions of spiraling stellar nebulae stretching out amongst massive gravitational fields on a logarithmic scale beyond comprehension, are all an expression of the divine Eros pouring forth as living waters from the uncreated *personal* Thou of God.

St. Maximos the Confessor explains,

“God is the producer and generator of tenderness and Eros. He has set outside himself what was within himself, namely, creatures. Which is why it is said of him: God is Love. The Song of Songs calls him *agape* or ‘sensual pleasure,’ and ‘desire,’ which means *Eros*. In so far as the *Eros* desire originates from him, he can be said to be the moving force of it, since he generated it. But in so far as he is himself the true object of the love, he is the moving force in others who look to him and possess according to their own nature the capacity for desire.²

Each human life entering the world carries the divine Image marking it as a recipient of the invitation to marriage between the created and the uncreated worlds that is consummated in Christ, the Theanthropos. Actualizing the potential of an Image-bearer of the divine Eros to becoming the likeness of a Passion-bearer in Christ, tests the limits of human freedom and love over a lifetime.

Marriage between creation and the uncreated ultimately involves trauma to both God and humanity. Life is a gift of joy and also a wound to every heart that actively receives it as the Eucharistic offering of Christ’s own flesh and blood given for the life of the world. Whatever we know about Eros and sexuality, we discover in this larger context of God’s enduring love for creation that is willing to take on every risk of creation for love, even to the point of going to hell with and for the sake of the beloved. Apart from this, neither sexual expression nor human life can find its full expression. From the very beginning, life involves the uncertainty whether the created will seek to revel and cavort in the life-given without thanksgiving to the Life-Giver or discover that intercourse with the life-given that can be truly known, only through the Life-Giver.

In this sense, the Theanthropos is God’s lovemaking with creation; the meeting between the created and uncreated in and through God’s very *person*. For Orthodox Christians, if

¹ Published 2015 in the Greek volume Χριστιανική Ζωή και Σεξουαλικές Σχέσεις (*Christian life and Sexual Relationships*), Vasili Arguriades and Chrestos Markopoulos, eds. Athens, Greece: Enploeditons.

² *On the Divine Names*

we want to talk about sex and love, this is where we must begin. Transfiguring the voluptuous choice has to do with whether we seek to live with God as our Beloved and receive one another and all created life in and through Christ or whether we shall be worshippers and servants of our desire for creation and its voluptuousness without God and forfeit the uncreated origin, meaning, and purpose of our lives in the process.

No one has ever become fully alive simply by optimally satisfying created biological instincts or self-centered desires. In order to say “Yes!” to God’s marriage proposal, we must be willing and able to say “No!” to whatever betrays it over a lifetime. When St. Irenaeus in the early second century observed, “the glory of God is a human being fully alive,” he was not referring to some sort of gourmet tasting of the various fruits of creation apart from their iconic revelation of the hidden, uncreated person of God. Nor was he waiting for twentieth century Americans to discover the so-called ‘sexual revolution’ so that we could eliminate an ontology of the Uncreated and reinvent Christianity in the image of an ecstatic humanism of biological instinct fanned by the flames of inventive imagination and friction that can raise persons no higher than the groin and the grave. Rather, he was referring to the fruit of becoming in the likeness of the divine Image revealed in Jesus Christ through whom each of us receives the gift of our personhood and our authentic relationship and harmony with the rest of the heavenly and created order.

Love as dialogical reciprocity

According to Clement of Alexandria in the second century, to taste the sweetness of life and come to know the “communion of otherness³” revealed through the Holy Trinity involves being willing to engage in a life-long struggle to “free ourselves from ignorance, and from evil and making the voluptuous choice⁴” of grasping created life without the uncreated God whose life sustains it. Following the urge to “take and eat” creation and each other apart from the blessing of God is a sign of our immaturity. Like an infant who must discover how to consciously inhabit and use his or her body, each person is on a journey over a lifetime to take part in the dialogical reciprocity with the uncreated invisible person of God that is found in and through the created order permeated by the *Logos*, who is received Eucharistically. In other words, leaving intercourse with the uncreated God out of the picture, when we talk about sex, is to reduce human relations to a monologue that kills Eros rather than brings it to fruition.

