

MYSTICAL UNION IN GREGORY OF NYSSA'S THOUGHT¹

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Introduction

There are several interesting themes about Christian mysticism in early Greek Christianity. Such themes are the idea of Christian perfection, the divinization, contemplation, gnosis (knowledge) or the vision of God, the divine birth, likeness to God, enjoyment of God, perfect prayer, ecstasy, and union with God.² In Christian mysticism, these themes were not understood as abstract mysticism in which the individual disappears in "the abyss of the divine"³ as they were usually apprehended by the Greek contemplative tradition commonly or especially in Neo-Platonic mysticism. However, in Christian mysticism, they were apprehended clearly because, as McGinn says, "They were utilized within the context of a community of belief centered on the confession of Jesus Christ as God and Redeemer. Hence, they always involved a relationship with Him, frequently expressed in the

¹Gregory of Nyssa was one of the Cappadocians or the three patristic figures of the later fourth century. The other two were St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nazianzus. They were a major force in the defense and development of Christian Orthodoxy after the Council of Nicea. See Brian Davies, "Editorial Foreword," in Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), viii.

²Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 85.

³Paul Tillich, *A Complete History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl F. Braaten (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 136.

term of following Christ, or imitating Christ.”⁴ In addition, here the word “mystic” does not just mean a secret⁵ “. . . but it is used to indicate the mystery of God’s love for us revealed in Christ. It is secret, or a mystery, not because it is kept secret, on the contrary it is something to be proclaimed and made known . . . and accessible to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.”⁶

The most important goal of Christian mysticism is to attain the *unio mystica* or mystical union with God. This union forms the highest spiritual form of the relationship between the believer and God. The believer can immerse himself or herself in God’s presence and experience the depth of His love either personally or communally through the activity of reading and interpreting the Scripture; doing ascetic practices such as celibacy, praying, fasting, and the like; and taking sacrament rituals such as baptism and the Eucharist. According to Denys the Areopagite—a mystic Christian who came at the end of the development of Patristic mystical theology and who has his root of mysticism in Philo and Gregory of Nyssa⁷—these activities have aims to purify the soul from the sin, to illuminate the soul in order to be able to receive the life of grace and to get eternal life. Louth writes: “With Denys too we find the regular use of “three ways” of purification, illumination, and union, a triad which has its root in the Greek mystery religions but which now refers to three “moments” of engagement with God: purification from sin and ignorance which is man’s lot as a result of the Fall, illumination as man is restored to the life of grace, and union in which man regains the life of Paradise.”⁸

In the perspective of Gregory of Nyssa, the mystical union can be achieved through a spiritual journey, in which the soul experiences purification,

⁴McGinn, *The Foundation of Mysticism*, 85.

⁵Greek: *musterion* means something closed or concealed.

⁶Andrew Louth, “Mysticism,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Gordon S. Wakefield (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 272.

⁷Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 159.

⁸Louth, *Mysticism*, 273.

an awareness of God, and the mystery of God. This is a never ending journey in man's life till he meets God at the death. This journey also describes the nature and destiny of man—who had fallen into sin—in its participation within God's salvation in order to be able to be restored in the image and likeness of God and therefore led into mystical union and eternal beatitude.⁹

To understand the spiritual journey, according to Gregory of Nyssa, we have to know about the human existence. Weinrich says, "Gregory's anthropology was an important contribution to Christian mysticism. Like the other Greek Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa believes that man is created in God's image, therefore man's soul is like unto God's nature, enabling man intuitively to know God and through purification to become like God."¹⁰ To go more deeply into Gregory of Nyssa's thought about mystical union, firstly we shall discuss his own concept about anthropology. Here in this paper, we will not discuss his anthropology broadly, but only as far as it relates to the mystical union.

Gregory of Nyssa's Anthropology

Schaff and Wace noted that man, according to Gregory of Nyssa, is divided into two kinds namely "the ideal and the actual man."¹¹ The ideal man in his perspective is a likeness of the Divine sovereignty. Gregory of Nyssa illustrates the ideal man as "painters who transfer human forms to their pictures by means of certain colors, laying on their copy the proper and corresponding tints, so that the beauty of the original may accurately

⁹David L. Balas, "Christian Transformation of Greek Philosophy Illustrated by Gregory of Nyssa's Use of the Notion Participation," in *Studies In Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson, David M. Scholer, and Paul Corby Finney (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 266.

¹⁰W.C. Weinrich, "Gregory of Nyssa," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 487.

¹¹Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, "Prolegomena to Gregory of Nyssa," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of The Christian Church Vol. IV* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 10.

transferred to the likeness."¹² Unlike painters, God painted the portrait or man not by coloring but by putting the addition of virtues in man. He describes this as follows: ". . . so I would have you understand that our Maker also, painting the portrait to resemble His beauty, by the addition virtues, as it were colors, show in us His own sovereignty: and manifold and varied are the tints, so to say, by which His true form is portrayed: not red, or white, or the blending of these, whatever it may be called, nor a touch of black that paints the eyebrow and the eye, and shades, by some combination, the depression in the figure, and such arts which the hands of painters contrive, but instead of these: purity, freedom, from passion, blessedness, alienation from all evil, and all those attributes of the like kind which help to form in men the likeness of God: with such hues as these did the Maker of His own image mark our nature."¹³

Furthermore, he adds that the likeness, which reveals the Divine beauty in man, is on the concept of the Godhead and the concept that God is love. He explains: "The Godhead is mind and word: for "in the beginning was the Word," for and the followers of Paul "have mind of Christ" which "speaks" in them: humanity too is not far removed from these: you see in yourself word and understanding, an imitation of the very Mind and Word. Again, God is love, and the fount of love: for this great John declares, that "love is God," and "God is love".¹⁴

It is very clear that the ideal man in Gregory of Nyssa's thought is really Christocentric. The ideal man was created to reveal God's plan, namely, to follow God's paths through Jesus Christ who is the perfect example in revealing the divine beauty. The basis to get ideal man or perfection therefore is only in Jesus Christ. Man cannot achieve the perfection without grounding his life in Jesus Christ.

