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Love and Knowledge in the Patristic Tradition

Abstract

The Eastern Church Fathers underlined the specificity of the christocentric knowledge as knowledge in and by love that is a knowledge of love which binds the one who knows and the one who is known. In love and by love, one can discover the way of Truth and of the real knowledge. In this knowledge, love appears truly as the bound of fulfillment. Also, this characterization of love, as the bound of fulfillment, refers to the wholeness of knowledge through love, in which knowledge becomes an event or an open and partakable fact. In this way, knowledge becomes a reality which is dynamic, open and relational, instead of a closed process, oriented towards the self or external to man. Of course, it is neither strictly human, nor exclusively divine, but a divino-human reality. Saint John the



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Evangelist stated the principle of Christian knowledge: „And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (Jn. 17:3). This phrase points out that the essence of knowledge is a spiritual, relational divino-human fact, which identifies itself with life and asserts life, so that both can be united with God's love, in Jesus Christ. The main characteristic of the neotestamentary knowledge is the coincidence between knowledge and love.

Keywords

Love, Knowledge, Communion, Participation, Eastern Fathers, Patristic Theology.

1 Introduction

It is not easy nowadays to talk about love, truth and eternal realities, because the logic of our times tells us that there is nothing irrevocable: everything changes, everything passes and this happens very quickly. “To change”, meaning to be modern, has become, in many cases, the password, the most inspiring exercise of freedom and in this way, our contemporaries are often inclined to think that it is impossible for them to make final decisions, which would pledge them for all their life, with implications for eternity. But which is the right way to use freedom? Is it true that in order to be happy we should be content with little, fleeting, momentary joys, which, once ended, leave bitterness in one's heart?

But this is not the true freedom, we cannot obtain happiness this way. Each of us is created not to make short-term and revocable choices, but final and irrevocable ones, which give life it's full meaning. We can see this in our own life: we would like every beautiful, happiness-giving experience to be endless. God

has created us out of love, for love and destined us to eternity, and He placed in the heart of each of us the seed of a spiritual life which may accomplish something beautiful, wonderful and deathless.¹ We are invited to have the courage of the final, eternal choices and to live them with fidelity and devotion.

God calls us to a particular offering of our own self. He invites us to make his love visible in history. Not only are the human beings looking for God; God Himself has set out to look for us. Starting with the Incarnation, something astonishing happens: the type of salvific communion with God changes radically and the body becomes the tool of Salvation: „And the Word became flesh”, wrote John the Evangelist, and Tertullian, a Christian author of the IIIrd century, stated: „*Caro salutis est cardo*”, the body is the basis of Salvation². The fact that He Himself became

¹ According to the Orthodox patristic conception, the spiritual life, being the life of Jesus Christ “in the Holy Spirit”, is in its essence, since now an eternal life, in which salvation is to be found. Consequently, spiritual life and salvation are exactly the same thing. See Rom. 5, 17-21; 6. 4, 8, 11, 22, 23; 8, 1-17. John 3, 34-36; 5, 24, 40; 6. 53-58, 63; 17, 2-3; 20, 30. I John 1,2; 4, 9; 5. 11, 20. S. P. N. Joannis Chrysostomi, *Homiliae LV in Acta apostolorum*, 13, 8, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus LX, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1862), p. 519. S. Gregorii Theologi, *Oratio XX*, 5, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XXXV, Paris: 1857), p. 1069. S. Joannis Damasceni, *Ad Colossens* 3, 1-4, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XLV, Paris: 1864), p. 897. BC. Paul Florenski, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 264: „*spiritual life is the salvation and the gift by our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

² Q. S. F. Tertulliani, *De carnis resurrectione*, 8, 3, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus II, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1879) p. 806. In the Virgin Mary, as V. Lossky correctly puts it, humanity has assented for the divine Logos to become flesh and to dwell among the people (*Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998, p. 126); kenosis, the assumption of manhood, the adoption, the hypostatic union and its theosis are realized by and in the Virgin Mary (concerning the work of the Virgin Mary in the act of Incarnation, see Νικόλαος Καβάσιλας, “Εἰς τόν Εὐαγγελισμόν τῆς Ὑπεραγίας Δεσποίνης ἡμῶν καί Ἀειπαρθένου

man and descended to the abysses of human existence, to the night of death shows us how much God loves man, His creature. Drove by love, God has set out towards us. God is looking for us.³