Sexuality in marriage as a spiritual path moves along the narrow and paradoxical way of dialogical reciprocity—like the call and response of improvisational jazz— where the uncreated divine energies and the vital sap of daily life in the world converge in a never ending liturgy. We become persons through this dialogical breathing between heaven and

³ Cf Zizoulas, J *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

⁴ St. Clement of Alexandria, [The Stromata or Miscellanies](#), Ante-Nicene Fathers, Chapter 17, p. 627 Orthodox Ebooks.

earth as we encounter Christ on the ‘Emmaus Way’ of authentic meeting with *otherness*. “It is not good for *persons* to be alone.”⁵ In a monologue, I am always dying.

Eros, like Holy Wisdom,⁶ who played before the Lord in the act of creation, moves in the paradoxical space created between lovers who are separate, while longing for a oneness they recognize unites them in some way that is true and yet whose fullness has yet to be realized.

“To sustain an *élan* toward the other, there must be a synapse to cross. Eroticism requires separateness. In other words, eroticism thrives in the space between the self and the other. In order to commune with the one we love, we must be able to tolerate this void and its pall of uncertainties.”⁷

Bearing the tension between these two paradoxical yearnings, for aloneness and union, is what most expresses our humanity and serves as the source of joy and sorrow in relationships, depending on the path we take to resolve them.

Pure-hearted abandon to the Christian path is life-giving because it is in harmony with creation’s freedom to be autonomous in order to offer itself in surrender, as God does to creation. God calls each of us into being by name personally, and in answering “Here I AM,” we share in the intimate gift of God’s own life which is offered freely, as much as we can bear. When we attempt to say “I AM” alone, without continuing response to the Thou who calls to us, we use the Lord’s name in vain. Only when Thou re-memberest me, *I AM*, and the world is received *Eucharistically*. Apart from God, I am always dying.

Voluptuous beauty as God-bearing image

Icons are a familiar expression of Orthodox worship. They reveal the person of God represented in and through them. To kiss an icon is to transmit one’s love and veneration to the one re-presented in it. If you remove an icon from the church, away from the call and response of worship, it becomes merely a ‘piece of art,’ an object, which however beautiful in and of itself, now reflects only the idolatry of voluptuous desire projected onto it, instead of an encounter with the presence of God who shines through both, sanctifying each. When a person is reduced to being merely the object of sexual desire outside the larger context of the journey in and through Theanthropic love, he or she is similarly *defaced* and becomes a ‘piece of ass’ in contrast to a messenger of God’s embrace arising in the gap of the ‘between’ wherever I and Thou meet, revealing the uniqueness of each one in the illumination of a third presence which arises. Eros, the herald and messenger of God, is replaced by the demon of lust, announcing the captivity of the uncreated spirit to the creation, tethered by deterministic strands of carnal desire without awareness of and faithfulness to its uncreated origins.

Voluptuousness, denied the capacity to function as a “window into heaven,” becomes a means of enslavement rather than liberation. This is what happens to our relationship

⁵Cf. Gen. 2:18

⁶ Proverbs 8:22

⁷ Perel, E. *Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence*. Harper Perennial: New York, 2007. Kindle edition Location 86.

with the world and each other, to the extent that we fail to honor every person as god-bearing image. The price of admission to the mystery of sexual union as part of a *spiritual path* and of the world as joyful blessing, is fidelity to an on-going dialogical encounter with God through embrace of the ordinary as iconic and with the willingness to endure all things for love.