¹²Gregory of Nyssa, "On The Making of Man V.1," in *Gregory of Nyssa in Selected Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Father of The Christian Church Vol. V*, trans. H.A. Wilson and ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 391.

¹³Ibid., V.2, 391.

¹⁴Schaff and Wace, *Gregory of Nyssa in Selected Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Father of The Christian Church V.2*, 391.

Schaff and Wace also say that according to Gregory of Nyssa, the concept of the ideal man is to show and emphasize human perfection, which in reality was in the bodily created Adam.¹⁵ Then, the nature of the ideal man was lost after Adam had fallen into sin. "The present man is not to be distinguished from that bodily Adam; both have fallen bellow the ideal type."¹⁶ Schaff and Wace also say that "Adam must have fallen; there was no perfect humanity in Paradise".¹⁷ Adam must have fallen because he as a created being is subject to flux. Gregory illustrates flux like some rivers. He says: "This life of our bodies, material and subject to flux, always advancing by way of motion, finds the power of its being in this, that it never rests from its motion: and as some rivers, flowing on by its own impulse, keeps the channel in which it run well filled, yet is not seen the same water always at the same place, but part comes flowing on, so, too, the material element of our life here suffers change in the continuity of its succession of opposites by way of motion and flux, so that it never can desist form change, but in its inability to rest keeps up unceasingly its motion alternating by like ways: and if it should ever cease moving it will assuredly have cessation also of its being."¹⁸

In the flux, man must struggle using his freewill to choose good or evil. Gregory says:

... human nature is mutable and prone to change. How then is it possible to establish in our changeable nature this permanence and immutability in good? To this then we answer: there can be no crown unless the contest is fair, and the contest is fair only if there is an adversary to fight with. Thus, if there is no adversary, there is no crown. There is no victory unless there is conquest. Let us then struggle against this very mutability of our nature, coming to grips as it were with our adversary in spirit; and become victors not by holding our adversary down but rather by not allowing him fall. For man does not merely have an inclination to evil; were this so, it would be impossible for him to grow in good, if his nature possessed only an inclination towards the contrary.¹⁹

¹⁵Schaff and Wace, "Prolegomena to Gregory of Nyssa," 8.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man, XIII. 1," 399-400.

¹⁹Gregory of Nyssa, "On Perfection, PG 46.285A-D," in Jean Danielou,

God foresaw that in the flux, man would follow his desire and misuse his free will rather than following God's will. God through His foreknowledge and His all-seeing power foresaw that man's free will would not go straight forward toward beauty and goodness, but would fall away from the angelic life.²⁰ As a result, he falls into sin. Whereas in the flux, for man, who believes in God through Jesus Christ, will be led and guided back to communicate and reunite the image of God. Therefore, for Gregory of Nyssa, the perfect humanity can happen if it is based on the work of God's redemption in Jesus Christ. For Gregory of Nyssa, God foresaw the Fall and Redemption, for man sinned and redeemed in the work of Jesus Christ at the cross.²¹

Schaff and Wace say that, according to Gregory of Nyssa, the fallen man is not an accident but a necessary consequence of this mixed nature between spirit and flesh²². This state is caused for the soul to choose the spirit or the flesh. The soul chose the pleasure of the flesh rather than the spirit. It happened first when man misused his free will or in other words man's withdrawal from the God-given goodness and therefore become something purely negative.²³ In Gregory of Nyssa's thought the misuse of man's freewill is related to the realm of matter. Balthasar asserts this point as he says, "On the one hand, Gregory does not hide his tendency to ground free human action in its entirety within the realm of "pathos" (material) and thereby in the realm of matter. On the other hand, he seems to put free action and sin at the basis not only of the sexual "pathos" but of all "pathos" and of materiality itself."²⁴ It is not to say that all "pathos" is evil, but to inform that "pathos" can be instrument for man to do sin. Here

From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writing, trans. and ed. Herbert Musurillo (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 83.

²⁰Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man, XVII. 4," 406.

²¹Schaff and Wace, "Prolegomena to Gregory of Nyssa," 10.

²²Ibid.

²³Gregory of Nyssa, "Oratorio Cathedetica 5," cited by Gerhart B. Ladner, "The Philosophical Anthropology of Saint Gregory of Nyssa," in *Studies in Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson, David M. Scholer, and Paul Corby Finney, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 296.

