

Man's free will and nature's freedom

REV. DR. C.N. DOMBALIS

From time to time, humanity faces uncontrollable and ruinous natural forces – floods, hurricanes, electrical storms, earthquakes, and tornadoes. Other tragedies are caused by human failures, both conscious and unconscious.

Whether “acts of nature” or “acts of men,” catastrophes seem irreconcilable with the attributes of a God who is depicted in every page of the New Testament as a God of love and mercy.

“How could God let this tragedy happen?” we ask. The question remains unanswered as we try to put our lives together again.

In seeking an answer to the question of “How could God ...?” we might imagine that a curse has been placed upon us or a family member. Or we may think the tragedy of war or disease or hunger was God’s punishment of the guilty.

In nature, scientists have discovered a freedom of movement in the macrocosms of the physical world. This freedom of movement is essential to the growth of brightly colored and fragrant flowers, the vibrant tree leaves of spring, the ocean wet and foamy, and the myriad snowflakes which blanket the earth – “wondrous nature,” in the words of Albert Einstein.

But what are we to say of the violence of nature as found in deadly lightning, thunderstorms, lethal floods, destructive forest fires and droughts? Einstein replies, “God does not roll dice.”

Aristotle described the creator of the universe as “Nous” (Mind) and asked his hearers to gaze in awe at the order of the universe. Aristotle and Einstein, both great men of science, did not associate the disruptive acts of nature and those of man with the nature of Nous or God, but assigned them to the freedom of nature’s intrinsic composition and man’s misuse of his free will.

To assign unreal and ghostly acts to God, either acts of nature or man, is to refute the essence of the Bible that “God is love.” But life is not always coherent, and so our knowledge of God – and that He is good – must always be greater than our understanding.

Faulting God for human failures and nature’s violence stems from faulty human reasoning. These are not “acts of God” but rather “acts of nature” and “acts of men.”

The Rev. Dr. C.N. Dombalis is dean emeritus of the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Richmond, Va. He served as a delegate to the United Nations, where he helped author the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Religious Ed 101

“ I AM THE A & Ω ”

The Lord said, “I am the Alpha and Omega; the Beginning and the End.” What meaning does this hold for us?

It means the Lord is eternal, without beginning or end. We do not totally comprehend eternal existence, as our minds seek a point of beginning and ending to everything, whether it’s a person, plant or a galaxy.

[Atheists, ironically, have no problem with the concept of eternal existence, believing as they do that planetary systems and stars somehow always existed in one form or another.]

Is there a parallel we can cite, though, to compare our world with another realm such as God’s? How about the Lord’s creation of sea life at the bottom of the ocean? For ages, those deep-sea fish have lived along the sea floor, crawling and swimming in darkness, knowing only their world of water. Now, do they have any inkling as to what open air or even daylight might be like? Are they aware of the world, directly above them, teeming with other wondrous life and spectacular scenery?

In a way, we too are like those fish: fully aware of our reality but unable to totally comprehend God’s infinite world, high above us. Unlike atheists, who believe this life is all there is, as Orthodox Christians we know that life continues, as the Lord said and as He confirmed by His resurrection and ascension.

God is truly the Alpha and Omega. His realm is eternal and more awesome than we can imagine, without beginning or end ... and as exclaimed in Handel’s Messiah, “He shall live forever and ever!”

From the Sunday School 10th grade curriculum of St. Athanasius Church, Arlington, Mass.; instructor George Makredes.



Since time immemorial, Christians have pursued holiness in the desert. The healing wisdom of the ascetic fathers has drawn pilgrims to profit by their counsel since the first centuries of Christianity.

HOLY LIGHT OF SINAI



Sister Joanna

An ascetic lifetime of devotion to prayer in stillness, or hesychasm, wins the clarity of soul from which holy discernment springs.

Among the early pilgrims to Sinai was St. Helena, who visited the monks at the Burning Bush in the fourth century. She built their first church, and the tower which is the oldest structure in St. Catherine’s Monastery.

Countless crowds followed her, crossing the desert without modern transportation, until well into the 20th century. World War II veteran Mr. Nick Grammatas, 93, of Vacaville, Calif., recounts traveling with his grandmother by camel caravan to St. Catherine’s in the 1920s.

The pilgrims discounted hardship and danger, seeking revelation at the Holy Mountain where God taught men to live spiritually. And where the oldest monastery in the world is founded on the root of the Burning Bush – the root of monasticism itself – for there God began His revelation to man on how to regain the Divine grace for which he was created.

Recently, St. Catherine’s Geronta Pavlos spoke on the potential of the human soul to achieve true freedom. Today – on how the goal is pursued ...

Geronta, what was the miracle that occurred in the tiny Chapel of the Life-giving Spring in St. Helena’s tower? It is very moving when everyone leaves the main church on Wednesdays, to come to this intimate chapel for the monastery Liturgy.

The monks didn’t have oil when the great Ascetic, St. George Arselaitis came to the monastery one day. This saint lived in the deep desert 40 kilometers from the Monastery, in a region called Arselao. He asked the Monastery fathers how they were getting along, and they replied, “Abba, we don’t have any oil here and we’re suffering.” He asked, “Where is the storeroom?” They led him to the storeroom where the oil was kept, where the chapel is now. The Abba prayed, and the pitharia filled with oil. Afterwards the storeroom was made into the Chapel of the Life-giving Spring.

When was this, Geronta?

It was way back; this saint is mentioned by St. John Climacus in his book, The Ladder. They were contemporaries, so it would have been about the year 600.

In The Ladder of Divine Ascent, St. John outlines the Christian struggle to become freed from the passions, which you said the Church greatly emphasizes. He particularly mentions certain ones.

Those are the mortal passions; that’s why we have to be careful.

