

Does God Have a Body?

By Fr. Lawrence Farley

Not so long ago I was asked by a very young child at church the question, “Fr. Lawrence, does God have a body?” She was not thinking of the incarnate Christ our God, but of God in the Old Testament, Yahweh, the pre-incarnate deity, the Father (though she did not express it in those terms). The answer, of course, is: No, God does not have a body. Next question? But when examining the Scriptures closely, it is not as simple as all that. For it almost looks as if God does have a body of sorts—though of course of different “stuff” than ours.

As was documented by (Bishop) Alexander Golitzin in his article “The Vision of God and the Form of Glory” in the festschrift for Metropolitan Kallistos Ware Abba: the Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West, it was taken for granted by the ancient Rabbis that God did have a body.

One sees how they might have gotten such an idea. For example, Exodus 24:9f plainly says that Moses, Aaron and his sons, and the elders of the people “saw the God of Israel, and there was under His feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone...And He did not lay His hand upon the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God and ate and drank”. The translators of the Septuagint were uncomfortable enough with this to alter the verses to read, “they saw the place where God stood...they appeared in the place of God and ate and drank”, but this was clearly an alteration of the original text. The received wisdom of the time said that no man could see God and live (compare Exodus 33:20), and so the Hebrew text was at pains to say that although Moses and his people saw God, they did not die: “He did not lay His hand upon the chief men of the people of Israel”. They saw God and still lived.

This notion of God having a visible form is also found in Exodus 33. There Moses prayed to see God’s glory, and God acceded to the request. “But,” God continued, “you cannot see My face, for man shall not see Me and live”. God therefore placed Moses in the cleft of a rock and covered him with His hand until He passed by, so that when He took His hand away, Moses saw only His back, not His face (Exodus 33:20f). Once again the Septuagint was not happy with all this, and so translated the offending verse, “you will see what is behind Me”. But that is not what the original text said. The text said that God had a back which Moses saw.

Then there was the vision of God seen by Isaiah and Ezekiel. Isaiah testified that he “saw the Lord sitting upon a throne” when he was in the Temple, and he cried out in distress, “Woe is me! For I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of hosts!” (Isaiah 6). Note: Isaiah saw Yahweh of hosts. Later Christian exegesis would identify this vision with the pre-incarnate Word (John 12:14), but that doesn’t alter the fact that prior to the incarnation, God had a form which could be seen and which Isaiah saw.

Ezekiel also had a vision of Yahweh, which he described in careful detail in Ezekiel 1:4f. After describing Yahweh’s cherubic chariot throne, the prophet said that he saw the likeness of a firmament, spread out above the heads of the cherubim, and “above the firmament over their heads there was the likeness of a throne and seated above the likeness of a throne was the likeness as it were of a human form. And upward from what had the appearance of His loins I saw as it were a gleaming bronze...Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Yahweh”.

We see here the prophet’s concern to preserve the transcendence of Yahweh—Ezekiel repeatedly speaks of “the likeness” of firmament, throne, and Yahweh. He doesn’t say (as did Exodus) “such was Yahweh”. Rather he backs away from this bold statement by a few paces and merely says, “such as the appearance of the likeness of the glory” of Yahweh. But the point is (as the Rabbis recognized) Ezekiel saw something.

A number of people in the Church afterward agreed with the ancient Rabbis and thought that God had a body of some kind, and when Origen (and the Alexandrian bishop Theophilus after him) denied this, there was great angst among some of the monks of Egypt. As the story was told by Cassian (in Conference 10), one monk, upon learning that God had no visible form, threw himself on the ground and cried out with tears, “Woe is me! They have taken my God away from me, and now I have no one to hold on to!” This kind of thinking Cassian condemned as “Jewish weakness” and as “pagan misapprehension”.

No doubt Cassian (as with Origen and Theophilus) was thinking of such texts as, “No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18, repeated in 1 John 4:12), or Paul’s description of Him as “the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), or Paul’s *Con’t Next Page*

Fr. Lawrence Con't

statement that God “alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (1 Timothy 6:16).

This view of God as above mere bodily existence is summarized by St. John of Damascus in his *Exact Exposition*: “The Deity is simple and uncompound...the terms ‘without beginning’, ‘incorruptible’, ‘unbegotten’, as also ‘uncreated’, ‘incorporeal’, ‘unseen’ and so forth explain what He is not...All statements concerning God that imply body are symbols” (Book 1, Chapters 9, 11). By the Damascene’s time this understanding of God had become standard in the Church, and eventually was regarded as self-evident to all Christians everywhere. Thus, for example, the Church of England’s “Thirty-nine Articles” opens with the statement, “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions”.