²⁴Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 72.

the flesh or body is related to "pathos". In his *On the Making of Man*, Gregory of Nyssa agrees with the Pauline conception that the flesh, indicating to "carnal", is different from natural and spirit, related to sin. He says:

Hence also the apostle recognizes three division of dispositions, calling one "carnal," which is busied with the belly and the pleasure connected with it, another "natural," which holds a middle position with regard to virtue and vice, rising above the one, but without pure participation in the other; and another "spiritual," which perceives the perfection of godly life: wherefore he says to the Corinthians, reproaching their indulgence in pleasure and passion, "Ye are carnal," and incapable of receiving the more perfect doctrine; while elsewhere, making a comparison of the middle kind with the perfect As, then, the natural man is higher than the carnal, by the same measure also the spiritual man rises above the natural.²⁵

Although the mixed nature indicates the totality of man, but because of the strong influence of the flesh to human's soul, it causes sin to enter in. Nevertheless, the flesh or body is still a vital element in human being, although it is less spiritual than the rational soul. For Gregory of Nyssa, the relation between the flesh or body and sin or evil is as far as the flesh or body was and is only an instrument, and it can be instrument also for good.²⁶ This concept must be different from the Greek Philosophy, which describes the dichotomy between the body and soul and the body is seen only as a burden and hindrance to soul. As Ladd says, "Ultimate reality belongs only to the higher world. Human beings, like the universe, are a duality: body and soul. The body belongs to phenomenal world, the soul to the noumenal. The visible world, including the body, is not considered evil in itself, but it is a burden and hindrance to the soul."²⁷ Therefore, the soul needs to be released from the body, which is the tomb or prison for the soul. For Gregory, the body is not a hindrance for the soul to come before God. The soul and the body are unity. Man's nature is twofold, "a mixture of the spiritual and the sensible,

²⁵Gregory of Nyssa, "On The Making of Man, VIII. 6," 394.

²⁶Gerhart B. Ladner, "The Philosophical Anthropology of Saint Gregory of Nyssa," in *Studies in Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson, David M. Scholer, and Paul Corby Finney, 305.

²⁷George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 269.

our life also is twofold as a consequence. Man is twofold, comprised of both body and soul. His life is also twofold."²⁸ Therefore the salvation of man embraces both the body and the soul. Gregory of Nyssa agrees with the Pauline concept, which says that salvation embraces the whole man; God will restore the body and soul on the resurrection day.²⁹

Mystical Union through the Progress of Grace

Having briefly discussed Gregory of Nyssa's anthropology, we shall further discuss on how man can be brought to the original state mystically, namely in the image of God, after the Fall. In other words, "How does man return to the unity with God, resembling His image after the Fall? How does Gregory of Nyssa deal with this issue, especially with his thought of mystical union?

To answer the question above, we shall consider the threefold ways of tradition of Christian spirituality tradition on how man can get God's salvation. The threefold ways are through repentance based on God's grace in Jesus Christ; illumination, and sanctification. Solignae explains the threefold ways exactly as follows: "1. People must repent so as to be freed from sin; this happen by a saving of Christ (via purgativa); 2. They must learn to know the truth of the faith and the moral goal as Christ and the church state them (via illuminativa); 3. The aim is complete sanctification by the spirit who unites every Christian with God in keeping with His calling (via unitiva)."³⁰ The idea of the threefold ways actually originates from Plato, who made allegory of the escape of the dark cave (Politeia, bk. 7). Arnov

²⁸Gregory of Nyssa, "Ecclesiastes 8:1, 736 B and 6: 1, 709 D," in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious and Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, 37.

²⁹This part is discussed by Gregory of Nyssa "On the Making of Man XXV, XXVI, XVXVII and on The Soul and The Resurrection," in Schaff and Wace, *Selected Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Father of The Christian Church Vol. V*, 461-467.

³⁰A. Solignae, "Contemplation, A. 11. Monde Greco-Roman," in: *DSP2* (1953, p. 1201), in Kees Waaijman, *Forms, Foundations, Methods*, trans. by John Vriend (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 132.

summarizes the idea as follows:

1. Fundamental is the field of the tension between the world of ideas (the good, the beautiful, the One) in which the soul participates on the other hand, and the material world of illusion to which the body belongs to the other. This field of tension produces the matrix for the first level of the spiritual way detachment from the material the world to which we are connected by our body and through our physical soul (the passions); 2. One can only be freed from bondage to the material world, however, after gaining insight into the existence of the world of ideas which is real. This insight looks up with a deep-seated memory frail, which the ideal world has left behind in the soul. Here lies the beginning of the second level of spiritual way, gaining insight into the imprints of the True Reality which are present in the higher soul as memory and which as an illuminating power open the way to the Highest being; 3. This approach to Supreme being in the third level which culminates in the perfection (telos) of contemplation (theoria), a moment of being outside of oneself (ekstasis).³¹

The Greek Fathers, such as Origen, Clement, Gregory of Nyssa etc. christianized the idea successfully without losing the Gospel message to explain the meaning of salvation in Jesus Christ. They used Plato's idea as a vehicle to reveal the Christian truth.

In addition, in Christian mysticism, this threefold ways especially deals with the soul. This does not mean to emphasize that the body is unworthy. Why the threefold ways are related to soul? Why can this be? According to Origen as quoted by Crouzel, it is because, "the soul (psyche) is the place where the soul can choose; when it chooses the spirit (pneuma), which is a divine presence, it becomes spiritual. When it turns to the flesh, which is the area of sin and therefore God is absent, it becomes carnal."³² The man is ideal if his soul is attributed to God and his flesh is not just animated by the soul but also led by the soul to obey God's will. For Gregory of Nyssa, the most important thing is to relate the threefold ways to the soul

³¹R. Arnov, "Contemplation A. 11. Monde Greco-Roman," in *Dsp. 2* (1953, p. 1719-1742.), in Kees Waaijman, *Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 132.

