

Athanasios N. Papathanasiou

## Holiness: The Sacrament of Surprise<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The article approaches Christian holiness in a specific perspective, that of surprise. The use of the notion of surprise serves to elucidate the special, nonconformist characteristics of holiness as participation in God's life and action, which introduces a radically new reality to the natural order of the world. Five parameters (the journey, suffering, creativeness, liberation and the anti-superman) are highlighted as areas in which holiness appears as a surprise, i.e. as the manifestation of the unprecedented in human life.

### Keywords

Holiness, Surprise, Liberation,  
Suffering, Promise



Dr. Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, Editor-in-chief of the quarterly *Synaxis* (Athens), Tutor at the Hellenic Open University, Athens, Greece, Member of the Advisory-Board of the *International Journal of Orthodox Theology*

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper delivered at the Conference "Holiness Today", organized by the *Action Chrétienne des Etudiants Russes - Mouvement de Jeunesse Orthodoxe*, 21 October 2012, Ermenonville, France.

## 1 Introduction

There is a strange dialectic in Christian life. It is the dialectic between *trust* and *surprise*. Trusting God and accepting his Good News sounds like the end of a journey; as arrival in God's realm. At the same time, however, this relationship with the living God also means quite the opposite: embarkation on a journey to unseen lands and oceans. It is not by accident that whenever Christ spoke about his Kingdom, he promised surprises. So the Christian is he who acknowledges Christ as the Lord of Surprises. The future is not a prolongation of the present, but a new creation, a real transfiguration, i.e., the emergence of what has never existed before.

Holiness is the existential state of the human being (of every human being) when it truly responds to God's invitation to this infinite and surprising journey. The Orthodox theologian Fr Dumitru Staniloae has aptly defined holiness as a paradox.

"In the saint God reveals Himself as transcendent, as different from the world. Holiness is the luminous and active mystery of God present in all His transcendence (...). Hence the paradoxical nature of holiness: it is at one and the same time transcendence and self-disclosure, or communication"<sup>2</sup>.

What Fr. Staniloae emphasizes here is the fact that the saint becomes a theophany. The mystery of the infinite God is revealed through the life of a limited being. It is really amazing! But this is not the only surprising thing in God's revelation. Pay attention, please, to the daring words of the recently (2010) canonized Orthodox theologian Fr. Justin Popovic:

"It is Good News, absolutely true Good News - not my own, but Good News of the saints of God- that the human being

---

2 D. Staniloae, *Prayer and Holiness: The Icon of Man Renewed in God* (Fairacres Publication, Oxford: SLG Press and Convent of the Incarnation 1996<sup>5</sup>), p. 12.

is a great mystery, a sacred mystery of God. It is so great and so sacred, that God himself became human, in order to explain to us the entire depth of the human mystery"<sup>3</sup>.

What do these two references point out? That encountering God is a journey from mystery to mystery, from surprise to surprise! If God is a mystery, his own image is a mystery as well! I shall try to touch upon these mysteries by referring to five dimension of holiness, five surprises:

- The surprise of the journey;
- The surprise of suffering;
- The surprise of creating the world anew;
- The surprise of liberation and
- The surprise of the anti-superman.

## 2 The Surprise of the Journey

People consider the warrior Ulysses (Odysseus) the traveller *par excellence*; the traveller who opens himself up to the as-yet unknown and unreached<sup>4</sup>. However, if we pay closer attention to his story, we may come to a different conclusion: The core of Ulysses' travels, his discovery of new places, and his contact with otherness was his return to the point he had started from, his return to his homeland. That is the reason, after all, why his beloved Penelope waits for him back there – at home. Ulysses is a prisoner of naturalism. He cannot dream of a future radically different from what natural evolution can bring. The world in which Ulysses moves remains eternally what it was from the

---

3 J. Popovic, "Together with all the Saints", idem. *Man and God-Man* [in Greek], (Athens: Astir publ. 1974), p. 95.

4 For what follows, see my "Journey to the Center of Gravity: Christian Mission One Century after Edinburgh 1910", in: T. M. Johnson, R. L. Petersen, G. A. Bellofatto, T. L. Myers (eds.), *The Changing Contours of World Mission and Christianity*, (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012), pp. 67-83.

beginning. And that is why his epic, *The Odyssey* culminates in the triumph of return and the triumph of tribal gods.

