Fr. Maximos Constas

Commentary on St. Maximos the Confessor, Chapters on Love,
by Elder Aimilianos of Simonopetra

Ἀρχιμ. Αἰμιλιανός, Περί Ἀγάπης: Ἐρμηνεία στὸν Ἀγίο Μάξιμο (Αθήναι: Ίνδικτος, 2015).¹

The Greek Orthodox Convent of the Annunciation (in Ormylia), in its ongoing commitment to publishing material from the archive of talks and sermons given by its founder, Elder Aimilianos (b. 1934 - ), former abbot of the Monastery of Simonopetra on Mt. Athos (1973-2000), has recently published a series of talks on St. Maximos the Confessor. These talks were originally delivered in 1975, partly to the monks of Simonopetra and partly to the nuns of Ormylia.²

The talks published in this volume are a commentary on a twenty four “chapters” from the Confessor’s second Century on Love, that is, Chapters on Love II.1 (pp. 23-27); II.2 (pp. 27-38); II.3 (pp. 43-47); II.4 (pp. 47-57); II.5 (pp. 57-63); II.6 (pp. 63-73); II.7 (pp. 74-78); II.8 (pp. 79-81); II.13 (pp. 81-86); II.10 (pp. 86-87); II.12 (pp. 87-92); II.14 (pp. 102-109); II.15 (pp. 109-114); II.16 (pp. 116-117); II.17 (pp. 117-121); II.21 (pp. 121-125); II.24 (pp. 127-137); II.25 (pp. 137-45); II.26 (p. 147); II.27 (pp. 147-149); II.28 (pp. 149-153); II.30 (pp. 153-160); II.32 (pp. 160-161); and II.33 (pp. 161-168) (page numbers refer to pages in the Elder’s Commentary).

This slender, handsomely produced volume is a fine contribution to the Elder’s previously published commentaries on patristic works, which include commentaries on the writings of Abba Isaiah, Hesychios of Sinai, the Rules of Ss. Anthony, Augustine, and Makarios, and a commentary on the Life of Neilos the Calabrian (in Greek). Those familiar with the writings of the Elder available in English (i.e., The Authentic Seal, The Church at Prayer, The Way of the Spirit, and Psalms and the Life of Faith) will already know the range and depth of his engagement with patristic and Byzantine ascetic literature.

The Elder’s attention to the nuances of language has been but one remarkable feature of these commentaries, and is well in evidence in here. In the Elder’s commentary on Chapters on Love II.1, for example, he deftly picks up on Maximos’s use of the word “genuinely” (γνησίως), which is the first word in II.1 (i.e., Ο γνησίως τὸν Θεόν ἀγαπάων),³ and uses it to elaborate on the Confessor’s thought, with special attention to the life of prayer (what follows is my translation of pp 23-26):

All the chapters concerning love written by St. Maximos are inspired by and reflect the everyday life of man and the mystical unions (γάμοι) of God and the soul. These chapters are, in other words, expressions of nuptial experiences (γαμήλιες ἐκφράσεις). The legitimacy (γνησιότητας) of our love for God is related to the legitimacy, legality, and fidelity of marriage. For he who ‘genuinely’ (γνησίως) loves God is the one who does not divorce

---

¹ Archimandrite Aimilianos, St. Maximos the Confessor, Commentary on the Chapters on Love (with a Prologue
² That is, not long after the Elder’s installation as abbot of Simonopetra (25 November, 1973). Note that at around the same time, Theokletos of Dionysiou was preparing an edition (with a valuable introduction) to the Chapters on Love and the Commentary on the Lord’s Prayer, i.e., Θεόκλητος Διονυσιάτης, Τὰ 400 Κεφάλαια περὶ Ἀγάπης καὶ Ἐρμηνεία εἰς τὸ Πάσχα ἡμῶν (Αθήναι: Ὀρος, 1976).
³ The Greek word γνησίως, which means “genuineness” and “sincerity,” is derived from the word γένος, which refers to a “legitimate birth,” of being “lawfully begotten,” and of being “born in wedlock.”
himself from God, that is, who does not introduce a third person or party that comprises the fidelity of his soul’s union to God:

*He who genuinely* (γνησίως)*4 loves God prays entirely without distraction, and he who prays entirely without distraction loves God genuinely. But he whose intellect is fixed on any worldly thing does not pray without distraction, and consequently he does not love God* (Maximos the Confessor, *Chapters on Love II.1)*.