³²H. Crouzel, "Origene in *DSp 11* (1982, p. 937 and 939)," in Kees Waaijman, *Forms, Foundations, Methods*, 132.

because the soul is created in the image of God and therefore the soul is a mirror in which the presence of God is revealed as the soul gives itself up to that image.³³ Again Gregory of Nyssa speaks of a purification of the soul, which will restore it to its original or primitive state, take away the rust or the dirt, and bring out from the marble the statue buried therein.³⁴

Furthermore, in Gregory of Nyssa's thought, the soul can achieve mystical union with God if the soul is restored in the progress of grace and of ascetic effort.³⁵ The progress indicates the synergy, which describes between the work of the Spirit in us and our own work, the work of the Spirit being simply a restoration of our own freedom.³⁶

. . . . the perfect will of God is that the soul should take the form of piety, that soul which the grace of the Spirit causes to flower to supreme beauty by concurring (syngenomene) with the efforts (ponois) of the man who conforms himself to it For the body grows without us but the measure and beauty of the soul in the renewal of its conception, which is given it by the grace of the Spirit through the zeal of him who receives it, depends on your disposition (gnome): to the degree that you develop your struggles for piety, to the same degree also grandeur of your soul develops through these struggles and these efforts.³⁷

The synergy of that both describes "very clear the reciprocal bond that makes grace and free will two poles of one and the same reality."³⁸ Again Gregory of Nyssa says that, "As the grace cannot descend upon

³³Louis Bouyer, *A History Of Christian Spirituality Volume I: The Spirituality of The New Testament and the Father* (England: Burns & Oates, 1963), 365.

³⁴Gregory of Nyssa, "Enneades, I, vi, 9, with De Virginitate; P.G., XLIV, 372 AB," in Louis Bouyer, *A History Of Christian Spirituality Volume I: The Spirituality of The New Testament and the Father*, 365; See also Gregory of Nyssa, *Comment. On the Psalms*, XI; P.G., XLIV, 544.

³⁵Bouyer, *A History Of Christian Spirituality Volume I*, 365.

³⁶Ibid., 361.

³⁷Gregory of Nyssa, "De Institutio Christiano, p. 46," in Louis Bouyer, *A History Of Christian Spirituality Volume I: The Spirituality of The New Testament and the Father*, 365.

³⁸Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. small group of members of the fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (London: James Clarke & CO, 1957), 197.

souls which flee from their salvation, so the power of human virtue is not of itself sufficient to raise to perfection soul which have no share in grace . . . The righteousness of works and the grace of the Spirit, coming together to the same place (προελθοῦσαι εἰς ταυτοῦ), fill the soul in which they are united with the life of the blessed.”³⁹

Gregory of Nyssa says that there are three levels of the soul’s ascent in the progress of grace to experience mystical union with God. The three levels are the light, the cloud and the darkness. These stages can be seen as Gregory of Nyssa allegorizes the experience of Moses with God at the Mount Sinai as follows:

Moses’ vision of God began with light; afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness. Now the doctrine we are taught here is as follows. Our initial withdrawal from wrong and erroneous ideas of God is a transition from darkness to light. Next comes a closer awareness of hidden things, and by this soul is guided through sense phenomena to the world of the invisible. And this awareness is a kind of cloud, which over shadows all appearances, and slowly guides and accustoms the soul to look forward what is hidden. Next the soul makes progress through all these stages and goes on higher, and as she leaves below all that human nature can attain, she enters within the chamber of the divine knowledge, and here she is cut off on all sides by the divines darkness. Now she leaves outside that can be grasped by sense or by reason, and the only thing left for her contemplation is the invisible and the incomprehensible. And here God is, as the Scripture tell us in connection with Moses: “But Moses went to the dark cloud where in God was.”(Exodus 20:21).⁴⁰

In the first level, where the soul experiences the light of God, can be termed as the level of purification.⁴¹ It is because the light of God purifies the soul. As a result, the soul is delivered from the grip of the darkness of

³⁹Gregory of Nyssa, “De Institutio Christiano, P.G., XLVI, 289 C,” in Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. small group of members of the fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 197.

⁴⁰Gregory of Nyssa, “Commentary on the Song of Songs XI: 1000-1001,” in Andrew Louth, *The Origin of The Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 83.

⁴¹ Jean Danielou, *Introduction to From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Writing*, trans. and ed. Herbert Musurillo, 23-24.

sin and the soul sees God in the light. The soul experiences the deliverance because the soul is already in God's salvation through the redemption of Jesus Christ. For Gregory of Nyssa, the deliverance of the soul is anchored in the work of Jesus Christ. "The advance of the soul is the work of the Divine Logos, Christ, and the result, the soul realizes the *Pleroma* of Christ: the advance of one soul brings grace and blessing to others and the indwelling of God in the individual affect the whole body."⁴²

In the first level, the soul also struggles against the passion, namely perversion, by involving an intensification of the soul's inner life by the practice of recollection: the soul seeks to unify its faculties by turning away from the multiplicity of external things.⁴³ "In this way is the image of God restored."⁴⁴ Danielou says, "For Gregory its characteristic marks are *apathia*, or detachment from all worldly distractions, and *parrhesia*, or a childlike confidence in God which man regains as soon as all fear and shame are banished."⁴⁵

In addition, the soul that experienced the purification is ready to approach God because the soul recognizes that God alone truly exists and He is the only worthy object of the soul's love.⁴⁶ Only the purified soul can approach God because the soul is made more like God and as a result, the soul attains its first knowledge of Him in itself.⁴⁷

The second level is the cloud. This level is related on how the soul attains the knowledge of God. This level is characterized by the knowledge of God "within the mirror of the soul".⁴⁸ It means that soul enters the realm of mysticism to contemplate the presence of God.⁴⁹ This contemplation is the contemplation of the soul to "the true reality and knowledge of intelligible

⁴²Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy Volume 2: Medieval Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2003), 36.