And even if man forgets about his Creator, the living and always true God doesn't stop being the first to call the man to the mystery-meeting of prayer.⁴ It is a proof of love from the faithful God, Who is always the first within the prayer, and man's action is always an answer to Him.⁵ As God reveals Himself to the man and also reveals the man to himself, the prayer appears as a mutual call, a moment of living the communion. By means of words and acts, this experience involves the heart also, the whole being who exists through love.⁶ According to Tertullian "the one that we worship is a unique God". And he continues, using the antitheses and paradoxes that are specific to his language: "He is invisible, though we discern Him; whom we cannot touch, though represented to us by His Spirit; and incomprehensible, though we come to some imperfect ideas of Him by the

Μαρίας", in Νικολάου Καβάσιλα, *Ἡ Θεομήτωρ. Τρεῖς Θεομητορικές Ὀμιλίες. Κείμενο*, Ἀθήνα ἔδ. Ἀποστολική Διακονία, 1995).

³ If Adam's fall had not happened, God's Word would have incarnated from the bottom to the top, that is by man, through the work of sanctification Cf. Georges Florovsky, *The Byzantine Fathers from sixth to eighth century*, (Vaduz: Buechervertriebsanstalt, 1987), p. 228. Concerning the cosmic dimension of the divine event of Christ's Incarnation, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Liturgie Cosmique* (Paris: Aubier, 1973), p. 203 and the next ones.

⁴ Cf. Archim. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is* (Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1992), p. 312.

⁵ Cf. S. P. N. Joannis Chrysostomi, *Homiliarum in Matthaem, Homil. LXXXII, 4*, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus LVIII, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1862), p. 742. See Π. Χρήστου, *Ελληνική Πατρολογία* (Thesaloniki: Pournara, 1989, 4 tome), pp. 302-303.

⁶ Cf. Jürgen Henkel, *Deification and Ethics of Love in the Work of Father Dumitru Stăniloae* (Sibiu: Deisis Publishing House, 2003), p. 91.

help of our senses and thus He is evident and immense!"⁷. God loves all human beings. He meets the restlessness of our hearts, the disquietude of our questions and of our quests with the disquietude of His own heart, which makes Him accomplish the final act for us: the Crucifixion. The disquietude towards God, the fact of being on our way towards Him, in order to know Him better and to live in Him must not die in us⁸.

In this sense, we should always remain disciples. "Seek His face always" urges us the author of Psalm 105, 4. In this regard, Augustine commented: God is so mighty that He is always infinitely greater than all our knowledge and all our being. The knowledge of God is never consumed. During all the eternity we can, with an increasing joy, continue to seek for Him, in order to know Him and to love Him forever more. "Our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee", said Augustine at the beginning of his "Confessions".⁹ Yes, man is restless, because all that is temporal is too little. The specificity of knowledge expresses essentially the union between the one who knows and the one who is known. God – as the Church Fathers say – has concluded a *sacrum commercium*, a sacred exchange: He assumed what was ours, so that we could get what was His, becoming like God.¹⁰ St.

⁷ S. Clementis I, *Apologeticum*, 17,1-2, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus I, Paris: 1857), p. 375 AB.

⁸ S. Maximi Confessoris, *Capita Theologiae et Oeconomiae* III, 37, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XC, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1863), p. 1083. See also, S. Dionysii Areopagitae, *De divinis nominibus*, Tomus prior, 4, 15, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus III, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), p. 713): "Love, whether we speak of Divine, or Angelic, or intelligent, or psychical, or physical, let us regard as a certain unifying and combining power".

⁹ S. Aurelii Augustini, *Confesiones*, I, 1, , in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XXXII, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1877) p, 659.

¹⁰ Time is offered to man as space for his participation to eternity, time is a mean of continual advancement towards holiness (Cf. S. Maximi Confessoris, *Ambiguorum Liber*, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XCI, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1865), p. 1153 and the next ones. See Vl. Lossky, „Théologie Dogmatique”, in *Messenger de*

Gregory of Nyssa clearly expresses the purpose of our preoccupations, the supreme aim to which our life is directed: not wasting our life with futile things, but finding the light which allows us to discern what is really useful¹¹ finding this supreme divine good thanks to which the “imitation of the divine nature” is possible.¹²

2 The Relationship between Knowledge and Love

2.1 The Biblical Perspective

The Old Testament revealed us that God is together with us, living and holy.¹³ What does the New Testament add to this sublime image? Our answer could be: it gives it a heart! And this heart is the statement: “God is love”. In the Christian belief, love comes from God and moreover, God Himself is Love: “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them” (1 John, 4, 16). To say that God is love means the same as to say

l'Exarchat du Patriarce russe en Europe Occidentale, 1964, pp. 211-2012).

