

# ΘΕΩΡΙΑ: THE VISION OF GOD, IN THE TEACHING OF ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA

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## Abstract

The term *θεωρία* had a great importance in the thinking of Saint Gregory of Nyssa. According to Gregory, *θεωρία* may refer to *consideration of something, things meditated upon, or actual contemplation*. In the teachings of Saint Gregory, we can distinguish, according to Jean Daniélou and Giulio Maspero, three fundamental places, linked to each other, where this notion is used: a) scientific knowledge, b) exegetical method, and c) mystical contemplation. In its most properly scientific use, *θεωρία* assumes a signification similar to that of *examination, research, study, philosophy*. In certain passages, it can be opposed to the material sense while, in others, it refers to the comprehension of the literal sense in itself, that is to the concatenation of events (*ιστορική θεωρία*). Gregory differs from the exegetes who preceded him, since he treats scientific knowledge of the Word of God, and not only its mystical knowledge. In its religious sense, as contemplation, this is the way of looking at human realities from the perspective of the celestial ones. Having been purified and having achieved purity in moral virtues, the human being is led to the vision of God.

**Keywords:** *contemplation, God, Gregory of Nyssa, knowledge, union*

philosophy, considering, aiming at, etc.<sup>1</sup> When referring to *θεωρία*, Saint Gregory of Nyssa writes down that *θεωρία* involves "consideration of some aspect", "things upon which one meditates" or "contemplation as such"<sup>2</sup>. In the opinion of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, this term (*θεωρία*) stands for several activities of spiritual nature, beginning with the intellectual analysis of the text in its historical-grammatical materiality and ending with the vision of God and with the loving relation of the soul with Christ. *Θεωρία* refers, among others, to the knowledge of the understandable reality of things, going beyond the sensible appearance, exceeding it. Saint Gregory understands *θεωρία* as an *object* of spiritual progress, being therefore related, as well, to the ceaseless human advance towards God and towards the reunion with Him. When referring to the human body, it is expressed by *ἀνατομική θεωρία*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The God of Christians is the Father revealed by His Son in the Holy Ghost. The imperial path of our becoming ordained is but the ascending movement in the divine gift, by means of the Son, up to the Father, the contemplation of the Holy Trinity actually representing the very "peak of theology".

According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, the word expressing the process of vision, contemplation and knowing of God is *θεωρία*. In old Greek, the word means: physical vision, general examination of a problem, real scientific knowledge, exegetic method, mystic contemplation. *Θεωρία* expresses the action of seeing, looking at, observing, examining, contemplating, meditating, studying,

## 2. SAINT GREGORY OF NYSSA ABOUT ΘΕΩΡΙΑ

When discussing the term *θεωρία*, starting from the work of Saint Gregory of Nyssa<sup>3</sup>, Giulio Maspero concludes that it is an essential notion of ancient thinking. Together with Jean Daniélou, he discusses three fundamental places, linked to each other, where it is used: a) scientific knowledge, b) exegetical method, and c) mystical contemplation. "Generally speaking, *θεωρία* is the activity of a soul which grasps the intelligible activity of things, without being restricted to their sensible aspect"<sup>3</sup>. As a matter of fact, the soul has the capacity of going beyond appearances, because the human being is the portrait (image) of the Creator. According to the Capadocian saint

– which is also the opinion of Aristotle – the word θεός itself is derived from contemplation, vision (ἐκ τῆς θέας), which might explain the intense criticism of Saint Gregory on its common, habitual utilization (συνήθεια).

a. In its purely scientific meaning, θεωρία assumes a significance similar to that of *vision, observation, examination or research*. "The object of θεωρία is to discover most rigorous interconnexions, the laws of reality. In this way, it represents a really scientific knowledge"<sup>4</sup>. Essentially to observe is that Saint Gregory makes use of θεωρία in ontology, namely with reference with the knowledge upon various categories of beings"<sup>5</sup>. Accordingly, knowledge of God through *creation* (τὰ ὄντα) leads to the knowledge of God as such (τὸ ὄντως ὄν). Also important is that Saint Gregory is interested in concomitantly evidencing the limits of human reasoning, because θεωρία remains always only at discursive level and, the closer the human being gets to the Absolute Being, the more conjunctural knowledge becomes.

b. According to Origen, θεωρία simply indicates the hidden meaning. Eusebius of Caesarea, with a more historiographical outlook, relates the term to the Christian vision of the prophets of the Old Testament. Saint Cyril of Alexandria, Diodor of Tars, Saint Gregory of Nazianz and Apollinarius of Laodicea share this approach. It is only Didymus the Blind (of Alexandria) who gives credit to the position of Origen.

