



What is the Human Nous?

Chapter 1 from *Patristic Theology*

by Father John Romanides

The chief concern of the Orthodox Church is the healing of the human soul. The Church has always considered the soul as the part of the human being that needs healing because She has seen from Hebrew tradition, from Christ Himself, and from the Apostles that in the region of the physical heart there functions something that the Fathers called the *nous*. In other words, the Fathers took the traditional term *nous*, which means both intellect (*dianoia*) and speech or reason (*logos*), and gave it a different meaning. They used *nous* to refer to this noetic energy that functions in the heart of every spiritually healthy person. We do not know when this change in meaning took place, because we know that some Fathers used the same word *nous* to refer to reason as well as to this noetic energy that descends and functions in the region of the heart.

So from this perspective, noetic activity is an activity essential to the soul. It functions in the brain as the reason; it simultaneously functions in the heart as the *nous*. In other words, the same organ, the *nous*, prays ceaselessly in the heart and simultaneously thinks about mathematical problems, for example, or anything else in the brain.

We should point out that there is a difference in terminology between St. Paul and the Fathers. What St. Paul calls the *nous* is the same as what the Fathers call *dianoia*. When the Apostle Paul says, I will pray with the spirit,[1] he means what the Fathers mean when they say, I will pray with the *nous*. And when he says, I will pray with the *nous*, he means I will pray with the intellect (*dianoia*). When the Fathers use the word *nous*, the Apostle Paul uses the word spirit. When he says I will pray with the *nous*, I will pray with the spirit or when he says I will chant with the *nous*, I will chant with the spirit, and when he says the Spirit of God bears witness to our

spirit,[2] he uses the word spirit to mean what the Fathers refer to as the *nous*. And by the word *nous*, he means the intellect or reason.

In his phrase, the Spirit of God bears witness to our spirit, St. Paul speaks about two spirits: the Spirit of God and the human spirit. By some strange turn of events, what St. Paul meant by the human spirit later reappeared during the time of St. Makarios the Egyptian with the name *nous*, and only the words *logos* and *dianoia* continued to refer to man's rational ability. This is how the *nous* came to be identified with spirit, that is, with the heart, since according to St. Paul, the heart is the place of man's spirit.[3]

Thus, for the Apostle Paul reasonable or logical worship takes place by means of the *nous* (i.e., the reason or the intellect) while noetic prayer occurs through the spirit and is spiritual prayer or prayer of the heart.[4] So when the Apostle Paul says, I prefer to say five words with my *nous* in order to instruct others rather than a thousand with my tongue,[5] he means that he prefers to say five words, in other words to speak a bit, for the instruction of others rather than pray noetically. Some monks interpret what St. Paul says here as a reference to the Prayer of Jesus, which consists of five words,[6] but at this point the Apostle is speaking here about the words he used in instructing others.[7] For how can catechism take place with noetic prayer, since noetic prayer is a person's inward prayer, and others around him do not hear anything? Catechism, however, takes place with teaching and worship that are cogent and reasonable. We teach and speak by using the reason, which is the usual way that people communicate with each other.[8]

Those who have noetic prayer in their hearts do, however, communicate with one another. In other words, they have the ability to sit together, and communicate with each other noetically, without speaking. That is, they are able to communicate spiritually. Of course, this also occurs even when such people are far apart. They also have the gifts of clairvoyance and foreknowledge. Through clairvoyance, they can sense both other peoples sins and thoughts (*logismoi*), while foreknowledge enables them to see and talk about subjects, deeds, and events in the future. Such charismatic people really do exist. If you go to them for confession, they know everything that you have done in your life before you open your mouth to tell them.

Endnotes

1. *1 Corinthians* 14:5.
2. *Romans* 8:16.
3. This means that the Spirit of God speaks to our spirit. In other words, God speaks within our heart by the grace of the Holy Spirit. St. Gregory Palamas in his second discourse from In Behalf of the Sacred Hesychasts notes that the heart rules over the whole human organism. For the *nous* and all the thoughts (*logismoi*) of the soul are located there. From the context of grace-filled prayer, it is clear that the term heart does not refer to the

physical heart, but to the deep heart, while the term *nous* does not refer to the intellect (*dianoia*), but to the energy/activity of the heart, the noetic activity which wells forth from the essence of the *nous* (i.e., the heart). For this reason, St. Gregory adds that it is necessary for the hesychasts to bring their *nous* back and enclose it within their body and particularly within that innermost body, within the body that we call the heart. The term spirit is also identical with the terms *nous* and heart. *Philokalia*, vol. IV (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 334.

4. Cf. Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, who notes: Man has two centres of knowing: the *nous* which is the appropriate organ for receiving the revelation of God that is later put into words through the reason and the reason which knows the sensible world around us. *The Person in Orthodox Tradition*, trans. Effie Mavromichali (Levadia: Monastery of the Birth of the Theotokos, 1994), p. 24.
5. *1 Corinthians* 14:19.
6. In Greek, the Prayer of Jesus consists of exactly five words in its simplest form, which in English is translated as Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me TRANS.
7. Thus as Saint John of Damascus puts it, we are led as though up a ladder to the thinking of good thoughts. Saint Paul also indicates this when he says: I had rather speak five words with my *nous*. St. Peter of Damascus, *The Third Stage of Contemplation*, in *Philokalia*, 3, page 42 [my translation: cf. also English *Philokalia*, vol. XXX, p. 120] and St. Nikitas Stithatos, as cited below.
8. With respect to this, Venerable Nikitas Stithatos writes, If when you pray and psalmodize you speak in a tongue to God in private you edify yourself, as Saint Paul says. If it is not in order to edify his flock that the shepherd seeks to be richly endowed with the grace of teaching and the knowledge of the Spirit, he lacks fervour in his quest for God's gifts. By merely praying and psalmodizing inwardly with your tongue, that is, by praying in the soul you edify yourself, but your *nous* is unproductive [cf. *1 Corinthians* 14:14], for you do not prophesy with the language of sacred teaching or edify God's Church. If Paul, who of all men was the most closely united with God through prayer, would have rather spoken from his fertile *nous* five words in the church for the instruction of others than ten thousand words of psalmody in private with a tongue [cf., *1 Corinthians* 14:19], surely those who have responsibility for others have strayed from the path of love if they limit the shepherd's ministry solely to psalmody and reading. St. Nikitas Stithatos, *On Spiritual Knowledge*, in *The Philokalia*, vol. 4, pp. 169-170.

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