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## Repentance as Divine Communion in St. Symeon the New Theologian's Hymns of Divine Love

### Abstract

Much English language scholarship on St. Symeon the New Theologian has, perhaps understandably, been intrigued by and focused on the saint's narrative of his luminous visions of the Lord. But this has often served to distract readers from the primary thrust of the most rhapsodic and ecstatic of all his writings, the *Hymns of Divine Love*. This paper argues that this major teaching is the doctrine of radical repentance that the saint espouses: and he does it in such a way as to redirect the flow of earlier Christian teaching on the developing stages of the spiritual life in a profoundly innovative manner.



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Rather than seeing re-pentance as a 'beginner's stage' in spirituality, to be succeeded by 'unitive' and 'contemplative' stages (as in many manuals of spiritual theology which suppose they thus reproduce Pseudo-Dionysios) Symeon appears to project radical and heartfelt repentance as the royal road to the deepest level of communion with Christ. For him, repentance is one of the highest spiritual states, not the lowest.

### Keywords

Symeon the New Theologian, Mysticism, Repentance, Divine Light, Deification Prayer of the Heart, Jesus Prayer, Spirituality, Nous, Energeia

St. Symeon the new Theologian is a remarkable spiritual teacher in so many different ways. The modern scholarly literature has represented many of these facets, and thrown new light on the depths of his intelligence and his charismatic insight. He is, of course, renowned as a visionary and mystic. His encounters with the God of Light are celebrated in his own enlightened experience, as well as that entrance into the light mediated to him by his spiritual Father, St. Symeon Eulabes. Yet again, his own monastic *Discourses* and *Catecheses* represent St. Symeon at a crossroads of ascetical teaching that is both traditional and innovative, often at the same time. He stands, as does his spiritual disciple Niketas Stethatos, as a major representative of the monastic reform movement of the Middle Byzantine era. Symeon's catechetical doctrine, in this instance, mirrors what was happening in his concurrent root and branch rebuilding of the St. Mamas community at the Xylokerkos Gate in the Imperial city, near the Stoudium monastery, and in numerous other monastic re-foundation movements at this period and after him, that combined structural rebuilding

efforts with significant liturgical developments (such as evidenced at the Evergetinos monastery) alongside a renewal of interest in the intense prayer of the heart and the sensed (*aisthetos*) operations of the Holy Spirit, trends that came from the introduction to Byzantium, via Mar Saba monastery, of many of the early Syriac fathers who were now rendered in Greek translation. This return with renewed interest to the spiritual doctrine of the Fathers will flower later in what we have come to call the Hesychastic period. But St. Symeon is already a prime witness of the core elements of that movement, comprised, as it was, of a return to the past as a *ressourciement* of the Orthodox tradition and a reliance on tried and tested experiences of God in personal prayer and asceticism.

This present paper has a much smaller scope, however, than considering the whole of St. Symeon's remarkable witness. It wishes to concern itself with only two things derived from one textual source: and that is the most remarkable aspect of St. Symeon (as it strikes me) which is how he emerges as the rhapsodist of radical repentance in the extraordinary *Hymns of Divine Eros*. For St. Symeon, I believe, is not only one of the great poets of all of Byzantine literature, but has a claim, so far not sufficiently pressed in much of the supportive literature, to be one of the greatest of all Christian poets in the ecstatic quality of his verse (much of which is very sophisticated in terms of literary genre and metrical flexibility) as well as in the profundity of its theological acumen.

In the *Hymns of Divine Eros* (henceforth HDE) St. Symeon is on fire with the thought of the love of God; with God's infinite mercy approaching the human soul, and with the beautiful radiance in which this encounter is enveloped. It is my thesis in this short paper, however, that it may often be overlooked that this rhapsody he speaks of (what we might classify, for want of a better term, his sense of 'mystical union' with God), is very far