The contemplative saint of Nyssa applies the term directly to the text: θεωρία indicates a correctly understood intelligibility. Therefore, in certain passages, it may oppose to the material meaning while, in others, it refers to the area of the literal meaning as such, namely to the chaining of events (ιστορικὴ θεωρία)<sup>6</sup>. Consequently, "in its own meaning, θεωρία is hermeneutics"<sup>7</sup>. Having this in view, it would be wholly incorrect to simply identify it with the search of its spiritual or typological meaning: the saint of Nyssa takes distance from the exegetes having preceded him, as he treats the scientific knowledge of the Word of God, and not only its mystical knowledge.

Consequently, the essence of θεωρία is to discover the subjacent theme which connects events and leads one to their significance: in this respect, "object θεωρία is ἀκολουθία"<sup>8</sup>. Gods wants to make use of history, that is why the events represent the basis and starting point of analysis, as obvious in the structure – divided

into two parts - of the work *De vita Moysis*, the former dedicated to ἱστορία, the latter - to θεωρία. The scope of God in revelation is not to communicate a material meaning, but to make us participants to redemption, to deify us - which actually represents the spiritual direction.

Consequently, the coherence of history, taken as a whole, becomes a criterion for interpreting the text. Θεωρία, similarly with the investigation of the spiritual meaning, was already present at Origen, whereas the research upon ἀκολουθία was already present at Eusebius, however Saint Gregory is the only one who unifies these two principles: "He puts forward the research upon ἀκολουθία as an object for θεωρία, which Eusebius does not do, a situation conferring a different meaning to the concept of θεωρία, comparatively with that usual in Alexandria or Antiochia"<sup>9</sup>. The exegetic utilization of term θεωρία in the language of Saint Gregory is therefore based "on one of its fundamental intuitions: that of the historicity of the created being", characterized by usual progress, desired by God<sup>10</sup>. The origin and source of this significance given to θεωρία by Saint Gregory may be explained by the rhetoric education of the author.

c. In its religious – namely contemplative – meaning, θεωρία is related to the already two present significances, however, instead of continuing an Aristotelian orientation, it is changed into a Platonic one, which is, possibly, a less original utilization, as it follows the Alexandrine tradition. It does not refer directly to the knowledge of God (θεολογίαωρία), which remains inaccessible, nor is it restricted to the common knowledge of the human aspects, representing instead the manner of considering the human realities from the perspective of the heavenly ones. In this respect, the term is associated to οἰκονομία, once it refers to knowledge from the perspective of the divine plane, which develops the relation between οἰκονομία and ἀκολουθία, its correlated term from the exegetic sphere. The eyes of the human creature look up in contemplation, to discover the true reality of the world. This θεωρία is the very essence of the prayer<sup>11</sup>. Contemplation of invisible realities (τῶν ἀοράτων θεωρία) characterizes the paradise itself, together with the friendship with angels and the union with God<sup>12</sup>.

In the opinion of Saint Gregory, happiness consists in the contemplation of God together with the angels; however, he unequivocally states that this contemplation

does not include the angels, but only God. Fundamentally, the term has here a negative connotation, because the divine nature remains always beyond the limited capacity of human understanding. Yet, similarly with the case of apophatism, the value of the assertion made by Saint Gregory lies in this very negation, as it brings together the contemplation of divine goods with the ascent to the heights of angels (τὴν πρὸς ἀγγέλους ὁμοιότητα). For Saint Gregory, contemplation is equivalent to the return to Paradise<sup>13</sup>.

