

Lives together

by [Scott Cairns](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue



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It is by living and dying that one becomes a theologian, Martin Luther said. With that comment in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939 and asked theologians to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, questions and hopes as people of faith and to consider how their work and life have been intertwined. This article is the fifth in the series.

I am sitting in a guest room of a monastery on Mount Athos in Greece, gathering my thoughts following two conversations with a wonderful monk. We spoke for a bit last evening and again this morning between services in the *katholikón*. I look forward to further opportunities to visit with him before I hike the rugged trail to another monastery tomorrow morning.

I mention my proximity to these particular blessings because they figure so prominently in shaping my response to the question of how my spiritual journey has unfolded. The availability of a spiritual father and the recovery of holy tradition has made me less inclined to see “my journey” as mine alone and more inclined to appreciate the vertiginous implications of our being the body of Christ, mutually incarnating our way into a collaboratively constructed future.

During the first of my conversations with the Athonite father, I mentioned my struggle with this very essay; I told him that a number of likely reconsiderations had occurred to me, but that I was keen to focus on one, and I also told him that I didn’t want to squander an opportunity to teach myself a thing or two in the process of self-examination, in the writerly process of *coming to terms*.

This, after all, is one of the ways in which my mind has changed. Some 30 years ago, I still assumed that writers generally wrote to tell us what they knew; these days, I am convinced that the writers I treasure most are men and women who have written in order to see what they had not apprehended beforehand. Rather than understanding their art as a vehicle for transferring known matter from one mind to another, writers (and, ideally, the theologians among them) are men and women who trust their vocations as a way of knowing, or at least as a way of glimpsing the magnitude of what none of us can wholly apprehend.

Presumably, this is what every one of our vocations is capable of doing, as long as we remain true to their attendant gifts. Still, I can imagine how even a writerly vocation might go wrong, how a writer might—for instance—inhibit her own work or hobble his own engagement with language for fear of writing something that didn’t fit with what she or he “believed.” That sort of anxiety strikes me as pretty much the antithesis of faith.

I no longer view the sequential deaths and resurrections of life as matters of the mind, merely. Much as I am grateful for the late recovery of my smudged and recalcitrant *nous*, I no longer consider that profound intellective faculty in terms of the half measures accommodated by its commonplace translation—*mind*; and I therefore no longer imagine my metanoia simply as a turn toward better thoughts—as if our Christian faith were a simply propositional faith and not one that demanded embodiment, incarnation, fruit. You can imagine the sorts of endless splinterings and proliferative schisms that could occur over 2,000 years if one were to mistake Christianity for an idea or for a set of ideas. (In case you missed it, that

was sarcasm.)

I was raised in a community that suffered a conflicted relationship with learning. On the one hand, perhaps out of feelings of intellectual inadequacy, our pastors appeared to study a great deal, affected scholarly demeanors and sported honorary degrees. On the other hand, they did not appear entirely comfortable in that posture; they remained largely humorless, responded poorly to criticism and very poorly to questions, especially from the young.

We pored over the King James Bible, albeit selectively, and were treated to a sort of scattergun approach to word study, including both Hebrew and Greek words. For all of that, our pastors seemed to hold—and clearly encouraged—a deep suspicion of education, implying that too much learning could compromise one's faith. Secular universities were understood to be inherently evil, and the most prestigious sectarian universities were understood to be unduly secularized.

It wasn't until my days at a state university that I caught on to the poor scholarship that our community's puffed-up Bible studies involved, and it wasn't until recently that I have acquired enough Greek language and Jewish theology to mitigate some of the effects of our community's earnest error.

In retrospect, I would say that we put too little energy into learning who we were and too much energy into saying who we were not—a doomed choice.

In any case, I suppose that it is my sense of salvation itself that has undergone the most dramatic revision.

In his sermon on Solomon's porch—recorded in the third chapter of Acts—St. Peter alludes quite matter-of-factly to what he calls the *chronon apocatastaseos*, or the restoration times. While his term *apocatastaseos* (nowadays more likely to appear in English as *apocatastasis*) was one borrowed from Aristotle, it proved to be a compelling provocation for most of three centuries of Christian discourse before, for the most part, disappearing from public view.