¹¹ S. Grégoire de Nysse, *Homélie sur l'Ecclésiaste*, 1, in : Françoise Vinel (ed.), *Sources Chrétiennes* 416 (Imprimerie Paillart, Picardy, 1996), p. 106-146.

¹² S. P. N. Gregorii, *De Professione Christiana*, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XLVI, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1858), p. 244 C.

¹³ Admitting the essential character of love, the Christian faith accepted what represented the core of Israel's faith and, at the same time, it conferred to this core a new depth and a new extension. In fact, the faithful man prays every day with these words taken from *The Book of Deuteronomy*, in which he knows that the quintessence of his life is included: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Jesus united the commandment of loving God and loving your neighbour from *The Book of Leviticus*, making them one commandment: “thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”. (Lev. 19,18; cf. Marc. 12, 29-31).

that God loves. Even the prophets had announced that Jahweh was a loving God, but none of them had gone so far as to say that "God is love". What did Jesus of Nazareth bring new, so that this qualitative leap could take place? Nothing but: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John, 3, 16). In the meeting of Christ and in the mutual love, we experience in us the same life of God, who stays in us with His perfect, total, eternal love.

Nothing is greater to man, a mortal and limited being, than to take part in the loving life of God. Therefore, God takes care of the world not because He is loved, but because He loves the world and He has always loved it, from the very beginning. The words of St. John the Evangelist (1 John, 4, 16) express very clearly what makes up the essence of the Christian life and faith: the Christian image of God and, consequently, the image of man and of his approach to eternity. Besides all these, in the same verse, St. John the Apostle offers us a synthetic formula of the Christian existence: "We have come to know and trust the love that God has for us". We have come to trust the love of God – in this way, the Christian may express the fundamental choice of his life. The Church Fathers showed us that love was the quintessence of the Christian life, in which the two Evangelic commandments of love are not to be lived as moral categories, precisely because they don't have a relationship only with a certain "moral part" of the man and of his existence, but they fully cover his whole human existence, in the personal reality, as well as in the social dimension. In this sense, we have to highlight the fact that the "first commandment" of loving God underlines all the main criteria and all the spiritual possibilities of the human existence: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind."

The "second commandment", of loving one's neighbour, having exactly the same value as the first, expresses the same meaning,

but with other words: “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Mat. 22, 37-3)¹⁴.

The two commandments of Christian love are summed up, eventually, in the one and only love for Jesus Christ, fully Man and true God¹⁵, as Saint Paul the Apostle put it (Philippians, 8, 2, 8, 39), and, following him, the whole patristic tradition.¹⁶ Loving God and loving one's neighbour are inseparable, they represent a unique commandment, a unique confession or a

¹⁴ Some people believe that perfection lies in the roughness of life, other see it in prayer, others in the frequent reception of the Holy Communion, others in Christian and merciful deeds, but they are wrong, because perfection lies in the love of God with all one's heart and this is visible in the love of the neighbour, because God wants love and not sacrifice. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen (cf. 1 John, 4, 20). But this understanding does not exclude at all the love of God as something impossible; on the contrary, in the overall context of the *First Epistle of John*, this love is explicitly demanded. The unbreakable bond between loving God and loving one's neighbour is stressed here. Both refer to one another so tightly that to affirm the love of God becomes a lie if man is blind to his neighbour's needs or, even more, if he hates him. We should rather interpret Saint John's verse in the sense that loving one's neighbour is a path for meeting God too, and closing the eyes to the presence of one's neighbour means to become blind as to the presence of God. In short, every man takes part in the act and in the event of the Christian love, which is in fact unique, unitary and indivisible. It is precisely for this reason that the first commandment does not exist without the next one, nor the second without the first, both imply themselves mutually - see I John 4, 19-21 and 5,2; S. Maximi Confessoris, *Capita de Charitate*, 1, 13 in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XC, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1863), p. 964.

¹⁵ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului* (Craiova : Ed. Omniscoop, 1993), p. 154. Father Dumitru Stăniloae states, according to the tradition, that after the Incarnation, the Logos has no longer a divine life, separated from the human one.