For understanding the concept of θεωρία in the interpretation of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, no parallel with the *vita contemplativa* of the Greek philosophers is absolutely necessary. One should not expect, from the part of Saint Gregory of Nyssa, a systematic and scholastic definition of θεωρία. He wrote *De vita Moysis* not as a secular philosopher, but as a person with a deep religious experience. The scope had in view was but to show to his ascetic readers the way towards spiritual improvement and the manner in which this path leads to God. Werner Jaeger evidences the fact that Saint Gregory "felt that the idea of ascetic life is a parallel and, in many ways, a direct continuation of the noble tradition of *vita contemplativa* initiated by the philosophers of ancient Greece. The fact that his own ideals were expressed from this perspective is obvious from the language of his ascetic treatises. He frequently and consciously uses the terms of philosophic tradition"<sup>14</sup>.

In the opinion of Saint Gregory, θεωρία does not represent only the Platonic condition of one's mind, or the Aristotelian definition of a philosopher life. For him, θεωρία is created from the religious and historical experience of the Church, it has biblical roots (e.g., the life of Moses as the prototype of Christian contemplation), its final scope being the total redemption of the human being in Christ and into Christ. Accordingly, the θεωρία concept of Saint Gregory of Nyssa and of the whole patristic tradition should be viewed not as an abstract, static, speculative condition of the human intellect or soul, but in the light of its final scope: a full Christian sharing of the sacramental life of the Church. In this respect, in his *De vita Moysis*, a strongly contemplative work, Saint Gregory outlines – continuously and more than emphatically – the true meaning and supreme purpose of the Mysteries of Baptism and Eucharist<sup>15</sup>.

Soul's purification of its passions and of the too numerous worldly things may raise one up to the contemplation of God as real life, real beauty and real goodness. As entitledly mentioned by W. Jaeger<sup>16</sup>, Saint Gregory completed, by his spiritual and mystic learning, the external rules of the discipline, previously established for the hermits of Asia Minor by his brother, Basil: his Moses is, first of all, a contemplative monk who "had secluded himself for forty years and, living all by himself, used his sight, without being disturbed in any way, in plenary silence (ἡσυχία), for the contemplation of the unseen"<sup>17</sup>. However, contemplation, or θεωρία, is not the final scope of soul's ascension. The soul goes beyond contemplation, ascending up to the immediate presence of God, by means of divine love<sup>18</sup>. In his mature works, *In Canticum canticorum* and *De vita Moysis*, Saint Gregory characterizes these three aspects by the image of light, cloud and darkness.

The knowledge of God, which may be both rational and natural, becomes really deep when it acquires a mystic nature, a permanent spiritual ascent towards Him. Advancing along the road of his perfection, the Christian comes to be reunited with God through contemplation (θεωρία), until he becomes capable of looking at God directly. Saint Gregory states that the pastoral ascent of the Christian towards God is possible only in Christ.

According to Jean Daniélou, interiorization of the *theory* (θεωρία) which, for Saint Gregory of Nyssa reveals itself to an immaculate heart or in the mirror of the soul, involves a total overthrow of the Platonic perspective. The intellectual θεωρία, the Platonic νοητά "does not represent for Saint Gregory, any more, the climax of the ascent towards divine spheres. It remains a climax only in relation with the created world. In the writings of Platon (and, to a certain extent, in those of Origen) κόσμος νοητός actually belongs to the divine sphere; in the opinion of Clement and Origen this was co-natural to God, something opposed to the sensible world. Instead, for Saint Gregory of Nyssa, the demarcation line passes directly between the created (sensible and intelligible) world and the divine Being. Accordingly, the sensible and intelligible *cosmos* is reconstructed in the soul who contemplates in its purified face, as in a mirror, the deifying energies to which the first to participate are, above all, the