from what readers can often imagine as the 'proper' state of mystical union, when that unitive condition is approached through the medium of Dionysiac or later medieval tri-partite mystical schemata – wherein the purgative state precedes the unitive state, which in turn precedes the illuminative state. These tripartite and consequential schemes, which are well in place in both the eastern and western church by the high middle ages, give us readers the presupposition, all too often perhaps, that the one who speaks of the mystical union with God is in a high state of spiritual perfection; has reached *apatheia* after years of hard ascetical *praxis*, and now enjoys the fruits of the cleansed soul, and the purified mind, which is the enjoyment of the presence of God. But while this sense of mystical union as a reward for progressively stabilized asceticism is a common presupposition in much patristic and medieval writing about mystical theology, it seems to me exactly what St. Symeon the New Theologian is definitely 'not' saying, even though he values the Dionysian corpus generally. And this is why I wish to focus on the notion today; because among the many things that make this remarkable theologian stand out from his Byzantine peers, this radical doctrine of repentance (*metanoia*) that he espouses (namely that the one who repents with passion is already in deep communion with God), is surely one of his most original contributions to the mystical life. This doctrine of repentance is something that he learned both from his own life-experience, and from the Gospels; for it is core to the evangelical teaching that repentance is not a prelude to the entrance into the Kingdom, but rather its very condition and experience. This doctrine of repentance is closely allied to St. Symeon's doctrine of tears, which he develops elsewhere to great affect (but less noticeably in the HDE). In the *Hymns*, however, he returns to the core significance of repentance time and again, so that it can actually be called one of the great

substructures of the whole book. To this extent we can justly call repentance the whole bedrock of what Symeon understands by mystical union with Christ. Rather than being distracted, as it were, by the more 'luminous' aspects of his unitive doctrine, which have for obvious reasons attracted the most lively attention when commentators read this work, we might be better served noticing those many times that St. Symeon points us to the unitive joy of repentance as the true core of his mystical doctrine, and the one he was perhaps most concerned with inculcating in his spiritual disciples: surely the monastic pedagogical reason he composed the HDE in the first place.

I would like, in what follows, to review those instances where the poet rhapsodically celebrates *metanoia* in the HDE and classify the key themes he seems to be elevating in this process. In the first place St. Symeon stresses the absolute priority of God in this process of repentance and union. Forgiveness is God's own work, proceeds from his mercy, and transforms his creature into a child of light who was once a son of darkness. In the beginning of the HDE, in the 'Mystical Prayer' Symeon sets the tone for this in a manner reminiscent of the (adverbial) language of Chalcedon addressing the incarnate hypostatic union, and thereby I think he intends to imply that the union between God and the soul is equally a hypostatic one. The unitive sense here is thus deeply personalist and ontological, but always entirely God's gift:

I give you thanks that you have become one spirit with me, without confusion, without change, without transformation. ....

You have never hidden yourself from anyone, rather it is we who hide ourselves from you, by refusing to go to you.<sup>1</sup>

In his Fifth *Hymn*, Symeon begins by recounting a traditional 'Monk's Alphabet' (of virtues) but supersedes it by intruding this passage to re-emphasize the absolute priority of God's working. In traditional eastern terminology this is expressed in luminous deification-focused language, but Symeon makes it personally clear once again that the whole *energeia* is propelled by the love of Christ to the sinner:

And then cultivate silence, which will preserve all these blessings.

Always keep the memory of death before you,

All that will purify and enlighten your heart

And you will deserve to see the divine light perfectly . . .

But it is Christ, love supreme,

Who illumines souls who seek him

O love which makes us gods ! who is God!<sup>2</sup>

This, so far, is nothing more, perhaps, than the traditional patristic insistence that God is all in all, and his divine power masters his universe and his church. But Symeon presses it in a distinctive way. Rather than God's mercy coming after repentance, to the purified sinner, the *energeia* of salvation, as he sees it, comes *as* the gift of repentance. In other words God's great mercy of the gift of union with Himself, is given to sinners

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<sup>1</sup> Mystical Prayer. M.9. [References to the *Hymns of Divine Eros* will be given throughout in terms of the E.T. of the *Hymns* in the version by Fr. George Maloney (Denville, New Jersey, 1975) whose translations I am using here: page number prefaced by M].