Grasping at flesh without blessing

From the Orthodox perspective, misuse of sexuality begins with our refusal to leave the world and one another free by *first* offering all to God in thanksgiving for blessing, *before* presuming to ‘take and eat,’ however enticing and desirable it all is. This of course entails first being offered to God *ourselves*. Then the life we receive back is Eucharistic – given for the life of the world. Can the moon shine without welcoming the Sun’s light? This dialogical mystery is the essence of an Eastern Orthodox approach to marriage and life in the world, including the gift of sexual expression.

According to St. Clement, freedom to become ourselves comes from being able to “withhold our assent from those delusive fantasies,” of self-centeredness that rob life of the reality that can only be entered into through ecstatic relationship with God and the world which is revealed in Christ’s self-offering. Theologically speaking, fantasies are ultimately an indication of some degree of a failure of the asceticism of love and repentance that protects the freedom of the other to be encountered as uniquely ‘other’ in Christ, here and now.

Instead of turning to the world from the heart of humble *hesychia*⁸, as from God whose good pleasure from the beginning has been to give us everything⁹ including Himself for nourishment as an outpouring of love; when we grasp at the gift without relationship to the Giver, we fail to discover either. By having sex with a fantasy instead of encountering a person, I am reduced to a kind of vampire who selfishly devours and monologically assimilates one whom I in effect ‘offer to myself’ rather than one whom I encounter eucharistically, through mutual self-offering.

Purification and redirection of Eros

Marriage and monasticism are both paths vowed to God¹⁰ and to the world, each involving the interplay of ascetical restraint and eros lived out in different conditions and

⁸ From the Greek word *Ἠσυχία*, meaning stillness, silence. Hesychasm is at the heart of the Orthodox spiritual life and practice of continual prayer and watchfulness. St. Theophan the Recluse speaks of the state of “pure prayer” as “Our mind must be stripped naked of every mental picture and intellectual concept, until it is conscious of nothing save the presence of the invisible and incomprehensible God.” (Kadloubovsky & Palmer, *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*. (Faber & Faber: London, 1981) p. 25.

⁹ Lk 12:32

¹⁰ “Laymen do not have anything more than monks except for the permission to cohabit with their spouse. In all the rest they should resemble the monks. If it was impossible that one through marriage could achieve what monks do, everything would be destroyed and virtue would be an issue of the few”. St. John Chrysostom, 7th homily on the letter to Hebrews, 4, P.G. 63: 68.

expressed in different ways.¹¹ The action of ascetical restraint and turning to God in both marriage and monasticism involves “the purification and redirection of eros, the chastity of a pure heart, without which no one can either see God or truly love his neighbor.”¹² For at the root of both, it is the relationship with God which is primary, and to the degree that this is not central, all the rest misses the mark. Archimandrite Amilianos explains:

My need for love and companionship is essentially a longing for God, and not even my marriage will be of any help to me if I do not have the Church for my spouse. Marriage, like monasticism, is a longing for the infinite; it is not the satisfaction of a biological drive, but an orientation of the self toward the eschaton. Marriage is a journey, an ascent toward the perfection of paradise.¹³

Being in the likeness of God, able to feed on and enjoy creation illumined by the uncreated light is only a potential, not a guarantee. It requires a response-ability to Spirit and earth, God and persons, simultaneously. Entered into, apart from Grace, without divine blessing, both ascetical restraint and libertine self-indulgence render us impersonal and antihuman. Only the presence of Christ is a guarantee of authentic humility¹⁴ which safeguards the freedom of the other which is the pre-requisite for love born of divine Grace.

As Orthodox Christians, in discussing marriage and sexuality we begin with fullness of life offered by God, with the recognition that the saints are those who are most fully alive, most human and capable of love, mercy and forgiveness, as evidenced by being most deeply rooted in both the genuine earthiness of their concrete selves and permeated by the Holy Spirit which enables them to appreciate and value the beauty and worth of all persons. The mark of healthy eros in a follower of Jesus Christ is that he or she turns toward the world (and those in the world) with the same self-denying and self-offering impassioned love and mercy which God evidences in Christ, “the lamb slain from the foundation of the world,¹⁵” for the sake of the world.