¹⁶ See, for example, S. Maximi Confessoris, *Capita de Charitate*, 1, 57 in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XC, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1863), p. 972: “The law of Christ is love”.

unique truth. But both exist out of the providential love of God, who loved us first. Therefore, it is no longer the question of a “commandment” prescribing us something external and impossible, but, on the contrary, it is all about an experience of love, given from my being, a love which, by its nature, must be consequently shared with the others. Love grows and exists by love. Love is divine because it comes from God and because it unites us with God and, by means of this unification process, it transforms us into a godly “we”, which surpasses our divisions and makes us one, until the end when God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15, 28).

In the Saint Gospel of John it is underlined that Christ is the truth, the life, the love, the word and, being all these, He is implicitly the source of the unique knowledge. Saint John the Apostle, when transmitting Christ's last sermon to His Apostles (John, 13, 1), which includes the famous words “I am the way and the truth and the life”, stated the principle of the Christian knowledge: “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John, 17, 3). This sentence points out that the essence of knowledge is a spiritual, relational divino-human fact, which identifies itself with life and asserts life, so that both can be united with God's love, in Jesus Christ.

In another passage, Saint Paul the Apostle points out very clearly the way in which one must understand the text of the Epistle to the Galatians, 4, 9, when he writes the first Epistle to the Corinthians, 8, 2-3: “Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God.” No doubt that the aim of Saint Paul the Apostle, when writing these words, was not to depreciate or to relativize the whole knowledge itself, he only wanted to express the truth according to which knowledge depends intrinsically on love. His intention was to present love as the unique and fundamental criterion of the Christian knowledge. Therefore, Saint Paul the Apostle may be considered one of the first

thinkers who outlined this specificity *sui generis* of the identity between love and knowledge.

2.2 The Patristic Perspective

By analyzing the definition “God is love”, successive curtains are drawn, on larger and larger backgrounds, so that eventually there comes an infinite background which is the Holy Trinity. Let us try to approach it through the stanzas of Gregory the Theologian, who writes:

“Among the great billows of the sea of life,
here and there whipped up by wild winds...
one thing alone is dear to me, my only treasure,
comfort and oblivion in my struggle,
the light of the Blessed Trinity”.¹⁷

There is no love without loving a being or a thing, there is no conscience which is not conscientious of something or of someone. Who does God love, since He is love? Man?... Yet, in this case, we cannot say that He has always been love, through Himself, but only starting with a few millions of years before. But before all these, what else was God, if not love? Does He love the material universe? But then He has been love only starting with a few thousand millions of years before. This is not enough either. The answer is the Holy Trinity!¹⁸ Gregory the

¹⁷ S. Gregorii Theologi, *Poemata historica*, Quae spectant ad alios, 1, 15, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XXXVII, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1862), p. 1250.

¹⁸ At the origin of the existence of the world lies the boundless love of the Holy Trinity, all that exists in it are expressions, manifestations, gifts of Her perfect, superabundant love. See Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturghia Ortodoxă*, (Craiova: ed. Mitropoliei Olteniei, 1986), p. 11. What is being accomplished by the Christian faith in a Trinitarian God makes possible to overcome the partial differences between people and allows the existence of unselfish love and the communion of people. Our creation implies a personal, real

Theologian makes the light of the Holy Trinity shine, protecting the faith proclaimed at the Council of Nicaea: a unique God, in three equal and distinct Persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, - “one glorious orb unites the triple rays”¹⁹.

Therefore, Gregory, guided by Saint Paul (1Cor. 8,6), always affirms that “For to us there is but One God, the Father, of Whom are all things, and One Lord Jesus Christ, by Whom are all things; and One Holy Ghost, in Whom are all things”.²⁰ God is eternal love between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

According to Dionysius the Areopagite knowledge is the one which unites “the one who knows and the one who is known”.²¹

Also Saint Maximus the Confessor will express the same thing.²² Before them, Saint Gregory of Nyssa transmitted this truth using the following words: “The one who owns knowledge is the one who has lived it (...) because in his life, he has transposed God’s word into acts and has made it his being. Knowledge is its transposition into being by the one who owns it.”²³ This truth is supported by other Holy Fathers as well, such

participation in the life of God. “Since, then, God, Who is good and more than good, did not find satisfaction in self-contemplation, but in fits exceeding goodness wished certain things to come into existence which would enjoy His benefits and share in His goodness” (Ιωάννης ο Διαμασκηνός, *Ἐκδόσεις Ἀκριβῆς τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου Πίστεως* (Thessaloniki: Pournara, trans. N. Matsouka, 2009), p. 29.