<sup>2</sup> HDE. 5. M 26.

even while they are sinners. He tells this story of the wonders of God's prevenient mercy first of all as from his own personal experience of salvation:

You who rose in a moment in my darkened heart,  
You who descended even to me as the last of all,  
You who made me a disciple and son of an apostle,  
Whom the dreadful, man-killing, dragon formerly held  
as his worker and instrument of evil –  
You the Sun who before all the ages shone in the depths  
of hell  
And who then enlightened my soul enveloped in  
darkness.  
And who have blessed me with the gift of endless  
light...<sup>3</sup>

From being the last of all (like the Apostle Paul), once even a persecutor, he is raised up instantaneously to the rank of disciple and son of an apostle (viz. Symeon Eulabes), in a moment which recalls the blinding illumination of Paul on the Damascus road: that light of revelation which was at one and the same moment his conversion: a repentance brought to Paul by Christ himself as a union of mercy. The apostolic illumination did not succeed the repentance, in other words, it was its cause and its accompaniment.

The same insight is repeated again in *Hymn 2* in a very typical moment where St. Symeon expresses, this time in a eucharistic medium, his profound sense of simultaneously being lifted up into union with Christ by the force of divine love, and having his defilement purified within God's overwhelming light:

What is your boundless mercy, Saviour?

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<sup>3</sup> HDE.1. M12.

How have you deigned to make me a member of your  
body,  
me the impure, the prodigal, the prostitute?  
How have you clothed me with the brilliant garment,  
vivid with the splendour of immortality.  
which changes all my members into light?  
...In fact, these filthy and perishable remains  
united to your all immaculate body  
and my blood mingled with your blood  
I was united, I know it, equally to your divinity  
and have become your very pure body  
brilliant member, really holy member,  
resplendent member, transparent , luminous... <sup>4</sup>

Turning once again to the implied parallel with Paul's conversion, though this time at the more remote instance of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7), where the martyr-apostle, 'full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand' (Acts 7.55), St. Symeon stresses, in *Hymn* 11, that this selfsame miracle of advent is happening once more in his own time and in his own person. But whereas it once was given as a gift of vision and union to a great apostolic witness, now it is given out of the immense humility of God to a profligate sinner:

What is this new marvel which is happening now again?  
Now again does God want to appear to sinners.  
[After the ascension] he hid himself from the eyes of the  
holy apostles  
And consequently we know only Stephen

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<sup>4</sup> HDE.2. M 17.



Saw the heavens opened...Nevertheless he was an  
apostle, he was a sanctified one,  
completely filled with the holy spirit.  
But today what does this strange thing mean  
which is happening in me? ...  
What is this manifestation of goodness to man which  
has just appeared,  
strange outpourings of gentleness, new source of mercy  
which by far surpasses those of old?  
For many found mercy in the goodness of God  
but they offered a personal offering, their faith  
or many other virtues and agreeable actions, while I,  
seeing myself deprived of all that  
am stupefied, I cannot endure  
what happens to me, a prodigal from my mother's  
womb....  
I see Christ – O terror – opening the heavens for me.  
Christ himself, who humbles himself and shows himself  
to me.<sup>5</sup>

The stress is quite particular here: this gift of unitive mercy with God, a vision of light, is greater than that which was established as the norm after the Ascension. Only Stephen's great virtue caused an exception to be made – but now in the latter days God has given this apostolic gift to a profligate and a sinner: not from out of the merit of a saintly life or witness, but out of God's own humility and mercy, to lift a sinner into glory. Symeon goes on to say after this point <sup>6</sup> that the vision of the

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<sup>5</sup> HDE. 11. M.36.

<sup>6</sup> He is referring to the first vision he experienced, while he was still serving in the imperial administration, and had fled to Symeon

divine light was so overwhelming that he turned away and ran back to the darkness of earthly pleasures, and to the world of material ideas, like someone choosing to lie under a tombstone once more, seeking to conceal himself, so as to avoid the death that this vision of God involved. Even so, he adds, within this fearful and life-threatening vision he knew that he had found the God who gives life.<sup>7</sup>

For St. Symeon, Repentance has an immense power within it. It is first roused by the prevenient love of God, that fire which consumes all before it, but it stirs up love from love, and in that unitive comprehension that illuminates the *Nous*, the servant of God realizes that God's love purifies and lifts up the soul to high status: making even the sinners of the latter days, equals to the apostles of old, as he argues in *Hymn 13*:

Master I give you thanks for having had pity upon me.  
 You have granted me to see these things, to write about  
 them thus  
 And to proclaim your goodness for man to my  
 companions...  
 that you have pity on all those who repent with fervor  
 like your apostles and all your saints,

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Eulabes' for refuge from political turmoil in the city. After peace was re-established he returned for several more years' imperial service. Further see JA McGuckin. 'St. Symeon the New Theologian and Byzantine Monasticism.' in : *Mount Athos & Byzantine Monasticism*. Ed. A. Bryer. Variorum Press, Aldershot, 1996. 17-35. Also Idem. *The Notion of Luminous Vision in 11th Century Byzantium : Interpreting the Biblical and Theological Paradigms of St. Symeon the New Theologian*. in: *Work & Worship at the Theotokos Evergetis*. [Acts of the Belfast Byzantine Colloquium. Portaferry 1995] Ed. M Mullett. Queens University Press. Belfast, 1997. pp. 90-123.