⁴³Danielou, *Introduction to From Glory to Glory*, 23-24.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Louth, *The Origin of The Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 84.

⁴⁷Danielou, *Introduction to From Glory to Glory*, 24.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

reality".⁵⁰ In the contemplation, the soul experiences an awareness of God's grace.⁵¹ The Triune God dwells in the soul and the soul senses His activity in soul.⁵² In this condition, the soul enables to reflect the knowledge of God because the soul participates in the presence of God. Gregory of Nyssa says that the soul can reflect the knowledge of God if the soul comes face to face with God. He illustrates the things put in front of a mirror; the mirror takes the appearance of the things. He says, "When you put gold in front of a mirror, the mirror takes on the appearance of the gold and because of the reflection it shines with the same gleam as the real substance. So too, if it catches the reflection of something loathsome, it imitates this ugliness by means of a likeness, as for of a frog, a toad, a millipede, or anything else that is disgusting to look at, thus responding in its own substance whatever is placed in front of it."⁵³ The same goes for the soul, which comes face to face with God. As a result, the soul can reflect the presence of God in itself. "So it is that the soul that has been purified by the Word and has put off all sin, receives within itself the circular form of the sun and shines now with this reflected light. Hence the Word says to her: You have become fair because you have come near to my light and this closeness to me you have attracted this participation in beauty."⁵⁴

In the second level, Gregory of Nyssa understands the soul that enters the cloud is the soul that achieves the progress virtue or the soul that can know the proper understanding of the Law. He says, "Whoever looks to Moses and the cloud, both of whom are guides to those who progress in virtue (Moses in this place would be the legal precepts, and the cloud which leads, the proper understanding of the Law)."⁵⁵

⁵⁰Louth, *The Origin of The Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 85.

⁵¹Danielou, *Introduction to From Glory to Glory*, 25.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Gregory of Nyssa, "The Life of Moses, sermon 4, 832D-833C," in Jean Danielou, *Introduction to From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writing*, 171.

⁵⁴Gregory of Nyssa, "The Life of Moses, sermon 4, 832D-833C," 171.

⁵⁵Gregory of Nyssa, "The Life of The Moses II. 153," in *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, ed. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York:

The next experience level of the mystical union with God is the Darkness. Before we discuss this level, we shall first take note that the all levels are connected to each other and are not strictly exclusive of one another.⁵⁶ All the levels are complementary. The soul can experience the presence of God (level two) because the soul passed through purification (level one). Purification is as a result of the presence of God is real in the soul. The same goes for the level of the darkness, which the soul is brought deeper and deeper to be more purified and immersed in the presence of God. We can say that the relation of the three levels is not "successive but shade off one into another"⁵⁷ and "each level has its dominant trait, the trait may also be found to some extent in the others."⁵⁸

In the level of the darkness, the soul comes into a condition, in which the soul cannot comprehend the knowledge of God because the soul discovers the limits of this knowledge.⁵⁹ In the former levels, the soul learns the knowledge of God as far as God reveals His knowledge to the soul. But in the third level, the soul realizes that the knowledge of God, especially His essence, is beyond her capacity. The soul also realizes of the divine transcendence and incomprehensibility.⁶⁰ Paradoxically, Gregory of Nyssa says that this condition of the soul, which is in the third level, truly achieves the true knowledge of God because the soul arrives at the recognition that the divine essence is unattainable by man or every intelligent creature. It might be the same with Paul the apostle's saying in Romans 11:33-34 (NIV), "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out; "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?"

Furthermore, Gregory of Nyssa explains the condition of the soul in

Paulist Press, 1978), 92.

⁵⁶Danielou, *Introduction to From Glory to Glory*, 24.

⁵⁷Louth, *The Origin of The Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 86.

⁵⁸Danielou, *Introduction to From Glory to Glory*, 24.

⁵⁹Ibid., 30.

⁶⁰Ibid.

the third level through describing the life of Moses when he was in the darkness as follows:

What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God it? What is now recounted seems somehow to be contradictory to the first theophany, for then the Divine was beheld in light but now is seen in darkness. Let us not think that this is at variance with the sequence of things we have contemplated spiritually. Scripture teaches by this that religious come at first to those who receive it as light. Therefore what is perceived to be contrary to religion is darkness, and the escape from darkness come about when one participates in light. But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is un contemplated. For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence's yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcend all knowledge, being separated on all side by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, No one has ever seen God, thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature. When, therefore, Moses grew in knowledge, he declared that he had seen God in the darkness, that he had then come to know that what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension, for the text says: Moses approached the dark cloud where God was.⁶¹

Though the soul experiences darkness, it does not cause the soul to cease in searching of God. Instead, it does mean that neither God escapes the grasp of the intellect nor God cannot be contacted anymore by man.⁶² If the intellect cannot grasp the divine, it does not mean that the soul cannot communicate with God anymore, but through the faith the soul can still contact God.⁶³ Indeed, in the darkness, God comes closer and more intense to the soul.⁶⁴ God draws the soul deeper and deeper in His presence. In this

⁶¹Gregory of Nyssa, "The Life of Moses," II.162, 94-95.