The immense tension and potential for life inherent in the Orthodox understanding of God’s desire for humanity and humanity’s desire for God, which transforms our lives through the encounter with Christ in between is poignantly expressed by Dee Jaquet, an Orthodox pastoral counselor.

¹¹ “Tell her that you love her more than your own life, because this present life is nothing, and that your only hope is that the two of you pass through this life in such a way that in the world to come, you will be united in perfect love....Pray together at home and go to church; when you come back home, let each ask the other the meaning of the readings and the prayers....If your marriage is like this, your perfection will rival the holiest of monks.” St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 20 on Ephesians*.

¹² K.N. Leontiev, “Third Letter from Athos”, in *Vostok, Russia I Slavianstvo*, Moscow: “Respublica”, 1996, p. 33 (in Russian) cited by Moss, V. *The Theology of Eros* (Orthodox Research Institute: New Hampshire, 2010) pp. 227-228.

¹³ Archimandrite Amilianos – *The Way of the Spirit: Reflections on Life in God*. (Indiktos: Greece, 2009) p.355.

¹⁴ “Where Christ is not present, there exists false humility.” – Archimandrite Arsenios (Papacioc) “Eternity Hidden in the Moment” *The Orthodox Word*. (St. Herman of Alaska: California, 2011) No. 281, p 289.

¹⁵ Rev. 13:8

Life IS voluptuous, wild in its own transfigured way of being the untamed power of god at heart. That is why no one can ever really leave Orthodoxy once it's been tasted. It is the sweetness of the extreme love of god and when that sweetness imbues your marriage, you can never voluntarily choose to leave it either.¹⁶

But for eros to be free to play in this way, the heart must learn to stand firm over a lifetime, uniting body and mind, both in joyful celebration as well as sacrificial difficulty where hell seems to prevail.

Otherwise eros can be diverted from its course, turning back on itself in two forms of monologue: projections on to the other (auto-erotic fetishes, infatuations, paraphilias, and the ephemeral illusion of the fantasy “woman” or “man” instead of my real partner) or by narcissistically incorporating others for personal use without recognizing uniquely transcendent personal boundaries (adultery, prostitution, fornication, cohabitation, the self-centered utilitarianism of “friends with benefits” and the possessiveness that erupts into domestic violence).

Both these extremes involve forms of monological self-love and spiritual beguilement that evidence some degree of developmental arrest of psychological and spiritual potential. They are marked by a compulsivity, joylessness and lack of gratefulness that is very different than the play of lovers who have come to enjoy one another in their freedom in Christ in a committed and generative marriage. The willingness to forgive and to show mercy and receive the full human being into one’s heart and arms over a lifetime is not the fruit of a series of self-protective encounters based on face-lifts and fantasy-engendered sexual passion that only serve to insulate one or the other from the pathos of approaching old age and death, but arises from the struggle involved in self-offering.

While the marriage bed is undefiled and sexual play and affection a blessing to couples in Christ, there is no evidence that the most robust and electrifying satisfaction of biological instincts and fantasy-directed sexual enactments are capable of sanctifying persons. This is something the contemporary world in its exploration of seeking to extend sexual fulfillment well into old age on the basis of fantasy and medicine, rather than crucified self-love, has not given sufficient attention too. Modern sex therapy, while helpful to couples in the short term in reigniting sexual desire, by lacking an adequate ontology of personhood that involves the Theanthropos who links created and uncreated, typically fails to place sexuality in its fullest dimension as a servant of personhood rather than mere pleasure or happiness.