¹⁹ S. Gregorii Theologi, *Poemata historica*, Quae spectant ad alios, 1, 32, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XXXVII, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1862), p. 512.

²⁰ S. Grégoire de Naziance, *Discours 39,12*, in Paul Gallyay (ed.), Claudio Moreschini (ed.), *Sources Chrétiennes* 458 (Paris: Cerf,1990), p. 172

²¹ S. Dionysii Areopagitae, *De divinis nominibus*, VII, 4, Tomus prior, 4, 15, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus III, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), p. 872.

²² S. Maximi Confessoris, *Capita Theologiae et Oeconomiae* VII, 91 in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XC, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1863), p. 1388.

²³ S. P. N. Gregorii, Episcopi nysseni, *Opera quae reperiri potuerunt omnia*, I, 44 in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus I, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1863), p. 1265 ἡ S.P.N. Gregorii, Episcopi nysseni,

as St. Basil the Great²⁴, St. Symeon the New Theologian²⁵, St. Diadochus of Photiki²⁶, and St. Gregory Palamas²⁷.

According to them, love is the perfect method, as well as the ideal way to knowledge, love being the sum of life and work of all the virtues, including the authentic knowledge. Love is synonymous with forgiveness, charity and philanthropy, love being the reason why God has created the world and has become Man. Love is the ground of the Incarnation of the Word, that is of the unification of man with God . By His Incarnation, Christ has created the structure in which man's salvation will take place – the Church which, as an eternal reality, becomes a universal mystery (καθολικόν μυστήριον)²⁸.

Together with the Incarnation of the Son of God, the Church becomes the mystical Body of Christ.²⁹ Therefore, without this visible Body, that is without the Incarnation itself, the Church would have been a reality *in potentia* and not a reality *de facto*. We can belong to Christ and be with Christ only in communion with Christ as a whole, head and body, in the full life of the Church, animated by its Lord. Only in it, thanks to God, the Holy Scripture is a living and topical Word. Without the living subject

Opera quae reperiri potuerunt omnia, I, 46 in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus III, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1863) p.176.

²⁴ S. P. N. Basilii, *Homiliae in Hexaemeron*, 1, 8, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XXIX, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1857), 20C.

²⁵ Συμεών Ν. Θεολόγου, *Άπαντα τα ευρισκόμενα* (Thessaloniki: ed. Zagoreou, 2004), p. 132.

²⁶ Diadochus of Photiki, *On Spiritual Knowledge* XVI SC5, *Philokaly* I, XIV (Astir Publishing House, 2008), p. 238.

²⁷ Γρηγορίου του Παλαμά, *Συνγράματα*, vol. IV (Thessaloniki: ed. Oikos Kyromanos, 1998), p. 141; vol. I (Thessaloniki: ed. Oikos Kyromanos, 3rd edition, 2010), p. 430.

²⁸ Γ. Φλωρόβσκυ, *Το Σώμα του ζώντος Χριστού* (Thessaloniki: Pournara, 1972), p. 39 and the next ones.

²⁹ „The Church is the work of the Incarnation of Christ, it is the Incarnation itself.” S. Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1997), p. 8.

of the Church embracing the ages, the Bible disintegrates into often heterogeneous writings, thus becoming a book of the past. In the present time, the Bible is eloquent only where „the Presence” is – where Christ stays forever our contemporary: in the Body of His Church. Yet, the Christian faith is not a „religion of the Book”: Christianity is the religion of God's Word, not a written and mute word, but an incarnate and living Word.

The words of Saint Maximus the Confessor show us to which extent the Church Fathers identified knowledge and love. In his writing, *Centuries on theology and economy*, this Father states:

“God and man are exemplars of each other. Man's ability to deify himself through love for God's sake is correlative with God's becoming man through compassion for man's sake. And man's manifestation through the virtues of the God who is by nature invisible is correlative with the degree to which his intellect is seized by God and imbued with spiritual knowledge”³⁰.