intelligible creatures, the angels – the pure faces whose souls become equally pure. In this way, the heavenly journey (a common theme to all Platonic philosophers) gets interiorized, becoming an inward ascent: the soul discovers its native realm – which is co-natural – in itself, rediscovering its primary condition. This is the climax of the vision, *θεωρία*<sup>19</sup>. However, God remains unknown in Himself, boundless in His nature. In his comment to The Song of Songs, Saint Gregory of Nyssa presents the soul in the search of the Beoved One. He raises again and passes, by means of the divine gift, through the intelligible and hypercosmic world, which he defines as the fortress which harbours the Dominions, the Princely Dignities and the Thrones attributed to the Powers; further on, he makes mention of the gathering of the heavenly beings, which he calls public square, and of their innumerable presence, which he calls paths, striving for finding The Beloved One among them. In His quest, he goes through the whole angelic world and, as he does not find Him among these blessed beings, he asks himself: is it possible that at least one of these beings will understand The One I love? They remain silent, giving no answer, making him understand, by their silence, that The One he looks for is inaccessible to them, as well. At that point, after having wandered, helped by the divine Ghost, along the whole supracosmic construction, yet incapable of recognizing The Beloved One among the intelligible and bodiless creatures, leaving aside all he finds, he finally comes to recognize that The One he looks for is The One he cannot embrace<sup>20</sup>.

### 3. KNOWING GOD BY MEANS OF SCRIPTURES AND FACTS

Saint Gregory of Nyssa makes mention of a first knowledge of God, when referring to that involving the word of the Holy Scripture and the commandments of the Law. As the word of God, The Holy Scripture is the first means available for knowing Him, once Christ (The Word), says he: "brings the human nature close to God, by following a continuous route. First of all, it throws light on it by means of prophets and by the commandments of the Law, through which the brilliance of the real light enters the hidden

ones, namely the soul<sup>21</sup>. Having succeeded in knowing God, by observance of the divine commandments, the soul advances in His knowledge by the same path provided by the Holy Scripture<sup>22</sup>, brought to light through its clerical interpretation. Nevertheless, the main role of the Holy Scripture, after that of making God known to us, is of inducing in us the wish to see Him directly, face to face, or – in the words of Saint Gregory – of "seeing the sun in the open". This requires a perfect life after which "the true light appears to our eyes ..., by the union with our nature"<sup>23</sup>. Until reaching this superior knowledge, the soul contemplates God in nature.

First of all, the soul sees God as "a bunch (*τό βοτρυδόν*), which scatters by its flowers a sweet and pleasant fragrance"<sup>24</sup>. This means an initial knowledge, which assumes few information on God, symbolized by the image of the flower which, generally, pleases only two of our five senses: sight and smell. The merely bursting into bud bunch exemplifies quite suggestively this idea, showing that the time until reaching maturity is quite long.

At a higher level, distinguishable from the previous stage, the soul considers that it is more suitable to name God "an apple (*μήλον*) from a barren forrest, embellished by the nice colour of the fully developed fruit"<sup>25</sup>. Such a comparison indicates additional knowledge, once the apple, comparatively with the bunch, gives pleasure not only to sight and smell, but also to taste. More than that, the tree having produced it offers the shadow for a good rest. At an even higher level, the soul realizes that neither this denomination is suitable, as The Desired One appears now with a new face. He "is like a deer and may be compared with a stag cub" (*δορχάδι γάρ ὁμοιοῦται και νευρῶ παρειχάζεται*)<sup>26</sup>. In this new appearance, he neither stays to be seen by us, nor does he remain in his place, but he jumps in the mountains, throwing himself from the peaks on the tops of the hills"<sup>27</sup>. This time, the notions of deer, stag cub, peaks of mountains and tops of hills offer a more complex image, which signifies a more profound knowledge than the previous ones.

In this way, advancing gradually, the soul enriches its knowledge about God, to Whom he ascribes, analogically with the things he

contemplates in nature, different denominations and characteristics.

In spite of all these, Saint Gregory of Nyssa insists mainly on the incomplete character of this type of knowledge. In his opinion, the already accomplished ascents cannot be considered "vision and clear-cut embracing of the truth (θεωρίαν χαί χατάλογον έναργή τῆς ἀληθείας), but voice of The Desired One (ἀλλὰ φωνήν τοῦ ποθομένου), which assumes rather an assumption than a certainty on who is really the one who utters the words"<sup>28</sup>. He suggestively expresses this idea by the image of bridegroom's hand, symbolizing everything His bride (the soul) could see and know about Him<sup>29</sup>. In this way, all she could have obtained was only a partial and highly relative knowledge on The Desired One.