By relating to the other as a projection of some aspect of one’s past experience, sexual fantasy and the enactments that mediate a variety of emotions and self-other representations through them are a veritable treasure-trove of the language of attachment and love. Significant hermeneutical contributions have been made in this area by psychotherapists who recognize that sexual expression is much richer and more expressive of the journey to personhood than is generally recognized by those ‘religious’ who see sex only in behavioral terms and are quick to label all sexual expression as being “less than” celibacy or at best, as something to be tolerated until people move beyond it

¹⁶ Personal correspondence with author, May 3, 2012.

in their spiritual life. Such dismissive simplistic moralizing views that focus on behavior and pleasure alone, fail to recognize the complex relational components and unvoiced unconscious longings being expressed through fantasy and sexual behaviors which can be clues to what is needed for further development. David Schnarch's work, while it lacks an Orthodox ontology of the uncreated, is representative of those psychotherapists who have come to recognize that passionate sex is ultimately related to passionate humanity.

When couples have sex, they are telling each other the stories of their lives—that is often why they stop having sex. Intimacy is self-confrontation and self disclosure in the presence of a partner. In a poorly differentiated relationship, the person with the least desire for intimacy controls it and they control their partner's sense of adequacy too.¹⁷

This is an area that spiritual fathers and confessors would do well to gain a better understanding of in order to help Christian couples live more healthy integrated lives. Often resolving blocks in this area are inherent to resolving spiritual impasse, for both have to do with expression of personhood in its fullest embodiment and are usually tied together, as body and soul are seamlessly united.

The body and desire are not the enemy. Selfish misuse of them is. The doxological vision of St. Symeon the New Theologian graphically emphasizes the potential for sanctification of the body and of desire in Christ when he describes how his spiritual father, Symeon the Pious, was not ashamed in the presence of his own or anyone else's nakedness, "for he had the whole of Christ, he was himself and all the members of his body Christ, and he was seeing each of the members of the body of anyone else as Christ." For St. Symeon, as for his spiritual father, this meant "we become members of Christ... the arm Christ and the foot Christ... do not say I am blaspheming... and my finger Christ and my penis [and vagina] Christ...."¹⁸ Similarly, St. John Climacus describes someone of great purity in his own day, who when he saw a person with a beautiful body, was moved to tears and glorified God. St. John observed that such a person, if he always feels and behaves this way "has risen immortal before the general resurrection."¹⁹

Asceticism and fidelity to love

The Islamic mystical poet Rumi observed, "Wine got drunk with us, not the other way around."²⁰ This is the ministry of the royal priesthood who find our meaning and purpose in the uniting of the created and uncreated worlds. The created order cannot be what it is meant to be without the human heart and mind united with the body in honoring and reflecting the Image of the Creator in every person and in all creatures great and small offering up the entire creation to the Creator. *Theosis*, illumination by grace,

is not something that only the human rational faculty experiences. During the experience of *theosis*, the entire person participates in this experience. Even the body participates with all its senses in normal working order. When someone sees

¹⁷ Schnarch, D. *Constructing the Sexual Crucible*. W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 1991

¹⁸ Faros, P. (1998) *Functional and Dysfunctional Christianity*. Holy Cross Orthodox Press. P.116.

¹⁹ IBID, P129, cited from *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 15. 60.

²⁰ From "*When Grapes Turn to Wine: Versions of Rumi*" trans. by Robert Bly. (Yellow Moon Press: Massachusetts, 1986)

Christ in glory, that person is completely alert. So this person does not merely see something in his mind. He sees with his body as well.²¹

The *personalizing* of grace working through the heart, illumining the mind and sanctifying the body blesses all creation with an Eros that goes far beyond sexual encounters of biology and psychology alone. In Theophany, water is sanctified by the Holy Spirit and in the Eucharist, bread and wine become the body of Christ. As the Psalmist says, “the heavens (and earth) declare the glory of God²²” only as persons act as priests before the altar of one another’s heart can the creation be raised up to God as received back again Eucharistic ally.