Yet, there is another figure, humble and insignificant in comparison with the warrior Ulysses. A figure who represents a radically different type of journey. It is Abraham. In his journey, there is no prospect of return. Abraham abandons his home forever. That is why he travels with his wife Sarah. Abraham opens himself up to what has not yet existed. He opens himself up to the future.

In Abraham's case, the encounter with otherness is not merely one episode. It is the very core of the journey. Abraham moves into the realm of otherness, and in addition he himself becomes something other than what he was initially. He becomes a stranger, and accepts a God who appears to him at a very specific moment: the moment when Abraham shows solidarity with strangers in need. Abraham is oriented toward surprise, and for that reason his story does not end with the story of his family. It continues as the history of the world and of the nations, of whom Abraham became the father.

As is well known, modern scholars such as Emmanuel Levinas have underlined Abraham's journey as the metaphor of move into the realm of the Other – as a model for true opening-up, where the subject ceases to exist as an enclosed entity, and is actualised only in relationship with the Other. Holiness, as readiness for this journey, is based on the fact that God himself moves into the realm of the radically Other.

Biblical syntax never ceases to surprise us. The moment God defines himself as "he who *is* and who *was*", the reader expects to hear that God is also "he who will be". Yet the biblical text says, "he who is and was *and who is coming*" (Rev 1:4)!

The Christian is he who is waiting, but this waiting is not inertia. The waiting Christian is a traveller, together with his God, who is not only coming, but also going. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations (...) and behold, I am with you all the days, until the completion of the age" (Matt. 28: 19-20).

### **3 The Surprise of Suffering**

The suffering, ill, and uncured holy man is a surprise. How can a friend of God, someone who often heals others, remain unhealed and die in pain? Suffering is a scandal for those who have been charmed by the Gospel of Health and Wealth and by the secular religions of self-improvement. Contemporary societies are not willing to discern between meaningless and meaningful suffering; suffering is always considered a menace. So people bypass the mystery of suffering for the sake of love and in so doing they bypass the pains of a new birth; the pains of our self-coming out of its shell and opening up in order to host the other.

This suffering is participation in Christ's suffering, but not only in his suffering on the cross almost two thousand years ago. It is also participation in his suffering now. Here lies one more paradox. The resurrected Christ is still the suffering Christ, participating in the suffering of every single person as long as history lasts. Saint Maximus the Confessor stressed this truth<sup>5</sup> ten centuries before Blaise Pascal said that Christ would be suffering until the end of time.

The suffering saint is living out his/her relationship with God because of pure love, not because of goods such as health, wealth, etc. The goods are good for our lives, but they may degenerate into idols if they are understood as the meaning of life, and stand between us and God or even replace God. The ultimate liberation from such idolatry in favour of unselfish love is represented by the paradox of saints entirely deprived of these goods. It is Moses who, finally, did not enter the Promised Land, Saint Paul who remained uncured, elder Pophyrius Bairaktaris (Greece, 1906-1991) who died in pain...

---

5 Maximus the Confessor, "Mystagogy", in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XCI, Paris: Garnier Freres, 1863), p. 713B.

I recall the words of elder Porphyrius:

"Souls that have known pain and suffering and that are tormented by their passions win most especially the love and grace of God. It is souls such as these that become saints, and very often we pass judgment on them. (...) We see them as weak, but when they open themselves to God they become all love and all divine *eros*. (...) That is how God's miracle works in such souls, which we regard as 'lost'"<sup>6</sup>.

It is the surprise of hidden holiness!

#### 4 The Surprise of Creating the World anew

Love is a rather worn-out word in our days, being used everywhere rather carelessly, mostly as a synonym of "pleasure" or "preference". In other words, love as taught in word and in action by Christ, i.e., sacrificial love, is often bypassed as something absurd and unreasonable. Sacrificial love does not stem from the natural order. The "harmony" of the natural order is based on power, on the dominance of the strongest. Of course, as human societies grow wiser, they progress to toleration of the Other. But toleration is not the same as love! It can simply mean autonomous and enclosed individual entities existing in parallel.

Apart from this emphasis upon power, however, it is true that many people who do not share Christian faith accept love as the supreme value in life. Here another issue emerges. A saint is a living manifestation of the fact that, if love is really important, then it cannot be merely a sentiment or one of the many

---

6 E. Porphyrios, J. Raffan (eds.), *Wounded by Love. The Life and the Wisdom of Elder Porphyrios*, (Greece: Denise Harvey publ., 2005), p. 185. Elder Porphyrios used to say: "You must love and suffer - suffer for the one you love. Love makes effort for the loved one" (p. 107).

elements of human existence. If love is merely a human sentiment, then it will die when the human being dies, in the same manner that the eyes, the heart, the feet, and every constituent part of a person dies when the individual dies. If we really accept love as the essence of life, then love has to be two things at the same time: personal and immortal. It has to be an endless communion of persons, i.e., God, or more precisely the Triune God.