According to the text above of Saint Maximus, the patristic method and the criterion of correlative knowledge of God and man are offered through love. I love, therefore I know. If Saint Maximus calls God's manifested love “compassion for man's sake” and the love of God means man's participation to it, this doesn't essentially change the matters concerning knowledge³¹. In Saint Maximus' work, as well as the works of other Fathers, we often come across such passages: they contain the principle of the patristic knowledge and we can find them since the beginning of Christianity, for example at Saint Paul the Apostle etc. Thus, we can mention the well-known, but somehow paradoxical phrase of Saint Paul the Apostle in the Epistle to the Galatians 4, 9: “But now that you have come to know God, or

³⁰ S. Maximi Confessoris, *Capita Theologiae et Oeconomiae* VII. 74, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XC, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1863), p. 1380. *Capita Theologiae et Oeconomiae* III, 27, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XC, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1863), p. 1189.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

rather to be known by God". The paradox of this statement lies in the fact that, according to the Apostle, human knowledge granted by God is determined by the *a priori* knowledge that God has of man! In this way, Saint Paul the Apostle wishes to underline a very natural fact for all the Christian faith: the living and personal manifestation of God in Jesus Christ and man's living communion with Him. Saint Gregory of Nyssa tries to define more accurately: "In fact this likeness to the divine is not our work at all; it is not the achievement of any faculty of man; it is the great gift of God bestowed upon our nature at the very moment of our birth".³²

Therefore, to the soul "the question is not to know something about God, but to have God in you."³³ For the rest, carefully observes Gregory, "deification means purity, it means liberation from the passions and the removal of any wrong thing: if all these are in you, God is truly in you."³⁴

In this way, God is not and could never be for us any kind of "object", not even the "object of knowledge", because God is "pre-eminently the subject", He is always and everywhere a true and living Person. This is why the existence and possibility of knowing the personal God are not realizable without a free-loving communion with Him, without the personal-loving union, as long as the one who knows dissociates knowledge from the one who is known. For the orthodox spirituality, which knows by loving and loves by knowing, it is easy to understand that there can be no relationship and no union of man with God outside freedom, beyond any outer, physical, moral, intellectual, rational or any other type of necessity. Such

³² S. Grégoire de Nysse, *Traité de la Virginité*, 12, 2 in: Michel Aubineau (ed.), *Sources Chrétiennes* 119 (Paris: Cerf, 1966), p. 408-410.

³³ S. P. N. Gregorii, *De Beatitudinibus*, 6, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XLIV, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1863), p. 1269 C.

³⁴ S. P. N. Gregorii, *De Beatitudinibus*, 6, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XLIV, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1863), p. 1272C.

a relationship of freedom expresses a desired state, that is an event which is possible only by love. The manifestation and the revelation of God to the world has happened by and with the initiative of the divine part, thanks to the love God has for the world, “because He first loved us” (John 4, 10 and 19), as Saint Paul the Apostle said (in Gal. 4, 9), when he drew our attention to the fact that God is always the one who makes the first move, even when it comes to the divino-human Christian knowledge. Knowledge cannot happen and nobody could have approached it except by the loving union between God and man, because it does not manifest itself as one-sided love, but as mutual, sacrificial love, creating union a mutual communion, without which it would have been one-sided compulsion or tyrannical domination.

3 Love as Principle of Knowledge

The fundamental principle of life in general is giving life. The human being who lives egocentrically loses or ruins his life. Without love, life becomes barren, dull and empty. Consequently, this axiom of living becomes eventually identical to the criterion of love. Basically, love means to abandon the egocentricity of self-love: not to focus our life on ourselves – how I will be, what will happen to me -, but to gaze in the direction You, the Eternal Other – towards God and towards the others that He has sent to me.³⁵

³⁵ See *Αποφθέγματα των αγίων Γερόντων*, English edition *Discourses and Sayings*, transl. E. Wheeler, (Cistercian Publications Kalamazoo, 1977), pp. 138-139: Abba Dorotheus used the image of a compasses to describe the way in which our relationships with the other people influence our relationship with God: “Suppose we were to take a compass and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The centre point is the same distance from any point on the circumference (...). Let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God himself is the centre; the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the

And this ground of love, which defines the action of man, identifies itself with the mystery of the cross, with the mystery of death and resurrection that we find in Christ. Man can accomplish love, because: he is created in the image of the God-love and is loved by God, therefore he loves in the full aspect of his potentialities³⁶. Love implies a path of growth, which is

centre are the lives of men." In order to come near to God, men have to progress on the circumference towards the centre of life: "The closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God (...). This is the very nature of life. The more we are turned away from and do not love God, the greater the distance that separates us from our neighbour". .