Such notables as Origen, Evagrius, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Maximos the Confessor, St. Clement of Alexandria and St. Isaak of Syria, among many others, have engaged the notion as indicative of, as St. Paul puts it, God's will that all men be saved. Even the Italian poet Dante Alighieri avers in his *Divine Comedy* that, finally, the flames of hell may prove to be nothing other than the glory of God, as experienced by those

who have rejected him. St. Isaak of Syria states in no uncertain terms:

He acts towards us in ways He knows will be advantageous to us, whether by way of things that cause suffering, or by way of things that cause relief, whether they cause joy or grief, whether they are insignificant or glorious: all are directed towards the single eternal good, whether each receives judgment or something of glory from Him—not by way of retribution, far from it!—but with a view to the advantage that is going to come from all these things.

The saint says further:

I am of the opinion that He is going to manifest some wonderful outcome, a matter of immense and ineffable compassion on the part of the glorious Creator, with respect to the ordering of this difficult matter of torment: out of it the wealth of His love and power and wisdom will become known all the more—and so will the insistent might of the waves of His goodness.

I'm with St. Isaak. Still, as I recall, Christian Gottlieb Barth observed in the 19th century that “anyone who does not believe in the universal restoration is an ox, but anyone who teaches it is an ass.” Duly warned, I won't press this particular beauty any further here.

So much for eternal damnation.

Over the years since first leaving home for college (more precisely, since my tardy discovery of the fathers and mothers of the church first led me to turn my eyes and my heart to the East), salvation itself has come to mean something larger to me, something fuller—both more substantial and more immediate than the understanding delivered to me by the community of my youth.

The way of salvation—as those fathers and mothers have taught me—is not the way of the mercenary (who serves to gain reward) nor the way of the slave (who serves to avoid punishment); rather, it is the way of the lover, who serves the beloved simply and purely out of genuine devotion.

For the monks on Mount Athos, “our being saved” does not have to do with an isolated instant of conversion, and its central benefit is not simply our being

delivered from hell. The more traditional understanding of salvation is one that recognizes our moving toward and into a continuously thickening reality. C. S. Lewis's beautiful little book *The Great Divorce* offers an image of this—that of the human person shifting from airy shadow to illuminated substance.

Salvation is an ongoing process of redemption; it is our recovery from chronic separation from God, both now and ever, and it includes our increasing awareness of who our God is. The miracle has very little to do with the popular notion of “dying and going to heaven” and has far more to do with finally *living*. It has to do with our entering the kingdom of God, here and now.

Archimandrite Sophrony of the Holy Mountain, a monastic of the early 20th century, offers keen and efficacious insight when he writes: “The essence of sin consists not in the infringement of ethical standards, but in a falling away from the eternal Divine life.” Therefore the essence of salvation lies in our leaning into that eternal divine life, and our being in position to derive endless life from our partaking of the God Who Is.

The monks and their Orthodox traditions have insisted that this salvation is offered to all of humankind, not just to those few who acknowledge membership. Of course, the monks would be quick to insist that the most trustworthy, most satisfying road to full participation in the saving life of Christ is revealed in the traditional teaching of and participation in that One, Holy, Orthodox, Catholic and Apostolic Church; they are also unshakable in the conviction that the One Body—that is to say, Christ's body—is synonymous with that self-same church. We acquire our salvation through our being *of* that body, through our partaking of that body, and this strikes me as absolutely true, pretty much regardless of our meager apprehension of the matter.

Bishop Kallistos Ware famously parses this mystery: “We can say where the Church is; we cannot say where she is not.” As Christ tells the earnest and anxious Nicodemus: like the wind, the Spirit blows where it will.

As I now see it, salvation has come to mean deliverance right now from the death-in-life routine that we often settle for, the sleepwalking life I have settled for in the past. St. Isaak of Syria, writing in the seventh century, offers firm support to this promise in his *Ascetical Homilies*: “The man who has found love eats and drinks Christ every day and hour, and hereby is made immortal, . . . and while yet in this world, he even now breathes the air of the resurrection.”

