

GREAT LENT

Second Sunday

"Good deeds are the oil, and love is the wick upon which, like light, rests the grace of the divine Spirit. When, therefore, the oil of good deeds is depleted, love inevitably withers, for it resides in the soul as a wick."

(Saint Gregory Palamas)



Numerous figures throughout Christian history have harnessed their talents in service to the Church of Christ. Inspired by the Gospel's parable of the talents, they acknowledged the gifts bestowed upon them by a benevolent God and generously multiplied them, contributing to the Church (and the world) for the greater good and their own salvation.

Their intellectual prowess, purity of life, and writings have provided the Church with resolutions to recurring theological puzzles across different epochs. God graciously bestows His holy people, demonstrating His unwavering care for all creation, at precisely the right moments. Among these illustrious individuals was Saint Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica, honored on the second Sunday of Great Lent.

Saint Gregory Palamas was an exceptional individual, likely born in Constantinople into a noble family. Despite receiving an education steeped in Byzantine culture, he renounced worldly vanities and glory. Along with his two brothers, he sought spiritual refinement in theology, art, and prayer at Mount Athos, a bastion of the Byzantine Empire's spiritual life.

The lives of saints recount his father as a devout man of prayer, making their household a dwelling place of devotion. Thus, Gregory's yearning for deeper spiritual growth comes as no surprise. The Athonite monks of his time, including those of noble birth and scholarly repute, exemplified humility and devotion, serving as beacons for all spiritual seekers.

Mount Athos was revered not only as a stronghold of Orthodox teaching but also as a leader in the ascetic and liturgical practices of the Christian Orthodox East.

In his engagements with the Athonite elders, Gregory rapidly advanced, immersing himself in the hesychastic tradition of silent prayer, a legacy of the experienced monks of Athos. This distinct practice of prayer, centered around the experience of divine uncreated energies, soon stirred a broader theological dialogue, sparking a dispute with Barlaam of Calabria beyond the monastic confines.

Elected Archbishop of Thessalonica in 1347, Gregory's journey from Thessalonica to Constantinople was marred by capture at the hands of Turks, from whom he was ransomed by the Serbs, leading to his eventual release.



Falling asleep in the Lord in 1359, Gregory was canonized in 1368, leaving a legacy enshrined in Thessaloniki's metropolitan church, where his relics lie and his unblemished Orthodox teachings continue to resonate.

The Tabor Light

("His face shone like the sun")

Saint Gregory Palamas was a leading proponent of Hesychast theology. This teaching is founded on the belief of the monks of Mount Athos that it is possible to perceive divine uncreated energies during contemplative prayer. Inspired by the biblical event of Christ's Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, where the apostles witnessed the transfigured Lord, the Athonite monks developed the concept of the possibility of seeing this Tabor light.



Saint Gregory Palamas embraced and expanded upon this teaching. Drawing from the traditions of the early Church Fathers, he concluded that while God's essence is beyond our comprehension, His divine energies can be experienced. This doctrine underscores the distinction between God's unknowable essence and the ways in which He makes Himself known in creation. Palamas affirmed that God revealed Himself personally through Jesus Christ, the source of true knowledge of God, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6).

His work is both authentic to Orthodoxy and a reminder that the Church's mission is ever-relevant. It illustrates that, regardless of the era, amidst various challenges, the theology of the Fathers remains a living, dynamic dialogue with the divine mystery. Through the incarnation of Christ, we are granted the possibility of a personal relationship with God—our Lord Jesus Christ.

In his debate with Barlaam of Calabria, a Latin scholastic, Palamas reiterated the position of the Holy Fathers on the possibility of knowing God through His divine uncreated energies. Without these uncreated energies, nothing in the world could exist, as they are the means by which God is present in creation. Palamas highlighted that God is not a distant architect but is intimately involved in the world He created, reminding us that "in Him we live, move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Archbishop Gregory's extensive writings defended Hesychasm, affirming its doctrinal validity at the 1368 Constantinople council.

The second week of Great Lent is dedicated to Saint Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki. His teachings are significant even in our contemporary era, asserting that a prayerful life is the Church's foundational biblical experience. According to Saint Gregory, life in Christ is a journey of ceaseless prayer and becoming more like God.

Troparion — Tone 8:

O luminary of Orthodoxy, support and teacher of the Church, ideal of monks and invincible champion of theologians, O wonderworker Gregory, boast of Thessalonica and herald of grace, always intercede for all of us that our souls may be saved.

Questions:

1. To whom is the second week of Great Lent dedicated?
2. Who were the Hesychasts?
3. What is the essence of Saint Gregory Palamas' teachings?

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