

## CHAPTER THREE.

### 1. God's Attributes.

The Light of God's absolute and infinite Perfection is made known to us through our spiritual eyes. Because man's logic is weak and limited, he is unable to comprehend the Essence of God. In order to appreciate His Divine Attributes, man needs to examine them separately. Using the analogy of the eye, when physical light passes through the prism of the lens, it divides into different beautiful colours that we are able to distinguish. Likewise, the Divine Attributes are perceived through our spiritual eyes so that our weak and limited minds are able to understand them.

We must always bear in mind that the Nature and the Essence of the Divine are beyond and above any logical comprehension. Only the external expressions of God's Divine Energies in relation to the world can be understood when they are revealed by God Himself for the purpose of our Salvation in Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, it must be understood that because of man's weakness and limited capacity of knowing God, we must use human expressions, ideas, forms and images of this world. We can seek God's Divine Energies that are expressed throughout the entire Creation and ascribe everything that is good to God. God Who is hidden from us and beyond all that reveals Him, is also He Who reveals Himself<sup>1</sup> (Cataphatic Theology). Negative terms can be

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<sup>1</sup> Lossky, *Theology*, p. 32.

used to describe what God “*is not*”<sup>2</sup> (Apophatic Theology). Finally, we ascribe God as being the Supreme Being Who is above all things, visible and invisible.

## 2. What Do We Mean By “Attributes of God?”

By using the terms “*being*” or “*existence*” we refer to those characteristics of each being, according to which it is distinguished from the other beings. It is that which it is. The terms used to describe God are therefore called “*attributes*,” “*virtues*” or “*perfections*” of His Divine Nature, through which the simple but not synthetic Essence of God is distinguished from the world and is revealed to us as the absolute and infinite “*BEING*.”

As we have mentioned above, God’s Essence is unapproachable and inconceivable. Thus when we speak of God’s Attributes we must never forget that no word can describe Divine Nature, nor can we obtain complete knowledge of God’s Essence. Even all the names in Holy Scripture do not contain the meaning of the Divine Essence, but each and every one of them are interpreting the surrounding and external Energies of God’s Nature.

Many of these names are used in a negative way through which we describe God as what He is not.<sup>3</sup> For example the terms: *inoffensive*, *immortal*, *invisible*, *wrathless*, *apathetic*, *impeccable*, *bodiless*, *unborn*, *without beginning*, *unalterable*, *untouchable*,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kefalas, *Catechesis*, pp. 44-45, 46.

*imperishable, unchangeable, indescribable, incomprehensible, unequivocal, unlimited, untold, boundless, incorruptible, inseparable, undated, timeless, irreprouachable.* Names that describe Divine Nature in a positive way are: *good, just, light, life, etc.* However, these terms do not precisely describe the Nature of God. They are applied to Him according to our limited and weak nature.

St. Basil teaches us that the creations of God are the “*indicators of His Power, Wisdom, and Technique,*” but they describe neither His Essence nor His full Strength.<sup>4</sup>

These many Attributes offer us a limited knowledge of God because they are unable to describe the invisible and incomprehensible Essence of God. Consequently we know that God is Wise but we ignore how Wise He is. We know that He is Magnificent yet we do not know the measure of His Majesty. We know that He is All-present yet we do not know how. This is why St. Paul the Apostle wrote: “*for we know in part and we prophesy in part.*”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> St. Basil the Great, *Against Eunomius*, II, 32, in Migne, *P.G.*, 29, 648. Kefalas, *Catechesis*, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinth. 13:9.

### 3. The Divine Attributes in Relation to the Simplicity of the Divine Essence.

When we ascribe different Attributes to God, we must never forget that the Essence of God is *simple*. How these Attributes are expressed must be understood in such a way that we must never touch the simplicity of God's Essence, nor should we say that It consists of many elements.

St. John of Damascus emphasizes that the uncreated and timeless and bodiless and everlasting and immortality and goodness and creativeness and Attributes similar to these that we ascribe to God, should under no circumstances be taken as essential differences, because then the Essence of the Divine would not be simple but synthetic. God's Essence is simple because there is neither any feature nor any kind of change.