Because St. Maximos understands love to be a conjugal union with God, he cannot imagine that real love for God exists in a man who cannot pray without distractions. The absolutely necessary condition for the spiritual life is an undistracted mind, since union with God takes place principally through the mind (νους). When someone says: ‘I’m distracted by thoughts during prayer; I can’t concentrate,’ or ‘I’m indifferent to prayer,’ or ‘I don’t understand any of this,’ you can be sure that such a person does not love God ‘genuinely’ and has *never* loved Him.

Often we say that we love God, and we sing and celebrate our love for Him, but yet we are not able to pray to Him without distractions. If this is the case, we are not speaking the truth, because genuine love of God is the generative cause of undistracted prayer, and undistracted prayer is the <generative cause> of the love of God. Would you like to apply a practical criterion to see if you love God? Look and see if you pray without distractions, if, in other words, your mind is not distracted and torn to pieces (διαξιφίζεται) either by desires, thoughts (λογισμοί), and passions, or by any other element or item that is not proper to the immaterial life of the intellect. Whatever distracts and fragments the mind reveals that we do not love God, for the love of God is like a wall that surrounds and prevents anything from outside entering our inner, noetic world. It’s like I have a saw and I use it to cut up a piece of wood, and the pieces are scattered in different directions—something like this happens to the mind when it is torn to pieces by thoughts and passions, by the various inclinations of the heart, by desires, and anything else like this.

Does your mind pray without distraction? Does it remain untouched, unwounded, inviolate from every thought, fantasy, and passion? Then you can be sure that you love God. *He who genuinely loves God prays entirely without distraction.* There can be no doubt that you’re fooling yourself if you think you love God when your mind is filled with distractions.

What does it mean to *genuinely* love God? From what verb does the adverb ‘genuinely’ come from? From the verb ‘to be’ (γίγνομαι), which means ‘to come into being,’ and ‘to be born.’ It means I am born naturally, that I am a son or daughter by nature, the son or daughter of my father and mother; I am not an illegitimate child, I am not born out of wedlock from someone who is not my mother or father. Thus the one who *genuinely loves God* is the one who naturally and truly loves God, and whatever he creates, whatever he gives birth to, is the product of a legitimate and lawful union.

---

4 All three English translations of the *Chapters on Love* render this word as “truly,” and thus miss the word’s conjugal and connubial connotations; cf. Polycarp Sherwood’s 1955 English translation of the *Chapters on Love* (*Centuries on Charity*) (ACW, p. 152); the 1981 English translation of the *Philokalia* (vol. 2, p. 65), and the 1985 translation by George Berthold (CWS, 1985, p. 46).
From this it follows that every thought (λογισμός), that is, every desire, everything that is self willed, every thought or memory that divides and fragments me, is an illegitimate offspring, it is not from God, neither is it from my spirit, which is conjoined to, united to God. The distraction of my mind is an act of adultery. We can say that it’s like putting a strange woman in your mind who would rival God for your affections, it would be, in other words, an idol, a person or object with whom I become an adulterer. This is why God and the prophets call idolatry ‘adultery.’ And this is why Scripture has the habit of calling thoughts ‘idols,’ so that when the Israelites fall into idolatry, becoming victims of their thoughts and opinions, they are said to have committed fornication.