The soul realizes the uncompleteness and relativity of its knowledge when, having attained a higher level, becomes conscious that its meditations on God and on the features attributed to Him do not express Him sufficiently, while none of the names given to Him appear as suitable, as He is much above all these. "I called Him with His name - sadly says the bride (the soul) -, as much as I could find a name for The Unnamed One. But no name can grasp, by its significance, the meaning of The One Looked for. Think, how could be provoked to answer, by simply uttering His name, The One who is much above any name?"<sup>30</sup>.

Leaving aside the assertions made up to now, and following a much lofty path, that of negation, the soul concludes that The One Looked for "is known only for not understanding what he really is, and for realizing that any possible understanding of Him appears as an obstacle for those who look for Him"<sup>31</sup>. Apparently, by this new ascension, his longing for God has been fulfilled, yet this is not fully satisfactory, as the soul, "after having obtaining this - says Saint Gregory -, and having entered even more deeply inside (ἐπί τό ἐνδότερον) the untold ones (τῶν ἀπορρήτων), asks for a path not only towards good things (ἐν προθύροις τῶν ἀγαθῶν) - but with the help of the Holy Ghost, by means of which, like with a kiss, became capable of investigating the depth of God (τοῦ Θεοῦ τά βάθη), and the Paradise, where, according to the

great Paul, he comes to see the unseen ones and to hear the unuttered ones"<sup>32</sup>.

Especially interesting in this text are, on one side, the term preferred by Saint Gregory of Nyssa for expressing the knowledge of God by the contemplation of nature, which he describes as "the porch of the good ones", considered, therefore, only an initiation for knowing the lofty ones, and, on the other side, the explanation provided, namely that this knowledge is the result of human intellectual efforts, obviously with the support of grace. In this respect, Saint Gregory offers a most precious indication, asserting that "after having raised from the low ones towards knowledge of the lofty ones, including the miracles made by the power of God, the soul can no longer advance by suspicious striving (δία τῆς πολυπραγμοσύνης), but it simply admires and worships The Known One only by the things it makes"<sup>33</sup>.

#### 4. SEEING GOD MEANS FOLLOWING HIM

One of the most profound introspections of Saint Gregory refers to the fact that the vision of God is the result of following God. In *De vita Moysis*, he reunites the images of movement and sight. "Thus, Mosse, who was eagerly looking to catch God, is now taught how can he grasp Him; to follow Him anywhere he takes you, means to see God"<sup>34</sup>. The comment to the *Song of Songs* resorts to the same invocation of the episode from Exodus 33, 21-23: "By this I think that we are taught that the one to see God will see his Beloved One only by constantly following him, contemplation of His face constituting the true endless journey towards Him, accomplished by a close observance of the Word"<sup>35</sup>. The favourite theme of Saint Gregory, that of participation, is also associated to perpetual progress, as raising to virtue increases with one's participation in God "as long as the existence of a limit of virtue has not been demonstrated, with the only exception of the evil, and as the Divine does not accept opposition, divine nature becomes boundless and infinite. Most certainly, the one who follows the real virtue shares but his God, Who is himself nothing but absolute virtue. As long as the ones

who know, by their nature, what is good, they are eager to share this Good and, as long as this Good has no limit, the very aspiration of the participant has no limit, but strives to a boundless condition"<sup>36</sup>.

One should also have in view the observation made by Saint Gregory in the very section of the third homily of *In Canticum canticorum* here under analysis<sup>37</sup>: "Knowledge of Good, which transcends any intellect, becomes possible by virtues, even if sometimes, by some image, we can grasp a small fragment of archetypal beauty". The message is that this knowledge of God is strictly correlated with the cultivation of virtues as, once we acquire virtue, we may know God. Briefly, the transformed *ego* is the one forming the mirror through which we know God. Saint Gregory considers that this concept is expressed by the words of *Canto* 1, 12b, where The Bride, referring to the Bridegroom, says: "My nard has his fragrance", understanding by this that her bunch of nard transmits "the fragrance of Christ". And yet, this fragrance – or reflexion, if the image of the mirror is preferred – permits only an indirect and inadequate knowledge of God.