So then, how are we to understand the statements in the Old Testament that clearly state that men saw God? I suggest that what we are dealing with here is theophany: God’s appearances to our eyes of flesh were acts of condescension. In our weakness, we find it impossible interact with the invisible; in the I-Thou relationship that is our salvation, we need a visible “Thou”—if only in a mental construct while praying. In His mercy God appears to us in visible human form that we may more easily enter into this I-Thou relationship.

In our experience, true conversation and relationship are only possible among human beings, and so God appears to our senses in human form to facilitate this. How else could we relate to Him?

Other forms of visible manifestation might be possible. Here I am thinking of a passage in C.S. Lewis’ *Perelandra*, in which the angels (who are also bodiless—though not as God is bodiless) took visible form in order to converse with and relate to Lewis’ protagonist Ransom. Their first attempt to appear to Ransom in visible form he experienced as “a tornado of sheer monstrosities pouring over him. Darting pillars filled with eyes, lightning pulsations of flame, talons and beaks and billowy masses of what suggested snow, volleyed through cubes and heptagons into an infinity of black void. ‘Stop it...stop it’ he yelled”... A second attempt produced “rolling wheels. There was nothing but that—concentric wheels moving with a rather sickening slowness one inside the other. There was nothing

terrible about them if you could get used to their appalling size, but there was also nothing significant. He bade them to try yet a third time. And suddenly two human figures stood before him”. It seems that to enter into calm and meaningful relationship, we humans need to relate to something rather like ourselves. I suggest that is why God chose a recognizably human form for His theophanies.

When the invisible and bodiless God whom no man has seen or can see appeared in ancient days in the form of a man, He was not thereby revealing His essence or His nature. He did not have a body or form like ours. He was stooping down to us, so that we could address Him as “Thou” and find salvation. Such was His greatness that angels and archangels trembled to approach Him. One day He would clothe Himself in our poor flesh and walk among us as a man. Until then He chose to appear in human form in theophany to create and sustain a covenant relationship that would lead to that blessed day. His theophanies were therefore prophecies and promises of His future incarnation, when the bodiless Word would indeed have a body.

Romans 13:11-14:4 (Epistle)

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts. Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.

Matushka Sonja Tutko (Horoschak) Tarpon Springs, FL [OCA]

Matushka Sonja Tutko (Horoschak) fell asleep in the Lord on Sunday night, March 7, 2021. The wife of Archpriest Peter Tutko, they have been married for fifty-three years. She and Father Peter served in a number of OCA parishes and founded several of them in the Dioceses of both New England and of the South.

Matushka Sonja was born in Paterson, NJ on February 19, 1943. She was a graduate of Wm Paterson University and Mississippi State. She was an excellent and well-respected choir director and also spent many years teaching religious education. Matushka Sonja was educated as a teacher holding Bachelor and Master's degrees in Biology and helped support her family by teaching that subject in high-schools until her retirement in 2010.

She is survived by Archpriest Peter, her son Mark Tutko and one grandchild Jayson.

Matushka Sonja's body will lay in state at Saint Andrew the First-Called Church, 4633 Glissade Drive, New Port Richey, FL on Friday evening March 12, 2021 with a Panikhida at 7:00 PM. The Funeral Divine Liturgy will be celebrated on Saturday morning, March 13, at 10:00 AM. Interment will follow at Meadowlawn Cemetery in New Port Richey, FL.

May Matushka Sonja's memory be eternal!

Sunday of Cheesefare: Expulsion of Adam from Paradise Commemorated on March 14

As we begin the Great Fast, the Church reminds us of Adam's expulsion from Paradise. God commanded Adam to fast (Gen. 2:16), but he did not obey. Because of their disobedience, Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden and lost the life of blessedness, knowledge of God, and communion with Him, for which they were created. Both they and their descendents became heirs of death and corruption.

Let us consider the benefits of fasting, the consequences of disobedience, and recall our fallen state. Today we are invited to cleanse ourselves of evil through fasting and obedience to God. Our fasting should not be a negative thing, a mere abstention from certain foods. It is an opportunity to free ourselves from the sinful desires and urges of our fallen nature, and to nourish our souls with prayer, repentance, to participate in church services, and partake of the life-giving Mysteries of Christ.

At Forgiveness Vespers we sing: "Let us begin the time of fasting in light, preparing ourselves for spiritual efforts. Let us purify our soul, let us purify our body. As we abstain from food, let us abstain from all passion and enjoy the virtues of the spirit...."

Beginning of Great Lent Commemorated on March 15

In the Orthodox Church, the last Sunday before Great Lent—the day on which, at Vespers, Lent is liturgically announced and inaugurated—is called Forgiveness Sunday. On the morning of that Sunday, at the Divine Liturgy, we hear the words of Christ:

"If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses..." (Mark 6:14-15).