What are they?

Some are pride, hate, apathy towards one’s spiritual obligations, envy, adultery, depression – those are mortal sins, aren’t they?

You said that a passion is a sin that has become habitual. How is depression fought, for instance?

One hopes that God has something good in store for him, that “something good will happen.” He secures himself on hope – hope is one’s anchor in the spiritual life. It gives stability, just as a ship is stabilized by an anchor. Depression is hopelessness. The person who truly lives with God does not despair.

Does one confess a passion as he confesses his sins?

Of course.

Geronta, what exactly happens within the Mystery of Confession?

Winning the Contest



Photo by Genevieve Angelides

The simplest chapels in St. Catherine’s Monastery are replete with exquisite Byzantine icons, like this one dedicated to St. James the Brother of God, inside the monastery’s katholicon. Lit only by candlelight, they offer a contrite atmosphere for the mystery of Confession.

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As St. Catherine’s elected Dikaos, **Geronta Pavlos** has been responsible for the spiritual life of the monastery for four decades. He represents the Archbishop during his frequent unavoidable absences, and oversees the daily worship services and large monastery garden. The hesychast geronta, devoted to ceaseless “prayer of the heart,” also responds to the spiritual needs of countless Orthodox pilgrims, both within the monastery and throughout Greece and Cyprus. His insightful spiritual guidance is in constant demand.



Sr. Joanna has been associated with St. Catherine’s Monastery since 1990 through its dependent monasteries in Greece and Sinai, most recently the historic Red Sea hermitage of Hamman Mousa (Springs of Moses), where the Hebrew people camped during the Exodus after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea.

First of all, whatever a person has done, no matter what it is, or how big a sin, when he confesses it, God forgives. There is no sin that can conquer the mercy of God. God forgives all. Further, the faithful person who confesses relieves himself of a weight, and puts it on the shoulders of the spiritual father. Although he came downcast and upset, he leaves confession lightened, peaceful and happy – when he confesses sincerely.

In confession indeed, it is necessary to be careful to be sincere, to not say, “So-and-so pressured me, and that’s why I did this or that bad thing.” Rather one should take the responsibility upon himself and say, “Finally I ‘gave the OK’ (as you say there), and the bad thing happened, the sin.” He shouldn’t put the responsibility on the other guy, that it’s the other’s fault, but “I, I am at fault that I did the bad thing.”

At this point many people say “I didn’t murder anyone, I didn’t steal – what do I have to say anyway?”

Yes, Christ, in the Gospel, however, said that you can do a big sin with your thought only – with the logismos as we monastics say – by thinking something bad about another. Most of us don’t suffer from big sins, from murder, adultery or other big sins. We suffer from the little ones, or rather those that we call little. They are not little, however – they appear little. For example, someone says in confession, “I don’t have anything weighty to say, just the everyday things.” And we say, “What everyday things – did you perhaps judge your brother?” “Yes, that’s common.” That is heavy, however, con-

demnation is a very heavy sin. Christ told us “Don’t judge in order to not be judged.” He didn’t leave some margin for error, “in such-and-such a case you can judge.” Distinctly, He said, “Don’t judge in order to not be judged.” And we consider it a small thing – whereas it is big!

Here in Greece, I don’t know about in America, but here it is common for people to say “Our society is a jungle!” That’s bad, because in this society, where it seems that God doesn’t exist, where sin does show, people exist who live holy lives, and they are here in this society. A jungle doesn’t have saints, it has wild beasts. Whereas in our society there are people with great virtue, who believe in God, and live as God wishes.

A humble person, a simple person, doesn’t say such things.

Now the great mystery: How does one become humble? We want you to tell us what we should actually do, rather than just have good intentions.

We, the monastics, try to arrive at humility through obedience. But in the world, that isn’t easy when you have a family. There is another way that is much easier.

Which?

To not judge. What did we say before, no person should judge. That is the road that leads to humility. It is a boulevard!

What exactly is judgment, condemnation of others?

When we say something bad about another. But who am I? “He didn’t do well, he should have done that.” Today, many of us judge all

other people, the politicians, church leaders. ... “They are bad, the politicians are thieves and deceivers” – all those comments are condemnation. The person who wants to arrive at humility avoids such conversation. It’s a very easy road. All it requires is carefulness.

And when the others around him are speaking this way?

OK, he can reply, “Look at it this way, if you had been in that person’s position, would you have done better? Or perhaps would you have done worse?” Thusly, we indicate in a positive way, that what he is doing is not right.

The opposite of humility is pride. How will I fight it?

When we have pride, we don’t have love. When a person doesn’t experience the state of love, he understands that something great is missing from his heart. Can a person live with hate? It’s an unnatural thing, hate. We are created to love.

With one’s will, can he love?

Of course.

As you said last time, with the analogy of the airplane that needs to put forth all its power to lift off the ground.

Yes, in the beginning, it requires force to break out of the passions. This is the struggle that the great ascetics made who went into the desert. They strove mightily against their bodies, making a great effort with toil and sacrifices, exactly in order to see the greatest miracle, which is for a person to see himself free of the passions – in the freedom of God.

Those of us who live in the city, what can we hope to do?

When a person wants to, with the grace of God, no matter where he is, he will accomplish it. On the other hand, he can be in the desert, inside the monastery, and be enslaved to some passion. He has lost his freedom. It’s not a matter of place. That’s why the ascetic Fathers of the Church say, “It’s not where you live, but how you live.”

“If therefore the Son sets you free, truly you will be free.”

We said, regarding the spiritual contest we have been talking about, in our struggle to break out of the passions, we are not alone. With the Grace of God we struggle ... without the Grace, nothing is possible.

May God make us worthy to put these things into practice.

With your blessing, Geronta, thank you very much.