Inextricably related to this discovery is another developing sense that while salvation necessarily happens to persons, it is not to be understood as a merely personal matter. I continue to enjoy—and enjoy repeating—the surprising response given by my friend, a wise and kind monk, to a man who had come to evangelize the Holy Mountain and who asked the father if Jesus Christ was “his personal savior.”

“No,” the smiling monk said without hesitation, “I like to share him.”

Thanks to the longstanding tradition this monk manifests, I see that salvation finally must have to do with all of us, collectively, and that it must have to do with all else as well—all of creation, in fact.

My reading in the fathers and the mothers of the church—assisted by my discovery of what I would call rabbinic, midrashic Bible reading—has me thinking that all of creation is implicated in this phenomenon we variously call salvation, redemption, reconciliation. Like the late theologian John Romanides, I aver that our saving relationship with God is quite specifically “as the Body of Christ”; our salvation is not a discrete, individualized, private bargain struck, but comes by way of our continuing participation in divine life, as a member of a whole and holy body that is at once both alive and life-giving.

I have many friends who are, without question, serious, kind, deeply spiritual persons of one stripe or another; they also share a deep hunger for community, which they attempt to satisfy with a range of worthwhile activities. Oddly enough, they also share an abiding sense of alienation from the body of Christ, at least as that body is expressed in the media and quite often in their local churches.

Many of them have blithely said—albeit to my puzzlement—that while they may be spiritual, they are not religious. While I understand the unfortunate distinction being made by their strained parsing of terms, that distinction continues to strike me as the result of an ongoing failure—theirs, ours and mine.

Somehow or other, these beloveds must find their way home. They must find a way to a reconnect their faith to their communities and their communities to their faith. They must find a way to reconnect, as it were, the spirit with the body. Satan, our tradition tells us, looks for any vessel sailing without a fleet, and—ironically enough—it seems to me that an individualized, isolated spirituality is almost by definition satanic.

I have been late in coming to this myself. In fact, my own difficulty with “fitting in” at the various churches I attended from my high school days through my early thirties left me floundering in the same isolated boat. I went a decade or so being a head without a body; I was a severed member, languishing alone.

These days, I see that we are called to work out this business together, and I see that faith is not something that can be both solitary and healthy. The health and eventual fruitfulness of the severed limb depends utterly upon its being grafted onto the living tree.

This is, in part, what I suspect Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hoping to reintroduce to his community in *Life Together*, wrestling as he does to reclaim the sacrament of confession. He writes: “The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain; his brother’s is sure.”

His brother’s word and heart—in the case of a confessor—are also informed by that most generous of democracies, the one in which, according to G. K. Chesterton, even the allegedly dead have a vote, that very cloud of witnesses whose writings, along with the holy scriptures, comprise the tradition that, at once, is our guide and provides our community.

Bonhoeffer insists that the presence of the brother—or, more to the point, the presence of the Christ borne in that brother’s heart—shores up one’s own faith, comforts and assures one’s own trembling heart. It is the fact of their being “two or more . . . gathered in [Christ’s] name” that enables their mutual apprehension of his assuring and unfailing presence.

This may be one of the reasons why, even among the monasteries of Mount Athos, the idiorhythmic (individualized) rule has been set aside in favor of the more deeply traditional cenobitic (community) rule; the fathers’ lives in Christ are necessarily *lives together*. Even the increasingly rare eremite, the desert dweller, in his bleak and rugged cave at the edge of Katounakía regularly makes his way to the monastic enclave for the purpose of liturgical worship and communion. In the Orthodox

tradition, there is no such thing as solitary communion.

This uncanny gift of a life together is not the property of monastics alone, but is offered to us all. The more troubling point remains, therefore, that until each of us claims that gift and lives into it, the entire body suffers, and we—as severed members—are inclined to dry up as deadwood, no good to ourselves nor to anyone else.

Ignorance and sin are characteristic of isolated individuals,” writes the Russian priest Father Alexander Elchaninov. “Only in the unity of the Church do we find these defects overcome. Man finds his true self in the Church alone; not in the helplessness of spiritual isolation but in the strength of his communion with his brothers and his Saviour.” Elsewhere this same priest offers a word of caution; quoting St. Paul, he observes: “When one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. . . . If we do not feel this, we are not within the Church.”

