

Stages of Human Development and Spiritual Growth

Some weeks ago, we celebrated the Leave-taking of the Feast of the Meeting of the Lord. The scripture for the feast concludes: "So the child (Jesus) grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him" (Luke 2:40). Further on in the same chapter, the Evangelist Luke describes the exchange between the twelve-year-old Jesus and the teachers of the Law in the Temple and concludes with similar words: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). We notice, in these passages, the emphasis on growth.

We Orthodox Christians are used to reading huge amounts of material on spiritual growth. When the Fathers of the Church speak of spiritual maturity, they use the word "*apatheia*," which connotes an inner peace of mind due to freedom from emotion and passion. Some Fathers simply speak of three markers: purification, enlightenment, and deification. St. John Climacus specifically uses the imagery of the ladder: each rung represents victory over certain vices and the attainment of certain virtues; thus the soul climbs upwards from earth to heaven, to mystical union with Christ.

We can all understand the growth from vice to virtue, from self-absorption to sacrificial love. But, is there a connection between developmental stages of life and spiritual growth? What does it mean that Jesus increased in "wisdom" as he increased in "stature"? Is our spiritual growth also connected with our human aging process?

In 1981, James Fowler, a developmental psychologist at Chandler School Theology, authored a book entitled, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, in which he described a relationship between human development and maturation of faith. In it, Fowler identifies "six stages" of faith:

- *Imaginative faith*—This is the faith usually of very young children, ages 2–7. They imagine God as a grandfather type who lives somewhere in the sky and on the clouds. They ask questions like: "Are there bathrooms in heaven? Does God have a wife?"
- *Literal faith*—This is the faith of children in their early school years. Children understand the Bible literally. They believe that if they pray well, God will always give them what they want. They fear God's reciprocity. They believe that if they just do the right things, God will reward them—a *quid pro pro* arrangement. Surprisingly, even adults easily revert to this stage in times of crisis and suffering.

- *Group Faith*—This is usually the faith of adolescents, but adults may display it and get stuck at this stage. Young people feel safe conforming to the expectations of a group—its values, and its understanding of faith—because they want to belong. A “group” may be the family, the church community, the teen group, the OCF, or “Project Mexico” participants. Persons in this stage view God as friend and companion, and the group as their sustainer, just as water sustains fish. Many adults are church members because of the group experience, which sustains their social network. Significantly, group faith can influence and propel a person to the next stage of faith.
- *Personal faith*—This is the faith that arises when late adolescents begin to question and doubt their beliefs, and those of the group. Such doubts often arise because of unanswered prayer, difficulties, or crisis. These young adults realize that to hold certain, unquestioned beliefs, or to perform certain habitual practices is not sufficient. The group holds less influence, and individuals realize that they must take ownership for beliefs heretofore taught by family, by a teacher or leader, or by their peers. Such doubts and realizations may eventually lead young adults to a deeper understanding of God. Persons in this stage are like fish that jump out of the water, to observe it and their own reflection.
- *Mystical faith* —This is the faith of those who have matured to a point at which they allow themselves to be alive to the paradoxes of the Gospel (i.e., to find yourself, you have to lose yourself). It is unusual to reach this stage of faith prior to mid-life. These individuals are ready to deepen their relationship with God, which includes His unavailability and transcendence as well as His closeness and clarity. They are willing to abandon themselves to God, to surrender to Him. They begin to comprehend the Apostle Paul’s words: “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). In this stage, the subject of one’s life is no longer the self, but Christ.
- *Sacrificial faith* —This is the faith of those who identify with the well being of others so greatly that love becomes self-less, self-emptying (*kenotic*). This stage of faith is rare. Individuals who reach this stage make a radical commitment to God’s will, without personal concern for status or security. Examples from the twentieth-century that come to my mind include: Mother Maria Skobtsova, a monastic who sacrificed herself in a Nazi concentration camp to spare the life of an unbeliever; Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who cared for the most destitute populations in India; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran theologian and pastor, who spoke out against Nazism at the expense of his own life.

These stages of faith seem to be nicely interwoven with human development and natural maturation. Of course, we realize that in reality spiritual growth does not always proceed unhindered, according to a set path, or fit into a neat pattern. Losses are incurred; gains are made; often, we get stuck. At times, we all regress.

The Apostle Paul himself expressed his frustration with the Christians in Corinth who, he noted, were unable to digest solid food (deeper understanding of the faith) because of their carnality. They remained, he said, babes in the faith, limited to digesting "only milk" (1 Cor. 3:1–3), despite that fact that they were fully grown human beings.

However, Fowler's descriptions of faith still are valuable to us, in two ways: First, do we ourselves identify with any of these stages? Can we see our own growth or lack thereof in his descriptions? And second, as ministers of the Gospel, how can we be present to others who have embraced certain stages of faith? When others are in our spiritual care, how can we help them move out of one stage and on to the next, until they reach the stage of "Sacrificial Faith," the faith that our Lord had in relationship to His own Father?

Humans are complex beings, and we should not pigeonhole them. However, it can be helpful when ministers recognize spiritual markers and help a child of God to move "up the ladder" toward an ever deeper and ever more personal relationship with God: "...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:11–13).

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