<sup>7</sup> See HDE. 11. M38.

that you fill them with blessings, with honor and glory,  
my God.<sup>8</sup>

And he repeats it in *Hymn 14*:

In my mind I want to review, O Christ, the multitude of  
my vices  
and how I have not done one thing well in my life  
- and how instead of punishments and your just anger  
....  
You have now, on the contrary, judged me worthy of  
such great blessings.<sup>9</sup>

The 15<sup>th</sup> *Hymn* expresses very forcibly this precise doctrine of  
the sinner-saint: the one who is lifted up in God's light, even as  
a sinner, and a prodigal, but in that act of mercy becomes a  
vessel of mercy, enveloped in God's radiant presence:

When you reveal yourself, master of the Universe,  
and show the glory of your face with more clearness  
I begin to tremble all over.....  
I am filled with fear...  
for I am impure, absolutely unworthy...  
But when I speak thus, and cover my eyes...  
while I weep and complain  
You surround me completely with your light.  
O amazement! and, upset, I weep more copiously  
admiring your mercy towards me, the Prodigal.....  
How is it, how does it happen that you have deigned  
to surround me thus with your light, night and day,  
in spite of my wretchedness.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> HDE.13. M 46.

<sup>9</sup> HDE.14. M 47.

Here, of course, the connection with Symeon's doctrine of tears is readily apparent <sup>11</sup>. These are likewise the second baptism, the tears which become radiant in light. His overall point is reinforced: that God's love is that *photismòs* (the Greek term for the sacrament of Baptism) which at once purifies and convinces the disciple of the need for repentance.

This extraordinary story of St. Symeon's doctrine of repentance was first impressed on me, when I read that remarkable 'Prayer Before Communion' <sup>12</sup> in the Orthodox ritual attributed to the saint. This, of course is not extant anywhere in the actual writings of St. Symeon but is rather a composite text made up (probably on Mount Athos) from selections from his HDE, particularly fragments of Hymns 13, 19, 17 and 41; so although the prayer is not by Symeon it is, nonetheless, authentically 'Symeonic.' In that nexus *Hymn 17* expresses the core sense most vividly: when the soul is most deeply conscious of its wretched state and separation from God, then is God's mercy at its greatest strength, and reacts to sinfulness by purifying light, that is by communication of divinity that transforms the sinner into God's friend. The *energeia* of this is none other than the fire of the divine love. Here in the communion prayer is Symeon's

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<sup>10</sup> HDE. 15. M 51.

<sup>11</sup> See also HDE. 13. M. 44: ' I weep, I am pierced with sorrow when the light shines on me/That I see my poverty and that I realize where I am,/What world I live in, what mortal world, mortal myself;/And I am filled with joy, with bliss, when I understand/what condition God has bestowed upon me, what glory,/And I consider myself like an angel of the Lord..../Thus joy kindles my love for the Giver/and the one who transforms me, God and Love causes streams of tears/to gush forth and make me even more brilliant.'

<sup>12</sup> 'From lips tainted and defiled..' c.f. *The Service of Preparation for Holy Communion*. Holy Transfiguration Monastery. Boston. 1986. 58-62.

doctrine of the deifying illumination of the sinner most starkly and most rhapsodically expressed:

I know O Savior that no one else has offended you like me  
Nor has done the actions that I have done, unfortunate one...  
but what I likewise know  
that which I am convinced of O my God,  
it is not the magnitude of my offences,  
it is not the number of the sins, nor the shame of the actions<sup>13</sup>  
which will never exceed your mercy – tender for man and great....  
which you pour out in abundance on those who offend you, and repent fervently.  
You purify them, you enlighten them, you share your light with them  
You communicate your divinity to them  
You speak with them and converse with them  
as to your friends, your true friends.  
O unbounded goodness. O inexpressible love!<sup>14</sup>

Repentance is clearly the gateway here to the luminous presence of all the all-encompassing love of Christ. This same theme is repeated many times over in his HDE. I will not cite further passages in this main text any longer, but simply list

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<sup>13</sup> 'I have committed actions beyond all forgiveness (you know what I am speaking about my Savior). I have violated all nature, performed acts against nature...' HDE. 15. M 60.

