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## **Who Is God and How Do I Relate to Him?**

Back-to-Basics

September 7, 2008

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### ***Introduction: The Ways of Knowing God***

There are two ways of exploring and experiencing a new place. Let's say we decide to visit San Francisco. One way to "visit" this city is to stand around a map, stare at it, and then find all the major landmarks and tourist attractions. If we thought that this alone was a meaningful visit and experience, we would be pretty pathetic.

Alternatively, we could all climb into a car, start driving without a map, and hope that we reach San Francisco. We might arrive at a large downtown area (which may or may not be San Francisco), wander around aimlessly, see some interesting sites (again, which may or may not be in San Francisco), climb back in the car, and then return home. Once again, we would not be experiencing San Francisco fully (and may not even at all).

There are many who approach their relationship with God in the same way. Some people read about Him, but then doubt His existence or do not relate to Him in any way. These are those who only look at the map. There are others who do understand anything about God and try to experience Him in whatever way makes them happy. This is like driving around without a map and (without a clue).

The Church offers us a balance of both ways of approaching God. God shows Himself to us and tells us about Who He is when we read the Holy Bible and, also, when we read the lives of the Saints. God works through the saints to show us His glory. We can also experience the presence of God through prayer and the Holy Mysteries of the Church (baptism, holy chrism, confession, communion, etc.).

### ***Faith in God***

Our relationship with God is summarized in two words: "I believe." We cannot prove that God exists through experiments and scientific testing. If we are open to it, we can certainly see evidence of God and His work

through the order of creation, for instance. This still requires faith and trust. Saint Paul writes, “*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*” (Hebrews 11:1). Those who have faith are also called blessed, “*Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*” (John 20:29).

When we describe the nature or essence of who God is, we remember the words of Saint Paul to Timothy, “*...who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen*” (1 Timothy 6:16). God, by nature, is beyond us and it is often difficult to fully understand His essence. In fact, if we could contain Him and fully understand Him, then He would not be God anymore.

Question: since it is so difficult for us to understand the nature of God, does that mean we should stop trying to learn more about Him? The Church Fathers tell us, “No.” One church father, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, describes someone making a very difficult journey in the middle of the day. The sun produces scorching rays. The person is incredibly dehydrated and thirsts for something to drink. Then, this person comes upon a spring of water. What will He do next? Will He sit down by the water and start to think about where this water came from or how this body of water is formed? Would he want to answer these questions before taking a drink? In this situation of course not, because he may never find the answers and could end up dying of thirst. Rather, he says ‘goodbye’ to this line of thinking and bends his head toward the stream and his lips in the water and begins to drink until he is refreshed. We have to do the same thing with God. Even though we do have knowledge about God and should use our minds, there comes a time when we must realize our weakness before Him and just simply reach out to Him and experience Him. Another Church Father, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, asks us, if just because we cannot drink a whole river, does that mean we should not drink water at all? Or just because we cannot look directly at the sun and see all of it, should we close our eyes to its light? Just because you cannot eat all the fruits in a garden, does this mean we should go away completely hungry? The answers to these questions are, “No.”

### ***What Do We Know About God?***

God has shown us who He is through the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ is God incarnate – He took flesh and became man and

taught us about the things pertaining to God. He showed us the many characteristics of God, which we will explore more below.

God also tells us about Who He is in the Holy Bible, and as we mentioned before, through the lives of the Saints. As we also said before, we see evidence of God in creation and in the visible world. *“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead”* (Romans 1:20).

Here are some of the characteristics we know about God:

1. God is Spirit

*“God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth”* (John 4:24). *“Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty”* (2 Corinthians 3:17). God does not have a bodily or material nature like us. Sometimes, however, we give God some bodily characteristics. For instance, we say that He sits on a throne; or He sleeps and awakens. These are ways that we can understand in human terms how God relates to us. For instance, God sitting on a throne shows us His power and majesty. When God ‘sleeps,’ it means that we do not feel His presence. When He ‘awakens,’ then we do.