⁶²Danielou, *Introduction to From Glory to Glory*, 32-3.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid.

condition, the soul continually longs for searching God and her desire continues to want to be satisfied in God's love. Nevertheless, here the satisfaction of the soul in God's love must be understood as still in the progressive process in the spiritual journey and never come at halt. In this process, the soul has actually achieved the mystical union with God. Danielou says that the third level is a condition, which as soul has already arrived at a high degree of union with God by Divine love.⁶⁵ In addition, Louth says that "... there is no ultimate satisfaction, no final union, no ecstasy in which the soul is rapt up out of the temporal sequence and achieves union. There is simply a deeper and deeper penetration into darkness."⁶⁶ Lossky exactly describes the condition of the soul as the soul, which is filled with ever-increasing desire the soul grows without ceasing, goes forth from itself, reaches out beyond itself, and, in so doing, is filled with yet greater longing.⁶⁷ In this condition, the soul experiences ecstasy, inebriation, the passion of love, dizziness, sleep, madness, wounding.⁶⁸ These experience means to say that the soul gets more advances in the presence of God. It happens because God's love brings the soul to contemplate itself in His presence. The soul, which is in the contemplation, realizes the limitation of itself and the limitless of the knowledge of God.

In *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Gregory of Nyssa says that the one who gets the advanced soul is the Bride of Christ. He gives an example of the model for the Bride is Moses, who spoke with God face to face (Exodus 33:11), and the Apostle Paul, who as we know "was caught up to the third heaven . . . and heard things that cannot be told" (2Cor. 12:2-4).⁶⁹ The Bride is a symbol for those who are united with God. It is because their soul is brought to come and share the company of God-comes, that is, to enter into the fulfillment of human existence.⁷⁰ This fulfillment happens

⁶⁵Ibid., 31.

⁶⁶Louth, *The Origin of The Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 89.

⁶⁷Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, 35.

⁶⁸Danielou, *Introduction to From Glory to Glory*, 33.

⁶⁹R.A. Norris, "The Soul Takes Flight: Gregory of Nyssa and the Song of Songs," in *Anglican Theological Review LXXX: 4* (Illinois: Fall 1998), 518.

⁷⁰Ibid., 526.

because they get God's salvation.

Interestingly, Gregory of Nyssa also talks of the word "Eros" as the desired soul of the bride to the bridegroom. But here it must be understood that this word is used to allegorize the relationship between Solomon and his lover, which symbolizes the relationship between the soul and God. The relation between the soul and God reveals spiritual love, even mystical marriage. The soul has this desire because God called the soul first and the soul listened and responded to His calling. As a result, the Eros of the soul for God is to have a truly ecstatic love with God. Danielou says the meaning of ecstatic love as follows:

... the notion of Eros denotes the surge of love which sweeps the soul out of itself in proportion to its awareness of God's infinite loveliness ... must it be explained in terms ecstasy and "inebriation," ... as God's adorable presence become more and more intense, the soul is, as it were, forced to go out of itself by a kind of infatuation, and to withdraw from its usual mode of existence, to be swept along the ways of God. Eros, then, is not a longing for possession in a self-centered way, but a truly ecstatic love.⁷¹

In addition, here the word "Eros" must be understood in the light of Agape. The center of the Eros of the soul is not in itself but in God. God the Agape is the ultimate goal of the soul. Therefore the soul enters the mysticism of agape, of a love which is the substantial communicating of God to soul.⁷²

Danielou argues that Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of Eros in the Homilies is simply the Agape of the Gospel in its intense form.⁷³ It is proved as Gregory of Nyssa says, "The bride then puts the veil from her eyes and with pure vision sees the ineffable beauty of her Spouse. And thus she is wounded by a spiritual and fiery dart of desire (Eros). For love (Agape) that is strained of intensity is called desire (Eros)."⁷⁴

⁷¹ Danielou, *Introduction to From glory to glory*, 43-4.

⁷² Bouyer, *A History Christian Spirituality Volume 1*, 367.

⁷³ Danielou, *Introduction to From Glory to Glory*, 44.

⁷⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, "Commentary on the Song of Songs, PG 44.1048C," in Jean Danielou, *From glory to glory: Texts From Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writing*, 44.

Beside the word "Eros", we find many words such as mouth, kiss, myrrh, wine, parts of body, bed, maidens and the like, which can be used to describe spiritual love between the soul and God. For Gregory of Nyssa, the words must be also allegorized and understood spiritually. He says:

And the form that is expressed by these words is that state of integrity and blessedness, union with God, the banishment of all evil, and the assimilation of the truly good and beautiful. These notions bear witness that Solomon's great wisdom transcended all the limits of mortal wisdom. For what could be more paradoxical than the nature itself should purify its own passions? For in words that seem to suggest passion it offers us precepts and instruction in purity. For he does not say that we ought to beyond all carnal passion, that we should mortify our members on earth, or that our lips should not be sullied by sinful words; rather he so manages our souls that we are made to look to chastity by means of words which seem to suggest the opposite, and through sensuous expressions he reveals a meaning which is incorruptible.⁷⁵

Furthermore, in the opening verses of the Song in chapter 3 we find the same meaning with the story of Moses who was at the Mountain of Sinai, where the bride cries out: "Upon my bed by night/ I sought him whom my soul loves/ I sought him and did not find him. . . . /I will arise, then, and go about the city. . . . /And I will seek him whom my soul loves. Gregory of Nyssa interprets these verses as the seeking of the desired soul to God, which is described through the bride's undertaking to know of the knowledge of God, especially God's essence. Yet this undertaking never come at halt, even for him, it proves that there is the mystery of God, which cannot be comprehended completely by man. God is still having the sides of His mystery, which we cannot grasp it. Gregory of Nyssa says, "She seems to attain the hope of the very highest good. For that is higher than to be in the One who is the object of desire and to receive the object of desire within oneself. But in this situation too, she bewails the fact that she is needy for the Good. As one who does not yet have what is present to her desire, she is perplexed and dissatisfied."⁷⁶ In this state, the bride experiences and enters the

⁷⁵Danielou, *Introduction to From Glory to Glory*, 154.