## 5. THE VISION OF GOD IS RESTRICTED BY HUMAN LIMITS, NOT BY GOD

Saint Gregory associates the theme of everlasting progress with part of his favourite conceptions, for example, that of the vision of God. God remains always beyond us, incomprehensible, however man receives His knowledge and takes advantage of His kindness, "according to his capacities". Man's knowledge of God is limited by man's capacity, and not by the Transcendent<sup>38</sup>.

This is eventually the doctrine possibly taught by Apostle Paul about the unutterable nature of God, when he says that eye cannot know, even if it can see (I Cor. 2, 9). This is because the eye cannot see everything as it really is, but only to the extent to which it may perceive it<sup>39</sup>. The nuance "according to its powers" brings this work close to the second theological substantiation referring to perpetual progress, namely the human nature.

## 6. THE GOOD-HEARTED ONES MAY SEE GOD

In the sixth homily from *De Beatitudinibus*, dedicated to the issue of seeing God (as the eighth Happiness makes mention "of the kind-hearted ones, who will see God"), Saint Gregory of Nyssa asks himself whether this contemplation of the divine attributes is sufficient for obtaining happiness. As a matter of fact, it is not sufficient to simply know the reason of holiness; to be really, happy, man should live as a saint. Happy indeed is not the one who knows something about God, but the one who sees Him in his own soul. Accordingly, happiness does not mean that something about God is known, but to have Him in us. For Saint Gregory of Nyssa, this is by far preferable to seeing Him "face to face". It is not to see God face to face the scope of the one who acquired a pure soul; this impressive formulation proposes – in the opinion of the author – what the Word expresses in front of the others, in more distinctive terms: «The kingdom of God is in yourselves», for making us *understand* that, if having a honest heart, purified of all earthly and bodily things, we shall be able to see the face of divine nature in all its beauty ... In this way, the method of contemplation, favourable to you, is that of looking inside you ... In a similar way with those who look at the sun through a mirror, even if they cannot scan intensely the sky, they see nevertheless the sun shining in the mirror exactly as the ones who look directly at the solar disk; in the same manner, if you have been blinded by the light (of God), you will have the things you look for inside yourselves to the extent to which you acquire the gift of the face who had been put in you from the beginning. Deification is actually purity, lack of passions, elimination of any evil thing. If your inner being is like this, then God is in you. When your soul is not stained by the evil, and it is free of passions, released from any dirtiness, you will be blessed with a bright vision. Once purified, you will come to know what the cursed ones cannot see. Once the bodily veil is removed from the eyes of your soul, you will contemplate – to the extent to which your eyes will be capable to see – in the pure air of your heart, the majestic performance"<sup>40</sup>.

Saint Gregory synthesizes his thoughts by saying: "It is equally true that a honest heart may see God and also that nobody has ever seen Him ... The One Unseen by His very nature was created by the works He had done". As happiness does not mean knowledge, we have "to have God in ourselves" and to contemplate, in Him the face (purified soul), the deifying energies. "The soul recognizes what it looks for (his Betroed One) only in what remains mysterious and not understood". Beyond the intelligible vision there begins the mysterious path where "knowledge becomes love - agape"<sup>41</sup>. The creature living a virtuous life is always eager to see God. "This is really the vision of God: never to cease wanting to see Him. Looking at what we see, we have to permanently strive to see more"<sup>42</sup>. The pure-hearted one will see God, as the unutterable word of God says, "according to his powers, receiving only what his mind can bear; nevertheless, the infinite and incomprehensible nature of God remains beyond any possible understanding"<sup>43</sup>.

## **7. HIS REAL VISION MEANS NOT TO SEE HIM. GOD, WHO TRANSCENDS ANY REPRESENTATION, CAN BE SEEN ONLY IN DARKNESS**

The more we advance with pure knowledge, the more we know that God is more incomprehensible and hidden in his being. Saint Gregory is convinced that "the real vision is that of not seeing"<sup>44</sup>. In this context, the term vision should be interpreted as knowledge. However, according to the apophatic movement, the absence of knowing and of seeing come to signify – paradoxically – a real knowledge. Along his ascent towards the divine mystery, the human being acquires more and more knowledge, coming to understand that the divine nature is above any possible knowledge and vision, and that God "is known only for not being understood in His essence"<sup>45</sup>. Union brings knowledge. One cannot know God if one had not realized, in "the inside" of one's being, some resemblance with the transcendent "Inside" of God. The one reunited with God knows God by means of the Holy Ghost – a knowledge mediated by the divine gift. The Holy Ghost raises the soul to a superior level of

knowledge and love for God<sup>46</sup>, yet the divine being remains hidden in darkness.

