

ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΙΚΟΣ ΠΛΗΡΩΜΑΤΟΣ  
Apostolic Church of the Pleroma

*Delivered by Tau Phosphoros  
to the Parish of St. Ambelain  
on February 18, 2015*

YEAR B - ASH WEDNESDAY

Greetings, brethren! As you know, today is Ash Wednesday, named so for the traditional marking of ash upon the forehead as a sign of penitence and a symbol of mortality. This day also marks the beginning of the Season of Lent - a period of intense asceticism and prayer preceding the Easter Season. It is appropriate, therefore, that our gospel reading today from the 6th chapter of Matthew should contain the verse upon which is based the doctrine of Orthodox asceticism - Hesychasm. I am referring, of course, to Matthew 6:6, which states: "Whenever you pray, enter into your private room and shut the door, and pray to your Father who is in secret." This is taken to mean that the Hesychast is to retire unto him- or herself, the heart being the private or hidden room where resides the "Father who is in secret."

This is a very mystical doctrine, and one that is not in any way at odds with our Gnostic doctrines and practices. The ancient Valentinians also saw the great significance of this passage, for we read in the Gospel of Philip: "He said, 'Go into your room, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father who is in secret,' that is, the one who is innermost. What is innermost is the Fullness, and there is nothing further within. And this is what they call the uppermost." So, we can see in this brief exegesis from the Gospel of Philip that the divine is immanent, and it is this immanence of God that makes it possible for us to attain to the Light of Gnosis through inner contemplation & meditation - the Way of the Heart.

This Way of the Heart is not only the path of the Gnostic, for our Orthodox brethren also seek to attain what they call the Prayer of the Heart or "ceaseless prayer." The Orthodox Hesychast utilizes asceticism & repetitive prayer to bring about the awareness of the Prayer of the Heart. The prayer most commonly used, as we've mentioned before, is the so-called Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Now, while this prayer may certainly be effective when used in a repetitive, rhythmic, contemplative manner, many Gnostics will find this prayer, with its sense of groveling self-deprecation, to be a little uncomfortable, or even distracting from its intended purpose. Another short prayer that has been used since antiquity in a similar manner is the one given by the late 4th century/early 5th century St. John Cassian: "O God, make speed to save me. O Lord, make haste to help me." This prayer is similar to the former in that it requests the intervention of divine assistance. But it has the benefit of being more uplifting in tone. In my opinion it also lends itself - in the English at least - much better for use as a repetitive, rhythmic prayer, being composed of two parts, each seven syllables long, and employing poetic conventions such as alliteration.

Therefore, my brethren, I ask each of you during this season of Lent to spend some time each day repeating either the Jesus Prayer or the prayer of St. John Cassian in conjunction with the posture & breathing techniques outlined in the Clergy Handbook, or those taught to you privately by your mentoring clergy. This is a voluntary exercise, of course, but I hope you will all join in participation.

Let us now pause for a moment of thoughtful contemplation before proceeding with the traditional anointing of ashes...