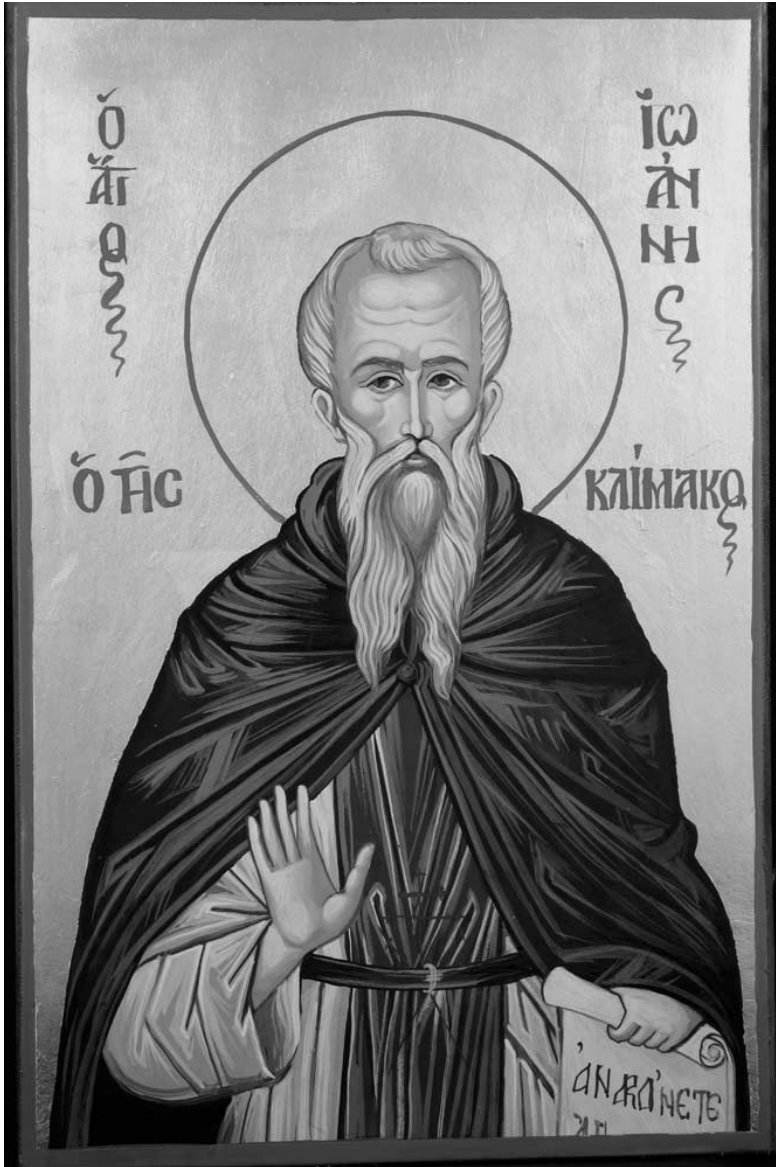


AN INTRODUCTION TO ST. JOHN CLIMACUS
AND
THE LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT



(Taken from the Introduction to The Ladder of Divine Ascent, pp. 1-70)

I. Who is John?

A. Monk: born c. 579, died c. 649

1. Received the name *Climacus* (Klimax) which means “ladder and is taken from the title of his book The Ladder of Divine Ascent.
2. Origin hidden in obscurity; possibly a native of Palestine and may have been a disciple of Gregory Nazianzen.
3. At age 16 he joined the monks of Mount Sinai at the Monastery of St. Catherine, which was built by the Emperor Justinian in 556. For four years lived under the direction of a holy man called Martyrius, to whom he submitted himself in obedience

B. Holy Man:

1. Tonsured as a monk at age 20 and settled as a hermit at Tholas about five miles from the main monastery. There he lived for the next forty years advancing along the way of perfection.
2. He received the grace of continual prayer and the gift of tears. He disciplined himself vigorously, fasting and reducing sleep to a minimum, but always displayed prudent moderation. Known for his holiness; many came to see him for advice. He had an extraordinary grace of healing the spiritual disorders of souls - freeing them from their struggles not only through his spiritual counsel but through his prayer on their behalf.
3. He read the bible assiduously, as well as the Fathers and was considered to be one of the most learned desert monks. It is for this reason that he is often called John the Scholastic.