Dwelling somewhere at the heart of this lies the Christian understanding of the human person, an understanding that commences with the conviction that every one of us—of whatever religion or nonreligion—is made in the image of God, and that we all continue to bear his image, however well or poorly we do so. As the Orthodox like to say, we are all of us written as the icon of God.

The *One* God is said to exist in *Three* Persons engaged in a single *perichorésis*, a single circling dance, and our familiar—if inexplicable—trope of Trinity is our shared tradition’s preferred manner of figuring God as an essentially relational being.

The image-bearing human person is therefore also necessarily a relational being. Safe to say, an individual is not the same thing as a person; authentic personhood stipulates the communion of one with another.

As for what we call salvation, it is better understood as neither an individual nor a future condition, but as a moment-by-moment, present mode of being—even as an ongoing acquisition, a developing realization. Maybe, in part, this is what Jesus was teaching when he said “the kingdom of God is within you.” This may be what he was getting at when he announced, “I tell you truly, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God.”

Standing among his exponentially expanding band of followers were some “who would not taste death” before they had witnessed the kingdom of God, had tasted

its power and were already savoring its abundant life, even as they hobbled with the rest of us through the valley of the shadow of death.

According to the fathers, this is a kingdom, a power, a glory and a quality of life that is no less apprehensible now.

“The ladder of the Kingdom,” writes St. Isaak, “is within you, hidden in your soul. Plunge deeply within yourself, away from sin, and there you will find steps by which you will be able to ascend.”

Archimandrite Sophrony asks:

What does salvation mean? Do our bodies have to die so that we can enter the kingdom of Christ? How can we develop our capacity to live according to Christ’s commandments, according to the Holy Spirit? Only one thing counts: to keep the tension of prayer and of repentance. Then, death will not be a rupture, but a crossing to the Kingdom for which we will have prepared ourselves by communion in the Body and Blood of Christ, by prayer, and by the invocation of His name: “Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy upon me and upon Thy world.”

In Abbas Isaak and Sophrony, I glimpse those who are speaking from within the kingdom already. The one who apprehends the reality of God’s unfailing presence, the one who sustains ongoing conversation with his Holy Presence, is able to apprehend all things and all experiences—the good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly, our loves and our afflictions, even our apparent deaths—as purposeful. That blessed pilgrim is able—even through his or her tears—to taste and to see that the Lord is good, that even our pain is remedial, that even our suffering is grace.

My own earlier struggles with a fiery temper have also been mitigated in recent years by an increasing apprehension of God’s kingdom being here and now. Mulling all this over, I confess there was a time when pride had me thinking that every insult, offense or error had to be corrected—by me, and immediately.

If someone were to treat me poorly, I made certain that person knew about it; if someone unjustly blamed me for any petty thing that went awry, the blame was duly delivered to its rightful owner.

Again, this is all in retrospect, but my subsequent practice of the Jesus prayer has helped me to deal with these distractions in a very different way. For one thing, the prayer has helped me to trust in God's unfailing presence, and, for another, this trust—quietly but inexorably—has freed me from a perverse need to let my offender know of his offense.

Over time, the knowledge that God has witnessed these occasions with me allowed my anger to be replaced by something more like embarrassment, something like regret. Nowadays I feel complicit in the whole mess, sorry for our mutual, human error—and forgiveness goes without saying. The fact that an offender may remain oblivious of that forgiveness is absolutely beside the point.

And so, sure, I too want very much to be saved. These days that means that I want to be saved from what passes for myself. This is because what passes for myself does not always feel quite like the self that is framed in the image of God and is thus united with those around me and is, allegedly, growing with them into His Likeness.

I would like to replace this recurrently hamstrung, self-defeating and sometimes isolated self with the more promising image: the person in communion with other persons. And while I'm at it, I wouldn't mind undergoing something like a lasting re-pairing of heart and mind, body and soul.

As I continue to discover more fully day by day, this journey toward wholeness is not something that one is able to undertake alone. Fellow travelers aren't simply a welcome luxury; they are crucial to our bearing our crosses as we seek to follow God.

Of course, we are likely to find that before we can set about healing the rift between persons, we have a good bit of interior work ahead of us in repairing and recovering the wholeness of our persons.

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