<sup>14</sup> HDE.17. M.61.

them in the notes for closer study.<sup>15</sup> They are remarkably consistent, deeply moving in their impact and sincerity, and all come to the same point: that it was Christ's love that searched out and found the lost soul and lifted it on high and graced it with divine light even when it was still lost. This gift of unitive vision *was* the soul's repentance: for St. Symeon, it turned him from darkness to life and stirred up within his soul the force of love: gratitude for the divine condescension: a sense of overwhelming love for the humility of the God who had so condescended to friendship with so lowly a servant. Now this strikingly diverges from the normal ascetical theology of the fathers, especially of the Dionysian synthesis, where rigid ascetical practices must be long endured to purify the repentant soul and strengthen its capacity, before any thought of closer union with God can be contemplated. Here, for Symeon, God rushes in to embrace the sinner and lift him on high, burning away all defilement by the very proximity of his glory, and stirring the heart, in consequence, to recognise an infinity of mercy in this gift of salvation as philanthropy, as friendship. It

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<sup>15</sup> HDE. 19. M.85: 'Master how shall I express your strange marvels...how do you cover my sullied soul with light and render it immaculate and divine light?' HDE 25. M. 136: 'I thank you that even when I was sitting in darkness, you revealed yourself to me, you enlightened me, you granted me to see the light of your countenance, and I became light in the night, I who was found in the midst of darkness.' HDE. 25. M 138.: 'Who after seeing my audacities, my debaucheries.... would not cry out...take away such a totally sordid person...but you descended to save the prodigals and the perverse....may your immaculate light, the light of your countenance, hide my works and the nudity of my soul, and clothe me in joyfulness.' HDE.41. M. 208: ' I have not labored, I have not done the works of justice...but spent all my life as a prodigal son...nevertheless you searched me out and found me and on your immaculate shoulders, by the light of your grace, you lifted me up O Christ.'

is the act of the Prodigal Father<sup>16</sup>, running across the fields to rehabilitate the wastrel son: prevenient mercy, excess of love.

I think it is easy to miss the force of what St. Symeon means here; especially if we interpret his words about his consciousness of sin as if they were merely rhetorical tropes: the sensibility of a great saint, who feels sin more acutely than most and thus accuses himself of great sins in an exaggerated manner. If we do this then we certainly can reduce the impact of the novelty of what the saint is actually implying. But then, I believe, we strike against the clear sense of what is being expressed in these *Hymns of Divine Eros*. The sin is acutely felt, and personally known. It is not 'abstract' sin, but real. Even so it makes the soul into the dark beauty of the garden in the *Song of Songs*, the one whom the Logos seeks out in love:

I have sinned against him as no other human being in  
the world.

Let no one think I say this through humility,  
for truly I have sinned more than all men.

To tell you briefly, I have committed every act of sin and  
vice.

Still He called me, I know it.

and I responded at once.....

where do you think I meant that He called me? ....

I meant He called me rather to repentance

and I at once followed the Master.

When he ran I also ran after Him,

when He fled, I likewise pursued Him...

I never gave up the chase...

and when He saw that I held all things as nothing....

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<sup>16</sup> Lk. 15.20.

then He totally appeared to me.  
He united Himself entirely with me.<sup>17</sup>

If we still wish to read this confession of sin as a trope, we are once more convicted by numerous other passages where Symeon repeatedly says to his reader: 'this is not a fiction I am repeating, it is not a comedic device.' The juxtaposition of deep sense of sin and unfathomable divine grace is exactly what St. Symeon's mystical vision is about: and it is this he offers as a paradigm to his later disciples. For such reasons we ought not to underestimate the reality of his experience of sin:

I have been a murderer (listen everyone so you may  
weep from compassion)  
but the manner  
I leave it aside so as not to lengthen my speech;  
I have also been adulterer in my heart  
and sodomite in deed and in desire.  
I have been a fornicator, magician, a slayer of children,  
swearer, perjurer, greedy,  
thief, liar, shameless, grasping – woe is me !... <sup>18</sup>  
I have committed all the other forms of wickedness.  
Yes. Believe me, what I say is true.  
It is not invention or comedy.  
Who then, after having heard that, would not be  
terrified  
and would not admire your forbearance,  
O Lover of Men.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> HDE. 29. M 154-155.