⁷⁶Gregory of Nyssa, "Homily 6 (GNO VI: 179)," in R.A. Norris, "The Soul Takes Flight: Gregory of Nyssa and the Song of Songs", in *Anglican Theological*

darkness. The word "night" in the opening of the Song 3 points to contemplation of thing unseen.⁷⁷ In traditional Christian mysticism, we call this contemplation as the apophatic journey of the soul. McIntosh says, "The bride's restless search for the absent beloved causes her to realize "that her sought after love is known only in her impossibility to comprehend his essence" (CSS, 131). So too in Gregory's view, a sense of unknowing and unclarity are the virtual hallmarks of authentic knowledge of God."⁷⁸ Paradoxically, although the soul experiences the state, but the soul achieves the unity with God. Mystical union with God really happens in the darkness, although the soul cannot comprehend God completely but in the state the soul ascends to God because the soul is more purified and therefore the soul is worthy before God.

Mystical Union through Ascetic Effort

Although the fulfillment of union between man and God will happen in the age to come, namely after the resurrection of the dead, the union can still be achieved even in this present life, through the transformation of our corruptible and depraved nature and by its adaptation to eternal life.⁷⁹ The ascetic effort is the way for man to achieve mystical union with God. The effort is really important because it can anticipate man's return to Paradise and must, therefore, tend toward the spiritualization of the body and thus toward re-assimilation to God.⁸⁰ The ascetic effort does not reject the body but spiritualized the body.⁸¹ The spiritualization of the body means to transform the body into effective locus and instrument for the soul's encounter with

Review LXXX:4 (Illinois: Fall 1998), 529.

⁷⁷Norris, *The Soul Takes Flight*, 529.

⁷⁸Mark A. McIntosh, "Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology," in *Challenges in Contemporary Theology*, series editor: Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (Massachusetts: Bakwell Publisher, 1998), 201.

⁷⁹Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, 196 & 197.

⁸⁰Ladner, *The Philosophical*, 93.

⁸¹Verna E. F. Harrison, "Allegory and Asceticism in Gregory of Nyssa in Discursive Formations, Ascetic Piety and The Interpretative of Early Christian Literature," in *Semeia* 57 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 126.

God through fasting, prayer, chastity and the like through fasting, prayer, chastity and the like.⁸²

In Gregory of Nyssa's thought, the ascetic effort is also often understood as "escaping from the world". To escape from the world means to overcome the temptation from the flesh and the world. He says:

Thus the man who avoids all bitterness and all the odors of the flesh, will raise himself upon *the wings of the Dove* (The Holy Spirit) above all the lowly striving of the world, indeed, above the entire universe; he will discover that which alone is worthy of our desire; he will become beautiful because he has drawn near to Beauty; and there he will become as luminous as light because he is in communion with the true light. Frequently in the heaven at night we see those illumination which some men call shooting stars; but according to the philosophers these are nothing more than the air itself rushing upwards the ether under the pressure of certain wind, and they explain that the fiery track that is traced in the heavens occurs when the wind catches in the ether. Now just as the air which surrounds the earth is forced upwards by the pressure of wind and turns into light in the pure ether, so too the human mind, in leaving this world of dirt and filth by the force of the Spirit, become pure and luminous in communion with that true and exalted purity. Man's soul, then, will shine within that purity, filled with rays of light, and will itself become light according to the Lord's promise that the just will shine as the sun (Matt. 13:43).⁸³

Graef adds that in Gregory of Nyssa's thought, "We actually save ourselves from evil by escaping from the world, just as one can save oneself by flight from being drowned in the sea, burned by fire, or killed in war."⁸⁴ To escape from the world is also related to living in a monastery. It is because when man stays in a monastery, he can focus and concentrate on God's will deeply and through it, he gets away from temptation. Graef criticizes the concept of Gregory of Nyssa by saying that the concept of the escaping from the world does not really protect one against temptation, as the case

⁸²Ibid., 126.

⁸³Gregory of Nyssa, "On Virginity, 46.364A-369B," in Jean Daniello, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writing*, 104.

⁸⁴Hilda C. Graef, *Introduction to The Lord's Prayer The Beatitudes: Texts from St. Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Johannes Questen and Joseph C. Plumpe (New York: Newmann Press, 1954), 15.

of St. Anthony and so many other deserted Fathers so clearly shows.⁸⁵

Gregory of Nyssa also relates the work of the Holy Spirit to the ascetic effort. The ascetic effort does not stand alone in itself but it is backed up by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the only source, which can give the power for man to achieve purity and beauty and then man can immerse in the Beauty through unity with the Beauty.

In Christian mystic tradition, the work of Holy Spirit is also related to the baptismal grace. When the baptism is administered to one, as a result of, the one receives the Holy Spirit in his heart and life. The believer receives the Holy Spirit; it means he receives love (Agape) in his life. It is because the Holy Spirit is the source of love and the giver of love, who enables us to participate in that supreme perfection of the Holy Trinity.⁸⁶ In the baptism, Gregory of Nyssa believes that the image of God is restored.⁸⁷ Not only the baptism has the role to receive mystical union with God, but the Eucharist has also the role to foster it.⁸⁸ For when the Eucharist is administered to and received by the believer, there occurs the corporeal unity between the believer and God. The bread and wine is really real as the body and the blood of Jesus Christ because the Word of God consecrates them.