Natural order demands retaliation and revenge. We want to pay back, to return the hit, and this seems reasonable. But in this way the evil (e.g., violence) is reproduced and multiplied. The deterministic chain of wrongdoing can be stopped only by forgiveness. Forgiveness is a creative power that makes history start from the beginning, free from the bonds of the past. This is the age-old experience of the Church, and it is rather impressive that it has drawn the attention of a modern philosopher, Jacques Derrida, who aptly points out that

“Forgiveness is mad, and [...] must remain a madness of the impossible [...]. It is even, perhaps, the only thing that arrives, that surprises, like a revolution, the ordinary course of history, politics, and law”<sup>7</sup>.

## 5 The Surprise of Liberation

Forgiveness and reconciliation, however, are not public relations; they are not tricks of diplomacy. It is, rather, a completely different calculus, which wishes to transform

---

<sup>7</sup> J. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (tr. M. Dooley, M. Hughes), (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 39. See A. N. Papathanasiou, "Christian Anthropology for a Culture of Peace: Considering the Church in Mission and Dialogue Today", in: E. Clapsis (ed.), *Violence and Christian Spirituality. An Ecumenical Conversation*, (WCC Publications, Geneva, Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), p. 100.

human life. So reconciliation is indissolubly linked with liberation. If reconciliation is divorced from liberation, then it becomes a compromise with the old world and with the dominion of death.

Holiness changes the world in reality, on every level (personal, spiritual, societal) - not in an esoteric, new-age type manner. Holiness stands far away from bourgeois ethics; it critiques social injustice and rocks the social status-quo. Allow me to mention only a few examples: Abba Makarios of Alexandria proceeded to commit a fraud, so that he could care for the incurables of Alexandria. He took money from a rich and avaricious woman with the promise that he would buy her precious stones at a bargain price. However, he gave the money for the treatment of patients. Similarly, John the Merciful, Patriarch of Alexandria, declared that it would not be wrong if one would figure out ways to deprive the rich even of their clothes in order to help poor people. And Saint Akakios, bishop of Amida at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> c., seemingly committed sacrilege when he melted down the precious sacred vessels of the churches in order to feed seven thousand Persian soldiers, prisoners of war, i.e., enemies and anti-Christians<sup>8</sup>. Remember that the “clergymen” who bypassed the wounded man in the parable of the Good Samaritan, did so because of their dedication to their liturgical tasks. For the sake of ritualism they annulled solidarity<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> For all these incidents see A. N. Papathanasiou, “Liberation perspectives in Patristic thought; An Orthodox approach”, in: *Hellenic Open University. Scientific Review of Post-Graduate Program ‘Studies in Orthodox Theology’* 2 (2011), pp. 419-438.

<sup>9</sup> The same happens in an ascetic narrative of the Church, where two young monks lived with a hermit in obedience. One day the hermit told them to cross the desert in order to prepare for a vigil. They met a wounded man, yet they bypassed him in order to maintain obedience. But eventually the wounded man, who in reality was an angel, told their master: "God sent me to inform you that your two monks are not worthy of the Kingdom of God because they don't have love", in: E. Porphyrios, J.



## 6 The Surprise of the Anti-Superman

Sometimes we produce triumphalist hagiographical narratives, where the saint appears as a Super Man or a Wonder Woman, i.e., as someone beyond weakness, ambitions, doubts, and faults. But if this is so, then the saint would not be the human response to God; he would be another species who runs his own way. The triumphalist approach of holiness cannot be found in the Gospels and the self-consciousness of the saints themselves. The saint is the one who does not cease to struggle and is ready to repent. Since he experiences God as a really living person, he expects his mercy and trusts his love. The saint does not replace the living God with any system of virtues or principles. In the New Testament, we see not only the failures of the disciples before Pentecost, but also the debate between Saint Paul and Saint Peter, yet it was a debate in love and for the truth. Love blossoms in an unconceivable variety of gifts, acts and stances, which are challenges to those who hasten to start the journey to unseen lands and the unforeseen oceans of God.

---

Raffan (eds.), *Wounded by Love. The Life and the Wisdom of Elder Porphyrios Wounded*, p. 189.