In the VIth homily of *De Beatitudinibus*, Saint Gregory of Nyssa asks himself how the eternal life can be pledged to the good-hearted ones as the vision of God, once this thing is impossible. He makes here mention of various texts of the Scriptures, in which "to see" means "to possess" or "to have". Not seeing means not participating to such an event. Consequently, "a new path is opened beyond θεωρία, beyond sight, to the soul which enters the darkness. For Saint Gregory of Nazianz, darkness is what separates us from the light of the Holy Trinity. On the contrary, for Saint Gregory of Nyssa, the darkness through which Moses arrived on top of Mount Sinai represents a form of communion with God, superior to the contemplation of the light given by the burning stake in which God showed Himself to Moses in the beginning of his wanderings ...

If God shows Himself as light, then as darkness, this means – according to Saint Gregory – "that it is impossible to see the divine being, while the union appears as a path going beyond sight, θεωρία, beyond intellect, in that realm in which knowledge is suspended, remaining only the love or, more exactly, where gnosis becomes ἀγάπη"<sup>47</sup>.

Unlike Saint Gregory of Nazianz, in this fragment Saint Gregory of Nyssa evidences the darkness, the mysterious and hidden knowledge of God. The notion of *darkness* has a mystic meaning. It does not express man's natural inability, but the radical inaccessibility of the divine nature, whose experiencing represents the supreme contemplation – present here being already the beginning of apophatic theology.

## **8. CONCLUSIONS**

On the climax of its mystic experience, soul was reunited with *Word* through love, understanding that God cannot be embraced rationally; it is only the darkness of faith that can apprehend God, Who transcends any representation. Faith brings God into the soul, where the feeling of having Him close is developing. The soul is surrounded by the divine night and the Bridegroom makes His presence felt, but He does not show Himself... He transmits to the soul a sort of consciousness of

His presence – ἀλοθεσις παρουσίας<sup>748</sup> – which, however, cannot be grasped. The more present God is, the more hidden he is, even in His apparition.

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## Endnotes

1. Jean Daniélou, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse*, Leiden, 1970, p. 1 & Anatole Bailly, *Dictionnaire Grec-Français*, Hachette, Paris, 2000, p. 933.
2. *In Canticum canticorum*, 6, P. G. XLIV, col. 892AC; see also F. W. Norris, *Deification: consensual and cogent*, in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 49.4, 1996, p. 411.
3. J. Daniélou, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse*, Leiden, 1970, p. 1.
4. *Ibidem*, p. 4.
5. *Contra Eunomium*, II, GNO I, 393.15-17, edité par Werner Jaeger, Leiden, 1960.
6. Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *In inscriptiones Psalmorum, GNO (Gregorii Nysseni Opera) V*, 72.10, edité par John Mc. Donough S. J., Leiden 1962.
7. J. Daniélou, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
8. *Ibidem*, p. 9; ἀκολουθία = succession, consequence, sequel, natural consequence, suite, analogy, etc.; (Anatole Bailly, *op. cit.*, p. 62).
9. *Ibidem*, p. 10.
10. B. De Margerie, *Introduction a l'histoire de l'exégèse*, Paris, 1980, p. 246.
11. J. Daniélou, *Platonisme et theologie mystique. Doctrine spirituelle de saint Gregoire de Nysse, Paris, 1944, p. 150*; Giulio Maspero, *Θεωρία ...*, p. 736-738.
12. Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *Oratio funebris in Flacillam imperatricem, GNO IX*, 486.14, edité par G. HEIL, A. van. Heck, Leiden, 1967.
13. Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *In Ecclesiasten, GNO V*, 386.18-20.
14. George S. Bebis, *Gregory of Nyssa's «De vita Moysis»: A Philosophical and Theological Analysis*, in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. XII, Nr. 3, 1967, p. 83, 86 sq.
15. *Ibidem*, p. 387.
16. Cf. Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique. Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse*, Paris, Aubier, 1944, p. 40.
17. John Meyendorff, *Sfântul Grigorie Palamas și mistica ortodoxă*, Translated from French by Angela Pagu, Humanitas, București, 2007, p. 53.
18. Mystic life is inseparably composed of a double element, interiority and transcendence, input and output, enstasis and extasis. („La vie mystique est faite, inséparablement... d'un double élément d'intériorité et de transcendance, d'entrée et de sortie, d'instase et d'extase" - Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme ...*, p. 274).
19. Vladimir Lossky, *Vederea lui Dumnezeu*, Translated from English by Prof. Dr. Remus Rus, Publishing