Thus the one who prays without distractions does not engage in spiritual adultery or produce illegitimate offspring. Instead whatever he creates, whatever he gives birth to, comes naturally and truly from God. From this it follows that the natural turn and motion of the mind is its movement toward God, for this is its natural activity and function, namely, to ascend to the Father. The words he who genuinely loves God are thus related to the mind, for they refer to the activity of the mind returning and ascending to God. Only he who genuinely loves God is truly with God, truly walks together with God, truly sees and is seen by God, and stands together with Him. But whoever is distracted in his mind during the time of prayer has already committed adultery in his heart, and his lover is whatever has entered into him and distanced his mind from God.

From the very beginning of the Second Century, St. Maximos makes a noble and decisive clarification. He doesn’t want us to fool ourselves, to be deceived, to live an empty, deluded, and vain life. He doesn’t want us to waste our time living a life devoid of love. And so, from the very first word of the Second Century, he presides over the marriage of love and prayer, for it is prayer that unites us to God, while love is the opposite of isolation, egotism, and individualism, being a union with another or with many, and union with God comes about through prayer (pp. 23-26).

Midway through the commentary, the Elder, in a fascinating aside, reflects on the nature and purpose of reading, understanding, and interpreting the Fathers:

We are reading the writings of St. Maximos—just as we read the other Fathers of the Church and Holy Scripture—and we are commenting on them. We’re not doing this so that you can learn something about what he says in his Second Century on Love, but so that you yourselves might learn to read the Fathers and interpret them on your own. A monastery that does not teach the Fathers—and often at that—is not a monastery. The monks in such a monastery easily fall prey to the devil, and become incapable of making spiritual progress; they become, as it were, spiritually castrated, unable to be spiritually productive, unable to bear spiritual fruit. To be sure, God intervenes and from stones is able to raise up men (cf. Mt 3:9), turning sinful mouths to prophecy, and making priests of the sons of harlots, and marrying his prophets to such, as we see in Scripture, but this is the work of grace. This is why, whenever we can, we teach and comment on the writings of the Fathers, namely, because we are not able to do this as often as we would like, and so this is why we are teaching you to do this on your own, so that you can learn how to read, and learn how to understand and interpret and apply the things that you read, so that you will acquire fully and perfectly the spirit of the Fathers. It follows, then, that if you don’t learn to read and understand the writings of the Fathers of the Church, you accomplish nothing.
Whatever you hear from me is simply a prologue, an introduction, which must be followed by your own reading and spiritual study. And whereas there is only one prologue, there are many chapters and volumes that follow, which is to say that it is possible for us to reflect on the writings of the Church Fathers for a long time, and from our personal spiritual study to draw forth all the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that is, to receive all the teachings of the Father we are studying, or the saint whose Life we are reading (pp. 99–100).

With respect to the Elder’s final point, one thinks of St. Maximos’s own words, from the Prologue to the Questions to Thalassios:

I ask you not to take what I say as a definitive spiritual interpretation of the <biblical> passages in question, for I am very far from the mind and meaning of the divine words, with respect to which I need to be taught by others. If it should happen that you—on your own or with others—are able to provide a better interpretation or perchance to learn something from what I have written, this is for you to determine, and produce a more elevated and true understanding, the fruit of which is the heart’s fulfillment for those who long for spiritual insight into the things that puzzle and perplex them.

This is because the divine word <of Scripture> is like water, for just as water operates in different species of plants and vegetation and in different kinds of living things—by which I mean in human beings who drink the Word Himself—the Word is manifested in them through the virtues, in proportion to their level of knowledge and ascetic practice, like burgeoning fruit produced according to the quality of virtue and knowledge in each, so that He becomes known to others through other qualities and characteristics. For the divine word could never be circumscribed by a single individual interpretation, nor does it suffer confinement in a single meaning, on account of its natural infinity.⁵

Fr. Maximos
March, 2016

⁵ From my forthcoming translation of the Questions to Thalassios.