<sup>18</sup> Another and quite specific list, equally graphic is given at *Hymn* 54. M. 277.

<sup>19</sup> HDE. 24. M. 127-128.



Readers normally think that this is surely rhetorical exaggeration. The list is rather drastic. But this would be to gloss over the duties expected, perhaps, of a young palace eunuch chamberlain<sup>20</sup>, who might be called upon to perform many duties and facilitate services for both the lords and ladies of the court, that were often far from ethical<sup>21</sup>: hiding of aristocratic abortions, magic-based fortune-telling, political and sexual misdemeanors on a daily basis. It is exactly his 'surfeit of sinning' in his youth in the palace service that makes him empathize with the prodigal son, with whom he often compares himself, who likewise was 'sick of sin' and returned to the Father's side. This radical sense of sin, combined with the

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<sup>20</sup> He was from an aristocratic family and held the rank of *Spathocubicularios* in the palace, a bedchamber attendant ('Of Cape and Sword') involving him in a range of domestic obligations in a highly pressured and closed environment.

<sup>21</sup> For several further examples see: HDE. 54. M. 277: ' I had become an instrument for every evil and every iniquity, a tested tool for perverse deeds ...O what hardness of heart! rapes, murders, criminal assassinations, injuries angers, evils of all shapes and forms, so as not to bore you with details, in such activities he found me....far away from the hand of God and from the hand of his saints... Therefore God who made me looked down from on high...and led me back again to the divine paradise. He gave me over to his vine-workers, the saints, to work at his divine labor, to cultivate the virtues.... And they ordered me to work at once at humility, and at true conversion, and to be unceasingly filled with sorrow for sins. For these three – they told me – child, when they are observed and persevered in by those doing good works, quickly and without knowing how, elevate them to glory leading them to purification, and impassibility, and divine contemplation.' Likewise HDE. 55. M. 279: ' You know me O Christ as one who has done all sorts of wickedness, really a receptacle of every kind of evil. I know it only too well, and I am overwhelmed by shame.... However the light of your countenance shines brilliantly over me in a mystical way and has driven away the evil thoughts and has dissolved the pain, and has substituted in my humbled soul, joy.... this joy is the contemplation of your countenance.'

immense surprise he experiences by God's illumining grace meeting him in the place of his alienation, is that special juxtaposition in Symeon's Mystical Theology which constantly characterizes the HDE.

It is this state of wonderment at being a sinner but caught up in the mercy of God's light that is the fire at the heart of Symeon's specific teachings about repentance. Many an ascetical writer will advocate the necessity of repentance. Few place it on the dramatic scale of Symeon's sense of divine rapture:

'Of [sinners] I am the first one O my Christ...  
 And when I found myself in the bottom of the abyss  
 I cried out: have mercy on me!  
 Having realized all my evils...I wept,  
 I shed from my eyes torrents of tears, sorrowfully;  
 I repented with all my heart and I cried out with  
 inexpressible cries.  
 And from your indescribable height you heard  
 the one who lay in the very deep abyss...  
 and having left the powers who surrounded you,  
 you passed through all the visible world..  
 and you descended there, in the place where I was lying  
 down.  
 At once you brought your light, you dispelled the  
 obscurity.  
 You awakened me with your divine breath.....  
 You captivated my by your beauty and your love. '<sup>22</sup>

In short, he says, the more the disciple was filled with the engulfing sense of his own sin and shame: 'The more You [O Christ] clasped me in your arms.' <sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> HDE. 24. M.131.

For St. Symeon it is the fire of love within repentance that gives it the force to raise the soul on level with God who has so humbly stooped down to the sinner. The sinner cannot hope to purify himself; his faults are too numerous to count. It is the love that God's prevenient *kenosis* stirs up in the consciousness, and which stimulates the desire for repentance, that lifts up the soul to match God's gift of unitive love.