³⁶ Saint John the Chrysostom says that the knowledge of God is innate to man. The spiritual vocation is innate to man: S. P. N. Joannis Chrysostomi, *Ad Homilias in S. Romanum Martyrem*, 2,1, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus L, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1862), p. 611; See X. N. Μπούκη, *Η ουσία της Θρησκείας κατά τούς Καππαδόκας*, Thessaloniki, 1967, p. 13; W. Pannenberg, *Gottesgedanke und menschliche Freiheit*, Göttingen, 1972). The natural religiosity is underlined more by the "optimist" spirit of the Old-Testamentary theology. See S. P. N. Joannis Chrysostomi, *Ad Eos Qui Scandalizati Sunt*. Lib. Unus, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus LII, Paris: 1862), p. 497; cf. John. 16, 33; see: Π. Δημητροπούλου, *Ορθόδοξος χριστιανική ηθική* (Athens, 1974), pp. 8ff See: S. P. N. Gregorii, *De hominis opificio*, *Scripta exegetica*, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XLIV, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1863), p. 201: Our proto-parents Adam and Eve had the innate capacity of knowing God (*Theognosias, capax Dei*), since the rational "power" of God's image worked naturally. (The Church Fathers interpreted this innate religiosity as the dynamic inclination of our whole being towards the divine Archetype (Origen), the unbroken aspiration of our spirit towards God (St. Basil, St. Maximus), the human love which aims at the divine love (St. Augustine, St. Gregory Palamas): cf. N. Νησιώτη, *Προλεγόμενα εἰς τὴν Θεολογικὴν Γνωσιολογίαν* (Athens, 1978), p. 78. Consequently, there are, in the human mind, *a priori*, ideas, principles of knowing God. N. A. Ματσούκα, *Δογματική και Συμβολική Θεολογία*, Thessaloniki: Pournara, vol. 1, p. 154: "Even man's soul is endowed with common meanings and final, divisible, syllogistic powers". See: S. P. N. Gregorii, *Episcopi nysseni, Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, I, 44, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus I, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1863), p. 624 C.

never finished and completed, but it changes during life, matures and precisely for this reason, remains faithful to itself.³⁷ In fact, love is not ready-made and beautiful, but it grows, to call it that way, we can learn it slowly, so that it may contain ever-more our forces and it may open our way to a correct life. To Dostoevsky's question: "Which beauty will save the world?", the answer is: the creative beauty of God's love³⁸.

A great neptic Father, Saint Diadochus of Photiki wrote in his work, "Gnostic Chapters", that "He who loves God consciously in his heart is known by God, for to the degree that he receives the love of God consciously in his soul, he truly enters into God's love"³⁹. Therefore, Abba Diadochus joins knowledge and love, concerning man's relationship with God in and by love, as well as beyond the transcendency of this love relationship, directly linked to the personal knowledge of God.

This is not only the basis or the starting point in knowledge, but also the end on any other form of shared knowledge. This happens because the knowledge of Truth is granted together with the personal knowledge of God, by experience or by living, so that in the end, the knowledge of God's truth may offer eternal life and true joy.

The experience of the saints proves the fact that without God, the knowledge of Him is not possible, because man is not endowed neither with those necessary characteristics, nor with the capacity of knowledge, physical or metaphysical, by means of which he could know God implicitly and personally, thus arriving to the true knowledge of Him. Man can get to know God only if He wants this and He makes Himself known. But God proved us by His economical revelation that He shows Himself

³⁷ S. Maximi Confessoris, *Capita de Charitate*, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XC, Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1863), p. 964.

³⁸ Федор Достоевский, *Идиот* (Издательство: АСТ, Москва, 2010), p. 161.

³⁹ Diadochus of Photiki, *On Spiritual Knowledge* XVI SC5), *Philokaly* I, XIV (Astir Publishing House, 2008), p. 238.

to people only in love and by freedom. God revealed His free, freeing and unlimited love, showing Himself to the man and to the world and He expects from the man, as well as from the one who knows, the same unlimited and unconditioned love. This loving, unlimited reciprocity of the love between God and man is implied in the words of the Saint Apostle (Gal. 4,9 and I Cor. 8,3).