It is blasphemous to think that God is synthetic or that there are things that exist around His Essence that complete Him. Synthesis is the cause of division and dissolution, which are alien to God. If the first Nature was composed of different elements, then it is not the first but that higher Source that brought together all the elements as one.<sup>6</sup> The many names ascribed to God's countless Attributes should be understood as describing the one, simple and incomprehensible Essence of God. The absolute simplicity of God's Essence remains undivided, unformed and unchangeable and is made known to us

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<sup>6</sup> Boulgareos, *Theologicon*, p. 89.

through its different Relationship and Energies towards the Cosmos.

St. Basil the Great observes that “*the Energies of God are many, but His Essence is one and simple. We know Him because of His Energies but it is impossible to approach His Essence. His Energies are sent to us; His Essence remains unapproachable.*”<sup>7</sup>

#### **4. Anthropomorphic and Humanistic Expressions.**

The Attributes that we have ascribed to God are incomplete and unable to describe the fullness of His Divine Essence since we use images and examples from our own limited understanding. It is natural therefore that these will always bear human characteristics. This explains why in Holy Scripture we find anthropomorphic and humanistic expressions attributed to God. God is portrayed as having hands, eyes and ears: He turns His Face away from sinners in dissatisfaction or looks over the just, He awakens with wrath, He looks down upon the earth and makes it tremble, He is happy or sad, He forgets or remembers, etc.<sup>8</sup>

The Orthodox Church believes that the Supreme BEING is God and not man, Who created the Heavens and

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<sup>7</sup> St. Basil the Great, *Epistle* 234, in Migne, *P.G.*, 32, 869.

<sup>8</sup> **Psalms** 118(119):15-16; 119(120):73; 11(12):4; 34(35):16; 38(39):17; 67(68):2; 68(69): 2-3; 77(78):65; 86(87):1; 80(81):20; 104(105):29, 32; 143(144):7. **Is.** 37:17. **Gen.** 3:10; 6:6; 8:21; 11:5; 11:5.

the earth and all therein, both visible and invisible; Who shall never hunger or tire, nor can His thoughts be scrutinized.

The use of humanistic expressions in Holy Scripture are limited only to certain vital parts and functions of the human body through which is expressed God's Mercy, Love, Wisdom, Almightyness, etc. Expressions for taste, shoulders, shoulder-blade, fantasy, etc. are never used.

In conclusion, when we use anthropomorphic and humanistic expressions concerning God, we must always search for hidden spiritual Truths. We must never forget that God in His love for mankind permits the use these expressions because the "*Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us.*"<sup>9</sup> The Word became Man without ceasing to be fully God: the Mystery of God Incarnate! He assumed complete human nature, both a physical body and a rational soul – everything we are - except for sin. As God and Man is in one Person, Christ accomplishes a Redemption that fully heals and Saves fallen humanity. The Word in His Divine Glory comes to dwell in the midst of humanity through His Incarnation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>10</sup> See note in *The Orthodox Study Bible*, p. 212.

## 5. Sources and Methods of Teachings of the Divine Attributes.

In order to continue our examination concerning the Divine Attributes, we must never forget that Divine Revelation in Holy Scripture is the only and infallible Source from which we receive our knowledge concerning the Attributes of God. Since we also come to the knowledge of these Divine Attributes by using our intelligence (logic), which is enlightened by the Light of Divine Revelation, we have two methods that help us to understand and determine the Divine Attributes.

The first is the *Abductive method* (*απαγωγική*) according to which one chooses one of God's basic Attributes - for example the self-existence or the self-essence - and upon this we come gradually to the knowledge of the rest. The second is the *Inductive method* (*επαγωγική*) according to which one always seeks the Divine Attributes one by one through the visible world, as they are revealed through the Cosmos. This is achieved by three methods developed by the Scholastic Theology<sup>11</sup> which are: *Via affirmationis* or *causalitatis*, *via negationis* and *via eminentiae*.<sup>12</sup>

We ascribe everything that is good to God because the reason cannot be lesser or weaker than the cause (*via affirmationis* or *causalitatis*). Through the negative way

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<sup>11</sup> Trempeles, *Encyclopaedia*, pp. 72-79.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, *Dogmatique*, v. I, p. 186. St. Dionysios, *About Divine Names*, ch. VII, in Migne, *P.G.*, 3, 869.

