

Living Sacrifices

by Hieromonk Damascene

We are called to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God, putting to death our sinful passions and being reborn in Christ.

Topics: "Spiritual Transformation", "Christian Sacrifice"

Description

Hieromonk Damascene delves into St. Paul's teaching on spiritual transformation, emphasizing the need to present ourselves as living sacrifices to God, putting to death our sinful passions to allow Christ to live in us. This transformation involves continually dying to our old selves and being reborn in Christ, marked by our Baptism where we die with Christ and are resurrected with Him. The sacrifice required is painful, as it involves tearing away from our fleshly desires and ego to unite with God in love, as beautifully illustrated by Abbess Thaisia's dream. St. John Chrysostom compares our sacrifice to the Hebrews' offerings, highlighting the importance of examining ourselves to be pure in all respects for God's consuming fire to perfect the sacrifice.

Transcript

With this in mind, let us look more closely at 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. In examining this chapter, I will rely first of all on the commentary given by St. John Chrysostom, who might be called the preeminent Orthodox commentator on Scripture. St. John's commentaries on the Epistles of St. Paul are of special interest because St. John was instructed by St. Paul himself in how to interpret his Epistles. According to St. John's Life, on three occasions his disciple Proclus saw the Apostle Paul standing over St. John's shoulder and speaking into his ear while St. John was writing his commentaries on the Epistles.

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.

In his commentary on this passage, 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." [4]

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.

Our death and rebirth are first marked at Baptism, when, according to St. Paul, we die with Christ and are resurrected with Him (cf. Rom. 6:3-4). In Baptism, we receive the Grace of the Holy Spirit within us, united with our soul, as Adam and Eve had it within themselves before the Fall. This is the beginning of our salvation and deification in Christ; but it is only the beginning. We are to continually put to death 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.

The sacrifice is painful. Our "old man," our "man of sin" does not want to die on the altar of sacrifice. The pull of our fallen nature is strong. The Holy Fathers teach that the Fall of man resulted from two motives. The first is self-esteem or self-love (in the day ye eat [of the fruit of the tree] ye shall be as gods--Gen. 3:5), and the second is love of sensual pleasure (the tree was good for food, and pleasant to the eyes--Gen. 3:6). All sins in the world, the Fathers say, stem from these two causes. We do not inherit the guilt of Adam's sin, but we do inherit the tendency or inclination toward sin. That inclination belongs to our "old man," the man of ego, the fleshly man, whom we have indulged over the years. When we try to put him to death, he will fight for his right to exist. That is why the sacrifice is so painful.

The pain of this sacrifice is powerfully expressed in the autobiography of Abbess Thaisia, one of the great abbesses of nineteenth-century Russia. Once she had a dream in which one of the great abbots of Russia, Damascene, appeared to her. Abbot Damascene had died one year before, and Abbess Thaisia was now enduring great tribulation in her life. In the dream Abbot Damascene asked her, "Do you know what the meaning is of the rending in two of the veil of the Temple in Jerusalem at the time of our Savior's death on the Cross?" Abbess Thaisia replied that this signified the division between the Old and New Testaments. "That is good," the Abbot said, "that is correct according to the books. But think yourself:

doesn't this refer somehow to our Christian life?"

Abbess Thaisia began to contemplate, and then replied, "I think that this signifies how the human soul is torn as it strives toward God and toward pleasing God. It is rent in two, becoming spiritual but not ceasing to belong to the fleshly man that dwells in it; it is torn, cutting off and tearing away from itself the will of the outward man, which is sweet, but inclined to sin. Its poor heart is torn, tearing itself in half, into pieces. Some of these pieces, as unfit but nonetheless akin to it, it tears and throws into the world, but the others it carries like pure incense to its Christ. Oh, how difficult it sometimes is for the poor heart; how it is tormented and suffers, literally being torn in half!"

In her dream, Abbess Thaisia said this with such fervor that she was covered with tears. Abbot Damascene said to her, "Yes, the Lord has not deprived you of His Grace. Is it for you to grow fainthearted and despondent in sorrows? Take courage, and may your heart be strengthened with hope in the Lord." With these words the Abbot stood up and blessed Abbess Thaisia. She awoke all in tears, but tears no longer of sorrow but of inexpressible joy. [6]

Abbess Thaisia's words provide us with an exact image of the sacrifice that is required of us who would know Christ and be united to God. It is a sacrifice most painful to the ego--for in it the ego dies a slow death--but it is a sacrifice that brings the greatest joy, courage and freedom to the spirit, which unites in love with its Creator. We must "give blood," said the Desert Father St. Longinus of Egypt, in order to "receive Spirit."

Speaking further of the sacrifice we are to offer God, St. John Chrysostom again likens it to the sacrifices of the Hebrews in the Old Testament. Just as the Hebrews examined carefully the animals they were to offer in sacrifice, to make sure there they had no spots and blemishes and were whole and healthy, so likewise should we examine ourselves strictly, so as to be pure in all respects. Then, says St. John, "we will also be able to say as did Paul, I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand (II Tim. 4:6). But this will be brought about if we kill the old man, if we put to death our members which are on the earth, if we crucify the world to ourselves. If, when Elias offered the visible sacrifice, a flame came down from above and consumed the whole water, wood and stones, much more will this be done for you. And if you have anything in yourselves which is relaxed and worldly, and yet you offer the sacrifice with a good intention, the fire of the Spirit will come down, and both wear away the worldliness, and perfect the whole sacrifice." [7]

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.

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