The character of the knowledge by love contained in the words of Saint Paul the Apostle: "But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God" and: "But if anyone loves God, he is known by Him" is very clear. But these words express mainly the new biblical and Christian content of the notion of knowledge as experience and love, that is, in essence, the relational and communal character of knowledge. The relational character of knowledge expresses mainly the reality of the communion and union act which bounds the one who is known and the one who knows. Didymus of Alexandria wrote the following about the neotestamentary content of science and knowledge:

"The meaning of the word 'knowledge' is double: on one hand it means to know; on the other hand it means to unite, to blend the one who knows and the one who is known. According to the first meaning, God knows everybody, not only the marked ones. According to the second meaning, God knows only the rightful ones: 'The Lord knows those who are His' (II Tim. 2, 19), and he ignores the sinful ones (...) Because the wicked one is not known. The one who stopped sinning and who was not known before is known now. This is in perfect accordance with the apostolic word: 'But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?' (Gal. 4, 9). When people ignore God,

they are ignored by Him too, and those who know God are known by Him too.”⁴⁰

These words highlight the special character and the method of the patristic knowledge. Man and knowledge are not defined autonomously, but in relationship, by communion with God and other people. Already by the act of knowledge and recognition, man is considered from the point of view of knowledge as unity.⁴¹ As an act of personal and relational knowledge, it is not mainly a capacity of accumulating notions or ideas, but mostly a relationship and mutual loving communion between living and personal beings. Such knowledge becomes in the heart a living reality: it is not only a theory, but a force of life, a life-changing union of love.

The knowledge of Christ is not only a thought, but love which opens the eyes, transforms man and creates communion with Christ the Word, who is truth and life.⁴² In this communion, which is unflawed knowledge and love, the perfect Christian attains the contemplation, the union with God. In other words, for the patristic understanding, knowledge arises from the union and from the life of the communion, from the “kinship” and “familiarity” existing between the one who knows and the one who is known, as Saint Cyril of Alexandria highlights. Following the words of Saint Paul the Apostle⁴³, he adds that in this act of mutual knowledge “we, the ones adopted by Him are called His people (...) because Christ wanted to receive us into

⁴⁰ Didymus of Alexandria, *Expositio in Psalmos*, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus XXXIX, Paris: 1863), p. 1264.

⁴¹ In almost all the languages of the world, the word “knowledge” seems to indicate a community knowledge, that is implying the participation of more than one person to the act of knowledge.

⁴² Cf. Ioan I. Ică jr., “Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul despre iubirea agapică”, in *Mitropolia Ardealului* 33 (1988), nr. 1, p. 37–59.

⁴³ “Members of God’s household” (Ephes. 2, 19)

all that are His.”⁴⁴ The path to the visible unity of all the Christians *dwells* in prayer, because, fundamentally, the unity is not “built” by us, but “built” by God, it comes from Him, from the trinitarian mystery, from the communion of the Father with the Son in the light of the Holy Spirit. Our life should be open to the divine grace, and it should become a daily invocation of God's grace.

4 Conclusions

To the orthodox ethos, knowledge is not an inductive, abstract and theoretical act, but it represents the living encounter between the one who knows and the one who is known. Therefore, knowledge does not mean to invent, to create, to elaborate, to discover or even to conceive a notion or a system of notions able to explain everything, “illuminating” or calming man's conscience. The unique aim of a real knowledge or its unique content is that man, as Christian hypostasis can meet face to face the living and shareable Truth. He can attain with his whole soul, his whole heart and his whole conscience the level of the personal encounter of the true and living God by Jesus Christ, who already is a perichoretic relationship. Authentic Christian knowledge means the beginning of a new life: love in union with Jesus Christ, Who is known and at the same time remains transcendent. The living and true God never becomes “object”, He always remains “Subject”, as the human being does, otherwise. Thus, for Clement of Alexandria, the moral-spiritual element has the same importance as the intellectual element on the way to perfection. The two go together, because one cannot know without loving and cannot love without knowing. The likeness of God and His

⁴⁴ S. P. N. Cyrilli Alexandriae Archiepiscopi, *Comentarium in Evangelium Joannis*, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus (Tomus LXXIII, Paris: 1864)*, p. 1045.

contemplation cannot be accomplished only by rational knowledge: for them, a life in accordance to Christ is necessary, a life in accordance to Christ's truth. Therefore, love must accompany the intellectual knowledge, just as the shadow accompanies the body. We end our paper by quoting a few sentences from the famous "Prayer to the Paedagogus", by which Clement of Alexandria finishes his "Paedagogus":

"Be gracious, O Instructor, to us Your children, cause all of us Your peace, having sailed tranquilly over the billows of sin, may be wafted in calm by Your Holy Spirit, by the ineffable wisdom, by night and day to the perfect day; and praising thank the Alone Father and Son, (...) Instructor and Teacher, with the Holy Spirit, Amen!"⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Clementis Alexandrini, *Paedagogus* 8, lib. 3, 12, 101, in: J-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus* (Tomus VIII, Paris: 1857), p. 679 BC.