Another goal of the ascetic effort according to Gregory of Nyssa is also to acquire virtue.⁸⁹ Here virtue is always connected to primarily attributes of God and of Christ in which human person, as bearers of the divine image, can choose to participate.⁹⁰ For him, to acquire virtue is to receive grace, and so the ascetic's life of action through the exercise of virtue already involves the communion with God associated with contemplation.⁹¹ Ascetic effort is based on God's grace. Therefore, for Gregory of Nyssa, there are two side of the ascetic effort, namely both

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, 213.

⁸⁷Copleston, *Medieval Philosophy*, 37.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Harrison, *Allegory and Asceticism*, 115.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Ibid.

ontologically or God's grace and practically or man's ascetic effort such as prayer, fasting, vigils, giving alms, chastity, and other good work done, are inseparable.⁹² Lossky explains exactly the co-operation of that both as follows:

For the true end of the Christian life is the acquiring of the Holy Spirit. As for fasts, vigils, prayers, alms, and other good works done in the name of Christ—these means whereby we acquire the Holy Spirit. Note well that it is only those good works, which are done in the name of Christ that bring us the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Other actions, even good ones, not done in the name of Christ, can neither procure us a reward in the life of the age to come, nor win us the grace of God in this present life. That is why our Lord Jesus Christ has said: "He that gathered not with me, scattered" (Matt. 7:30). In other words, there is for the Christians no such thing as an autonomous good: a work is good in so far as it furthers our union with God, in so far as it makes grace ours. The virtues are not the end but the means, or, rather, the symptoms, the outward manifestations of the Christian life, the sole end of which is the acquisition of grace.⁹³

Celibacy is also the topic in the context of the ascetic community. With this regard, Gregory of Nyssa says that to restore God's image in man's soul, man has to take celibacy. Treatise on *Virginity*, he says:

It is quite common for us to see traveler who do not miss the right path even though there may be many turning; they avoid the other roads once they have warned of them. Insofar as a person keeps away from the wrong paths on his journey, so much the more will he keep himself on the right one. So too the mind will begin to be aware of the true meaning of reality if it avoids trivial things. And indeed, this seems to be what we are taught in the writing of the great prophets, when we are told not to become involved in the things that the world strives for. And one of these things is marriage—rather it is the very root and the principle of every vain effort.⁹⁴

Also On *Virginity*, he adds as follows:

If then we are to be dissolved and to be with Christ (Phil. 1.23), then we must start out again from the last stage, which they reached in their dissolution. It is just like those who live separated from their near and

⁹² See page 10 above.

⁹³ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, 196 & 197.

⁹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, "On Virginity, 46.360C-364A", 104.

dear ones: if they want to return to their place of origin, they begin by leaving the spot at which they last arrived. Now marriage was the last stage in the process of the separation from the life of Eden. Hence the Word teaches us that marriage should be first thing we should leave; it is, as it were, the last resting-place for those who are going to be dissolved to be with Christ.⁹⁵

In Gregory of Nyssa's thought the condition of unmarried is God's original plan for man and this condition will also happen again in the end of time. Ladner says:

At the of time, in heaven, where, as Gregory reminds us, there is no marriage, the first creational image-likeness with God, with Christ, in whom there is neither male nor female, will come to the fore again in undiluted fashion. Mankind's task in time and history is to become what is in God's original plan: a spiritual being or, more exactly, a being which the full dignity of man is vindicated not only in his mind but also in a spiritualized body. Had not St. Paul said: "What is sown a natural body raises a spiritual body?"⁹⁶

We should understand that Gregory of Nyssa's position of celibacy is not demeaning marriage. His position must be understood in the context of the ascetic community. Harrison comments exactly that, "many of Gregory of Nyssa's writing were intended for an audience of ascetics and others who looked to the spirituality and ethical practice as an ideal to be imitated as far as their capacities and circumstances allowed."⁹⁷

Conclusion

The study of the mystical union in Gregory of Nyssa's thought helps us to realize that the ultimate goal of man is to be united with the Creator, namely to get back the image of God that has lost since the Fall. Man has to realize that the center of his life is not in himself or anthropocentric but it must be centered to God. Man can get back the image of God through the spiritual journey, where the soul can experience purification, the awareness and the mystery of the Triune God.

⁹⁵Ibid., 113.

⁹⁶Ladner, *The Philosophical Anthropology*, 85.

⁹⁷Harrison, *Allegory and Ascetism*, 113.

Based on God's grace and the ascetic effort, man's soul can achieve the union. In Gregory of Nyssa's thought, we do not see the separation between grace and free will. Grace and free will are united and manifested simultaneously. Gregory of Nyssa describes the unity of grace and freewill clearly when he says: "As the grace of God cannot descend upon the soul which flee from their salvation, so the power of human virtue is not of itself sufficient to raise the perfection souls which have no share in grace . . . the righteousness of work and the grace of the Spirit, coming together to the same place (προελθοῦσαι εἰς ταυτοῦ), fill the soul in which they are united with the life of the blessed."⁹⁸

The church today should bring back to life the role of mystical experience in her life. As a result, although the world tends to be secular and even, as said by a philosopher, the light of God did dim but the church can still experience the present and the awareness of God in this world.

⁹⁸Gregory of Nyssa, "De Institutio Christiano, P.G., XLVI, 289 C., " in Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of The Eastern Church*, 197.