This is why, toward that end, Orthodox Christians joyfully embrace the boundaries of ascetical restraint, whether in celibacy or in marital sexual fidelity in order to make room for the joy of feasting on divine energies of eros which is possible only where relationship with God is not sundered by sin. As Jesus said to the Apostles, “I am the vine and you are the branches. Cut off from me you can do nothing.²³” The wine of the grape becomes ‘drunk’ with the Spirit only when it reaches fruition in the mystery of the Eucharist that brings the divine life into full union with the created order through the royal priesthood of all those found in Christ.

When Russian Orthodox theologian Serge Bulgakov summed up Patristic counsel to, “Kill the flesh in order to acquire a body²⁴” he meant, avoiding the compulsive self-enclosed slavery of drunkenness, licentiousness, avarice, pride and other sins so that the heart can be increasingly free to experience the ecstatic joy and freedom of the virtues of fidelity to our vow of chastity (whether married or celibate), poverty (with regard to eros diverted to material possession or spiritual hedonism) and obedience, (which is love’s surrender of self-will and self-indulgence for the sake of the Beloved).

The human heart is made for the joy and sacrifice of love that arises through experiencing the world as an icon of Christ and offering one’s life in return, as God offers his in Christ to us. St. Maximos the Confessor points out that the body and all human appetites and powers find their authenticity in this way. “Love is the unfailing pleasure and indivisible union of those who participate through their longing in what is good by nature.²⁵” This includes the couple united in sexual union in marriage. In this way, we are all priests who lift up the cup of salvation on a daily basis— earthen vessels pregnant with the treasure of the Divine Spirit, giving thanks and praying with our lives, “Thy will be done on earth (and in the earth of myself) as it is in heaven.”

The infusion of grace in the physical body itself through the indwelling of the mind in the heart is such that the church has experienced repeatedly the miracle of how icons weep and bodies of sanctified persons evidence the glory of God after death, defying decomposition and in some instances, exuding a fragrant myrrh that surpasses the finest perfume. In one recent example, following the death of their beloved elder, to the

²¹ Romanides, J. *Patristic Theology*. (Uncut Mountain Press: Greece, 2008) p 74.

²² Cf Psalm 19:1.

²³ Jn. 15:15.

²⁴ Ware, K. *The Orthodox Way* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Pres: New York, 1979) p 61.

²⁵ Third Century of Various Texts, (31).

astonishment of the monks preparing him for burial after his face had already set with his mouth open so that it could not be closed, the elder Joseph of Vatopaidi smiled beatifically. His now closed mouth and eyes revealed the joy of a paradise hidden from human sight.²⁶

The spiritual context of sexual expression

The taste of Eros in the passionate euphoria of “falling in love” doesn’t last because it is largely the result of chemicals that temporarily change the homeostasis of the brain. After a couple years, these chemicals subside and a different relationship is forged which is accompanied by a deeper commitment to one another rooted in real love that involves the deep will of the heart that is vowed to God. It is by intentionally and consciously remaining faithful to the marriage over a lifetime through the dry times when we don’t have hormonal euphoria (just as we do in prayer when we don’t have the spiritual consolations that make it enjoyable), that we eventually grow beyond our neurotic conflicts into full humanity where the joy of eros is newly evident and we rediscover one another in a richer and deeper way according to the growing depth of our hearts.

In light of this, the ideals of passionate attachments offered up for popular consumption by Hollywood fail to inspire. Contemporary films in America consistently portray love in terms of self-centered abandonment to bodily appetites that lack moorings in the deep knowing, self-sacrificial care, mercy and forgiveness between spouses that parallels the life-long commitment to the relationship between God and the larger community which both marriage and monasticism are designed to preserve and enhance. Apart from a heart vowed to God and without the ascetical sacrifices that evidence such a vow, only lust and the tension release of causal “hook-ups” remain— depersonalized eros— the fizzle of heat in the body without fire in the heart and *theosis*²⁷ does not occur.

