

THE SOCIAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF SAINT GREGORY PALAMAS'S APPROACH TO DEFENDING THE HESYCHASTIC PRAYER

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Abstract

At the heart of the monastic spirituality is the development of hesychasm as a means toward achieving an experience of the divine (theosis), and this development proved to be of immense importance in the history of the Orthodox Church. This development of hesychasm, focused on the necessity of ceaseless inner prayer, greatly influenced later Orthodox Church history, spirituality and pastoral counseling. For reasons which will be discussed within this paper, hesychastic spirituality came to the forefront in the fourteenth century, especially through the substantial contribution of Saint Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), and since that time it has played a key role as a renewal movement within Eastern Christianity up to the present day. In his defense of hesychasm prayer, Saint Gregory Palamas formulated a solid theological justification based on the writings of the past Church Fathers, which means that he was in full conformity with the Orthodox Christian tradition.

Keywords: Orthodox spirituality, Saint Gregory Palamas, hesychasm, Jesus prayer, patristic teachings

The origins of *hesychasm* are to be found in the deserts of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Sinai in the third and fourth centuries. Beginning in these centuries Christians started to make an exodus from the cities toward the desert in search of a higher degree of perfection. Interestingly, this exodus towards the desert coincided with the emergence of the "Peace of the Church" in which the persecution of Christians came to a halt under the reign of the Roman emperor Constantine. While this peace brought a certain degree of consolation to many within the Church, it also brought a certain degree of unease amongst a sizeable population of Christians.