So it is that such repentance always has a place in the heart of the advanced disciples, not simply that of the novice penitent:

I fall down and entreat you and seek your mercy.  
Turn your eyes as always, so now also, O my universal king.  
Show me your tender pity, show me your compassion.  
Show me that you hold no resentment towards me, the publican,  
or rather the prodigal son who has sinned against you more than any other....  
but let my faith be considered in place of my works, O my God.<sup>24</sup>

Such a fire of repentance is the sustaining *energeia* of the divine vision in a disciple; it is the source of those tears of light which renew the initial *photismòs*. As he says in *Hymn 4*:

Give me humility, give me a helping hand  
purify the impurity of my soul  
and grant me tears of repentance  
tears of regret, tears of salvation,  
tears which dispel the darkness from my intellect

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<sup>23</sup> HDE. 24. M. 132.

<sup>24</sup> HDE. 26. M 141.

and which will make me shine with heavenly  
brightness.<sup>25</sup>

Repentance is thus the very mechanism by which we becomes the 'Sons of God', not simply children of God, that is, but literally *Sons of God* like to the angels themselves (c.f. Ps.82.6). As *Hymn* 8 puts it:

It is not all those whom you see that you know, My God,  
It is only those who love you whom you know with love  
and it is to them very specially that you manifest  
yourself.

Sun which remains hidden to all mortal nature,  
You rise in those who belong to you, you show yourself  
in them,

and in you rise those who first were in darkness,  
adulterers, fornicators and debaucherers, sinners,  
publicans.

Through repentance they become sons of your divine  
light,

but what can light produce if not light?

They themselves, then, are also light

sons of God, as it is written, and gods by grace.<sup>26</sup>

For St. Symeon, the approach of Christ is like fire and light; it takes away sin by its very proximity: it burns away all defilement, and heals all wounds:

Pay attention to what I am going to say.

He who has illumined me touches with his hands my  
fetters and my wounds.

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<sup>25</sup> HDE. 4. M 24.

<sup>26</sup> HDE. 8. M 30.

There, where his hand touches, or where with his  
fingers he approaches  
at once the bonds fall away, the worms die, the wounds  
disappear...<sup>27</sup>

In so many places, then, <sup>28</sup> this remarkable theologian characterizes repentance as the divine light that lifts up the soul to mystical union. His sense in this very distinctive approach is that the love of God is inspired in the redeemed soul which understands the depths of the divine humility in God's approach to the defiled and the fallen. Shame is burned away in the heart's deep gratitude for such kenotic mercy: and on this level of the disciple's elevation, and the Lord's *kenosis*, a true meeting of hearts can occur. This is the mystical union, the deifying *henosis*, which so enraptures the saint, and which he wishes to convey to his readers in the HDE.

In conclusion, as much as St. Symeon is renowned for his doctrine of mystical illumination, so too he ought to be venerated for being one of the Church's greatest teachers of the joy of repentance. By radically juxtaposing the sense of sin with God's merciful encounter, Symeon defines the deifying illumination as the soul's purification and *metanoia*. It is this which drives him on throughout the HDE to recount his own story of liberation from a life of debauchery in the court to a life lived in Christ's light: not for the purpose of self-referential hagiography or the edification of his monks, but precisely so as to elevate for them the concept of the radiant nature of *metanoia* as the locus, the holy ground, where the soul meets its God. As he tells in *Hymn 32* this is the true goal of the saint: to

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<sup>27</sup> HDE.30. M. 165.

<sup>28</sup> See further HDE. 13. M44; HDE. 2. M18; HDE.4. M.24; HDE.1. M.12.

realize that Christ has come near to us, and loves us, even in the midst of our defilement. This realization he goes on to say, and it is very particular to St. Symeon, is the very heights of mystical attainment and causes the disciple day after day to live in the light of such a merciful Lord. His own lyrical prayer can sum it up for us and stand as our ending *coda*:

Therefore weep for yourselves; therefore be repentant,  
therefore pour out each day fervent tears  
so as to wash out the spiritual eyes of your heart,  
that they may contemplate that light which radiates in  
the world,  
that brilliant light which cries out in so loud a voice:  
I am the light of the world !<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> HDE. 32. M. 181.