(*via negationis*), God is nothing of this world, not that He does not exist, but because He is beyond any knowledge or essence of this world. Thus, through the negative we exclude from God any imperfections that exist in the Cosmos. We identify God as being *without beginning, imperishable, immortal, infinite, invisible, formless, indescribable, unlimited etc.* St. Dionysios compares this method to the example of a sculptor who chisels away the unnecessary parts of the marble in order to reveal the beauty hidden within.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the *via eminentiae* joins within the two other methods and renouncing any restrictions or boundaries, assures us that God is Infinite and Perfect.<sup>14</sup> These three ways or methods join together at a certain point with one another.<sup>15</sup>

## 6. Classification and Division of the Divine Attributes.

Although God's Divine Essence is incomprehensible to our limited knowledge, we have to classify and divide the Attributes of God. This division is necessary on the one hand because of their many manifestations to the world. On the other hand, not because they are distinguished to a higher or lesser degree, more or less important, essential or not, but because of our

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<sup>13</sup> St. Dionysios, *About Mystic Theology*, ch. II, in Migne, *P.G.*, 3, 1025. Cf.: St. John of Damascus, *Exposition, Proof that there is one God*, book 1, ch. 5, in Migne, *P.G.*, 94, 800. Theodoretus of Cyrus, *Evangelic Truth. About Principal*, Homily II, in Migne, *P.G.*, 83, 856. St. Basil the Great, *Against Eunomius*, I, 10, in Migne, *P.G.*, 29, 533.

<sup>14</sup> St. John of Damascus, *Exposition*, book I, ch. XII, in Migne, *P.G.*, 94, 845.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Cf.: Oosterzee, *Dogmatics*, p. 254. Rhosse, *Σύστημα*, p. 139.

limited minds we are incapable of fully comprehending their depth.

**a) *Positive and Negative.***

*Positive Attributes* are those that describe God as being the Absolute Perfect and Infinite BEING. For example: *Good, Just, Light, Life etc.*<sup>16</sup>

*Negative Attributes* are those that deny any imperfections of God. For example: *inoffensive, without anger, impeccable, inscrutable, forbearing, inexplicable, unexplored, inexhaustible, unhindered, etc.*<sup>17</sup>

**b) *Transitional or Transmittable,  
Persistent or Intransitive  
Attributes.***

This division is as previously mentioned because *Intransitive Attributes* are those that can be ascribed to the Divine BEING. For example: *simplicity, infinity, unintelligible, self-existence, etc.*

The *transitional* correspond to the positive Attributes. For example: *Holiness, Goodness, Truth, Love,*

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<sup>16</sup> Theodoretus of Cyrus, *Evangelic Truth. About Principal*, Homily II, in Migne, *P.G.*, 83, 856.

<sup>17</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, XII, in Migne, *P.G.*, 45, 953, 957. St. Basil the Great, *Against Eunomius*, I, 10, in Migne, *P.G.*, 29, 533.

*etc.*, which can be transmitted to the intellectual beings, the Angels and men, but only to a certain level.<sup>18</sup>

***c) Natural and Energetic Attributes.***

The natural Attributes present God as the Absolute and Blessed Being. The energetic Attributes characterize the Energies and the Manifestations of His Life in the Creation. These Divine Energies are divided into *moral* and *intellectual* Energies.

***d) Relative and Absolute Attributes.***

The *relative Attributes* signify that there is some type of relationship between God and His Creation, whereas the absolute Attributes can be characterized as transcendental. Nevertheless, the relative Attributes (*creativity*) are Eternal and exist in the Essence of God, even if we presume that God did not want to create the world.

***e) Internal and Hypostatic Attributes.***

The internal and hypostatic Attributes of God are the *Fatherhood* of God the Father, the Son *being a Son* and the *Procession* of the Holy Spirit only from the Father.

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<sup>18</sup> Boulgareos, *Theologicon*, p. 83.

*f) Personal and Essential Attributes.*

*Personal Attributes* are those that refer to the three Persons of the One Godhead. Thus, God the Father as a Person cannot be God the Son, nor can the Holy Spirit as a Person be the Father or the Son. Each Person of the Holy Trinity differs from the other two according to their *Hypostases*.<sup>19</sup>

*Essential Attributes* are those that refer to each Person of the Holy Trinity being the One True God. For example: *without beginning, Endless, Goodness, Kindness, Almightyness, Creator, Providence, Omnipotence, Omniscient, All-present, Indescribable, All-knowing, etc.*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Karmeris, *The dogmatics*, v. I, pp. 364-365.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, v. II, pp. 598-599. Kefalas, *Catechesis*, pp. 47-48.