While the so-called “sexual revolution” has the appearance of liberation from restraint on the surface, it often conceals an atmosphere of shame-based, autonomous, self-centered, individualistic pleasure-seeking. It is compulsive, bringing together depersonalized bodies without hearts that are equally vowed to God and the welfare of entire community. To deeply know, accept and compassion with another before God is something born through struggle and passion-bearing of the Spirit infusing the flesh.

By contrast, passion without personhood, desire without faithfulness to anything or anyone beyond one’s own individualistic pursuit of biological pleasure and individual happiness are ultimately enslaving and disintegrating of both. “No sane person would entrust anything of value to a person whose idol is pleasure.”²⁸ No person will ever feel confirmed in his or her humanity by being ravished and ravishing another sexually in an ecstasy of mutual masturbation. True intercourse as God “knew” his people Israel, is an event that is not possible apart from the Holy Spirit.

²⁶ <http://www.orthodoxchristianity.net/forum/index.php?topic=26138.0>

²⁷ An Eastern Orthodox term referring to the fullness of sanctification and union with God through the indwelling Divine Energies of Grace

²⁸ Esolen, A. (2013) “Scarborough Needs Men: Manly Chastity, Hedonism & the Law of Non-contradiction.” *Touchstone*. Jan/Feb Vol. 26(1) 30.

God is our true lover and this is why it is only through the call and response of being loved and loving that “He pursues, without fail and at all costs, the sighs of our hearts, which mean far more than any obligatory or formal asceticism. The spiritual life depends significantly on the character of these sighs²⁹” for they are the recognition that we are human, a fact we only truly experience in the process of acquiring a “crushed and humbled heart”³⁰ by seeking to answer the call of the uncreated One whose loves invites us into Holy Communion with God.³¹ We do not truly become ourselves except by giving ourselves away freely and ecstatically in love for Christ who has done this for us. But only those who have experienced the heartbreak of seeking to love others as God loves, and failing, will come to know the mercy that opens the way to such loving and to eternal life through the gift of divine Grace.

God did not come into the world to condemn it. God did not fashion the world of created bodies of flesh and blood in order to destroy them. He created a world loved so much that out of God’s own sigh from the heart for his beloved, he took on flesh and became human himself in order to make it possible through him, for humanity to become eternally alive with God’s own uncreated life. God’s love for humanity and the entire creation is revealed through him becoming fully human and going to hell with and for our sakes, in order to bring us to paradise. This is a path each of must follow in order to know such love. Behold, the Bridegroom cometh! Let us then keep awake and seek him where he may be found: “wherever two or more are gathered” for this purpose...there is *διά-Λογος*.³²

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²⁹ Archimandrite Arsenios (Papacioc) “Eternity Hidden in the Moment” *The Orthodox Word*. (St. Herman of Alaska: California, 2011) No. 281, p 289.

³⁰ Psalm 51:17.

³¹ St. Athanasius described the path to ‘deification’ or *theosis*,-- which is union with God by grace, as being like iron which is indistinguishable from the red hot fire, remaining iron by nature, yet being simultaneously fire by grace, as “God became human so that humans could become God.”

³² *διά-Λογος* is from two Greek words meaning ‘through’ and “Logos” which is the word used for God the Son by the Apostle John in the opening lines of his Gospel. Hyphenated like this, they emphasize how the English word “dialogue” has its deeper meaning in the mystery of the encounter with Christ, the Logos, Who appears in ‘between’ wherever we meet others and the world not as “it” but as Thou. Christ is the ground for the possibility of every authentic transformative encounter. Cf. S. Muse. *When Hearts Become Flame: An Eastern Orthodox Approach to the διά-Λογος of Pastoral Counseling*. (Orthodox Research Institute: Rollingsford, New Hampshire, 2011), *Όταν Οι Καρδιασ Φλεγονται* (Editions Grigori, 2013) and Muse, S. *Being Bread* (Orthodox Research Institute: Rollingsford, New Hampshire, 2013)