- House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, București, 1995, p. 73.
20. P. G. XLIV, col. 893.
  21. Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum*, Vth omillia, P. G. XLIV, col. 864C.
  22. The role of accomplishing the orders for knowing God is evidenced by The Pious Marcu the Ascet, who states that: "God is hidden behind His orders, and those who seek Him, find Him as they accomplish them" (*Despre legea duhovnicească*, cap. 190, translated from Greek, introduction and notes by Dumitru Stăniloae, Honorary member of the Romanian Academy, in *Filocalia sau culegere din scrierile Sfinților Părinți care arată cum se poate omul curăți, lumina și desăvârși*, vol. I, Humanitas, București, 1999, p. 249). According to Saint Issac Sirul: "observing the orders offers the real knowledge (ἀληθοῦς γνώσεως). And not only true knowledge, but also deification (ἀλλὰ καὶ θεώσεως) one fully arrives at when we praise God in the Holy Ghost" (τοῦ ὁσίου πατρὸς).
  23. Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum*, Vth omillia, P. G. XLIV, col. 864C.
  24. Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *op. cit.*, VIth homily, P. G. XLIV, col. 888D.
  25. *Ibidem*, col. 889A.
  26. Magistrand N. V. Stănescu, *Progresul în cunoașterea lui Dumnezeu ...*, p. 31.
  27. Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *op. cit.*, VI, P. G. XLIV, col. 889D.
  28. *Ibidem*, V, P. G. XLIV, col. 860AB; see also VIth homily, col. 889B.
  29. *Ibidem*, XI, P. G. XLIV, col. 1009A, 1011A.
  30. *Ibidem*, VI, P. G. XLIV, col. 892D-893A.
  31. *Ibidem*, col. 893B.
  32. *Ibidem*, I, col. 785A.
  33. Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *op. cit.*, XI, P. G. XLIV, col. 1009C.
  34. Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *De vita Moysis*, II, P. G. XLIV, col. 408D.
  35. Idem, *In Canticum canticorum*, P. G. XLIV, col. 1028A.
  36. Idem, *De vita Moysis*, I, P. G. XLIV, col. 301AB.
  37. *In Canticum canticorum*, IIIrd homily, GNO, VI, 91, edité par Herman LANGERBECK, Leiden, 1960, 1961.
  38. Jean Daniélou, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse ...*, p. 108.
  39. Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum*, P. G. XLIV, col. 941B.
  40. Idem, *De Beatitudinibus*, VI, P. G. XLIV, col. 1272BC.
  41. Paul Evdokimov, *Cunoașterea lui Dumnezeu*, Translation, foreword and notes by Priest Lecturer, PhD Vasile Răducă, Christiana Publishing House, București, 1995, p. 54.
  42. Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *De vita Moysis*, II, P. G. XLIV, col. 409D.
  43. Idem, *In Canticum canticorum*, P. G. XLIV, col. 941A.
  44. Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *De vita Moysis*, P. G. XLIV, col. 377A.
  45. Idem, *In Canticum canticorum*, VI, P. G. XLIV, col. 893BC.
  46. W. Völker, *Gregor von Nyssa als Mystiker*, Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1955, p. 173.
  47. Vladimir Lossky, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
  48. Paul Evdokimov, *Cunoașterea lui Dumnezeu ...*, p. 53.