Then after Vespers—after hearing the announcement of Lent in the Great Prokeimenon: "Turn not away Thy face from Thy child, for I am afflicted! Hear me speedily! Draw near unto my soul and deliver it!", after making our entrance into Lenten worship, with its special melodies, with the prayer of Saint Ephraim the Syrian, with its prostrations—we ask forgiveness from each other, we perform the rite of forgiveness and reconciliation. And as we approach each other with words of reconciliation, the choir intones the Paschal hymns, filling the church with the anticipation of Paschal joy.

What is the meaning of this rite? Why is it that the Church wants us to begin the Lenten season with forgiveness and reconciliation? These questions are in order because for too many people Lent means primarily, and almost exclusively, a change of diet, the compliance with ecclesiastical *Con't Next Page*

Beginning of the fast Con't

regulations concerning fasting. They understand fasting as an end in itself, as a “good deed” required by God and carrying in itself its merit and its reward. But the Church spares no effort in revealing to us that fasting is but a means, one among many, towards a higher goal: the spiritual renewal of man, his return to God, true repentance and, therefore, true reconciliation. The Church spares no effort in warning us against a hypocritical and pharisaic fasting, against the reduction of religion to mere external obligations. As a Lenten hymn says:

“In vain do you rejoice in not eating, O soul! For you abstain from food, But from passions you are not purified. If you persevere in sin, you will perform a useless fast!”

Now, forgiveness stands at the very center of Christian faith and of Christian life because Christianity itself is, above all, the religion of forgiveness. God forgives us, and His forgiveness is in Christ, His Son, whom He sends to us so that by sharing in His humanity we may share in His love and be truly reconciled with God. Indeed, Christianity has no other content but love. And it is primarily the renewal of that love, a growth in it, that we seek in Great Lent, in fasting and prayer, in the entire spirit and the entire effort of that season. Thus, truly forgiveness is both the beginning of, and the proper condition for, the Lenten season.

One may ask, however: Why should I perform this rite when I have no “enemies?” Why should I ask forgiveness from people who have done nothing to me, and whom I hardly know? To ask these questions is to misunderstand the Orthodox teaching concerning forgiveness. It is true that open enmity, personal hatred, real animosity may be absent from our life, though if we experience them, it may be easier for us to repent, for these feelings openly contradict Divine commandments. But the Church reveals to us that there are much subtler ways of offending Divine Love. These are indifference, selfishness, lack of interest in other people, of any real concern for them—in short, that wall which we usually erect around ourselves, thinking that by being “polite” and “friendly” we fulfill God’s commandments. The rite of forgiveness is so important precisely because it makes us realize—be it only for one minute—that our entire relationship to other men is wrong, makes us experience that encounter of one child of God with another, of one person created by God with another, makes us feel

that mutual “recognition” which is so terribly lacking in our cold and dehumanized world.

On that unique evening, listening to the joyful Paschal hymns we are called to make a spiritual discovery: to taste of another mode of life and relationship with people, of life whose essence is love. We can discover that always and everywhere Christ, the Divine Love Himself, stands in the midst of us, transforming our mutual alienation into brotherhood. As I advance towards the other, as the other comes to me—we begin to realize that it is Christ who brings us together by His love for both of us.

And because we make this discovery—and because this discovery is that of the Kingdom of God itself: the Kingdom of Peace and Love, of reconciliation with God and, in Him, with all that exists—we hear the hymns of that Feast, which once a year “opens to us the doors of Paradise.” We know why we shall fast and pray, what we shall seek during the long Lenten pilgrimage.

Forgiveness Sunday: the day on which we acquire the power to make our fasting—true fasting; our effort—true effort; our reconciliation with God—true reconciliation. —Father Alexander Schmemmann

FISH FRY

St. Mary’s Byzantine Church in Marblehead will be holding a fish Fry on Friday’s from 4-6pm for take out only at the church during their Great Fast.

Menu: Breaded Perch & Tartar Sauce, Cole Slaw, Cheesy Potatoes & a roll (The last 3 fish fry’s will occur during our fast. Just tell Restaurant & they will substitute the dairy portion of the meal)

Cost: \$12 and will be provided by the Latitude Cafe.

Bakery Available for purchase. / Raffle Basket tickets also available for sale.

Pre-orders only. Call Restaurant @ 419-702-7004 if no answers leave a message with name & # of dinners. Deadline is always noon on Thursday.

Place order with restaurant but pick dinners up at the church.

Dinner Dates: 19, 26, 31