2. God is Eternal

He has no beginning or end. We call Him the first and the last, the alpha and the omega.

3. All-Good

God’s goodness and His love are unlimited. He does not limit His love to certain people, but He cares for all of us.

4. All-Knowing (Omniscient)

God knows all things. *“And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account”* (Hebrews 4:13). Even though God knows our past, present, and future, He does not take away our decision to decide between good and evil.

5. All-Righteous

God is perfect in His holiness and in His justice. God is the purest light. Although God judges strictly for our sins, He does so as a loving father, who wants to discipline us in order to make us better and bring us to our senses.

6. All-Powerful (Almighty)

We say that God is Almighty (*Pantocrator*), the beholder-of-all. All things are under His power. This does not mean that evil cannot exist. As we said before, God does not take away from us the decision to choose right from wrong. This is our free will.

7. All-Present

God is not limited by space. He fills everything in a way that we cannot fully understand. In the psalms, we read, *“Where could I go from Your Spirit, or flee from Your face? If I should ascend into heaven, You would be there; if I should descend into Hades, You would be there; if I should take up my wings at dawn and pitch camp at the furthest part of the sea, even there Your hand would lead me, and Your right hand would hold me”* (LXX Psalm 138:7-10).

8. Unchangeable

Because God is perfect, He cannot change. Changing is a sign of imperfection. *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning”* (James 1:17).

## **Prayer**

Let us now turn to one of the ways that we relate to God. It is through prayer. Prayer is the way we relate to Him, it is a loving conversation with Him, it is the raising of the heart and the mind toward Him, it is a heavenly journey, and it is our source of rest, peace, and comfort.

However, not everything that seems like prayer *is* in fact prayer. Our Lord accused the Pharisees and Scribes quoting from Isaiah the Prophet, saying, *“These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men”* (Matthew 15:8). Also, our Lord Jesus Christ warns us, *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven”* (Matthew 7:21).

When we pray, we should pray with a very sincere desire to serve God and do His will, with faith and without doubting, with words that match our actions, with words of glorification, thanksgiving, confession, and supplication, through the intercessions and prayers of the saints, and with persistence and struggle (we should always pray and not lose heart – Luke 18:1-8).

When we pray, should we only pray with our own words or with the written prayers that the Church gives us? We can pray with our own words, but we should not neglect the Lord's Prayer (taught to us by our Lord Jesus, Himself), as well as the prayers of the Agpeya, and the Liturgy. Why?

When we learned to read, we first practiced sounding out letters, then we put these letters together in words, and then we read these words together in sentences. When we learned to write, we took a pen in our hands and began to draw the shapes of different letters over and over again. So we had to learn to read and write before we could start writing our own thoughts, our own sentences, and our own stories.

Pray is like this. When we start to pray, we don't really know how. We have to spend time with the prayers that the church gives us, until we begin to memorize them and make these prayers our own. We will also learn the different types of prayer. This way our prayer is rich with glory, thanksgiving, confession, and intercession. If we just pray based on our own emotions, we may forget to thank God, for instance, or to ask for His mercy.

Here are some suggestions on how to pray:

1. We should have a rule of prayer from our fathers of confession. This means that we should have certain prayers that we say each day, and we should stick to this rule.
2. At the very least, we can start each day with God through a short prayer and making the sign of the cross
3. It is useful to read the words of prayer and the Divine Liturgy outside the time of prayer so that we can understand them more. We can read contemplations about these prayers to help us understand them more.

4. We should memorize prayers. This will come with time and repetition.
5. We should choose a suitable time for focused prayer.
6. We should trust that God hears our prayers, and that when He does not seem to answer them, He is working for our benefit.
7. We should pray for others.
8. We can use short, arrow-like prayers throughout the day to feel God's presence. For example, the Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," or, "Lord, as you will and as you know, have mercy on me," or even simple prayers like, "Lord, help!" or "Lord, be with me."

**Glory is due to God forever. Amen.**