C. Spiritual Father:

4. After 40 years of hermit life at Tholas, John was elected abbot of the central monastery at Sinai. It was during this last period of his life that he composed *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, at the request of abbot John, the superior of a nearby monastery at Raithu. (See *handout with Letter of Abba John, Abbot of Raithu*)

5. He came to be regarded as another Moses; for, as his biographer writes, "he went up into the mountain of contemplation, talked to God face to face, and then came down to his fellows bearing the tables of God's law, his Ladder of Divine Ascent - Ladder of Perfection."

II. What is The Ladder?

A. Purpose:

1. **Written for monks**, specifically those living in community. Yet, the monk's purpose is essentially the same as all Christians: to live according to the gospel. Whether monastic or married, all the baptized are responding to the same Gospel call; the outward conditions of their response may vary, but the path is essentially one.
2. Written to be a **practical guide** (as a guide for those who intend to exercise their faith) - John's aim in *The Ladder* is not to inculcate abstract teaching or to impose a formal code of ascetic rules, but to evoke in his readers an experience similar to his own. "Do you imagine that plain words can . . . describe the love of God. . . and assurance of the heart? Do you imagine that talk of such matters will mean anything to someone who has never experienced them? If you think so, then you will be like a man who with words and examples tries to convey the sweetness of honey to people who have never tasted it. He talks uselessly." (Step 25)
3. The *Ladder* is an **invitation to pilgrimage**. Refrains from giving detailed directions about specific practices, because his concern is with inner disposition rather than external behaviors. The practice of physical asceticism is assumed, but not overly emphasized. What matters to John is humility and purity of heart. "In scripture are the words, "I humbled myself, and the Lord hastened to rescue me" (Ps. 144:6); and these words are there instead of "I have fasted," "I have kept vigil," "I lay down on the bare earth." (Step 25)
4. What John offers is not techniques and formulae but a way of life, not regulations but a **path of initiation**. His aim is to impart a living, personal experience. And so, like our Lord with His parables, John avoids spelling out his conclusions too plainly, for he wants the reader to work out the answer for himself. The point of his examples are not always immediately clear and his phrases are often cryptic. He loves short, sharp sentences, pithy definitions, and paradoxical aphorisms. In all of this John's aim is pastoral: to wake the reader up,

to elicit a response, to provoke a leap of faith, to bring him to the moment of personal encounter.

B. Structure and Emphases:

1. Book structured around the image of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven like that which Jacob saw (Gen 28:12). Though commonly used by earlier writers, John's is far more developed. His ladder has thirty rungs or steps, one for each year in the hidden life of Christ before his baptism.

I. *The Break with the World*

1. Renunciation
2. Detachment
3. Exile

II. *The Practice of the Virtues ("Active Life")*

(i) *Fundamental Virtues*

4. Obedience
5. Penitence
6. Remembrance of Death
7. Sorrow

(ii) *The Struggle Against the Passions*

(a) Passions That Are Predominantly Non-Physical

8. Anger
9. Malice
10. Slander
11. Talkativeness
12. Falsehood
13. Despondency

(b) Physical and Material Passions

14. Gluttony
15. Lust
- 16-17. Avarice

(c) Non-Physical Passions (cont.)

- 18-20. Insensitivity
21. Fear
22. Vainglory
23. Pride (also Blasphemy)

(iii) *Higher Virtues of the "Active Life"*

24. Simplicity
25. Humility
26. Discernment

III. *Union with God (Transitions to the
"Contemplative Life")*

27. Stillness

28. Prayer

29. Dispassion

30. Love

2. Internal Structure of Individual Steps:
 - a. Brief introductory statement, indicating the source of the vice and its place in the *Ladder*;
 - b. Short Definitions;
 - c. More detailed analysis: causes, symptoms, effects, remedies (with illustrative anecdotes);
 - d. Final Summary.

3. Correspondences and Contrasts:
 - a. I (1-3) balances III (27-30)
 - b. II i (4-7) balances II iii (24-26)
 - c. II ii b (14-17) on passions of a material type, is flanked by two balancing sections, each of six steps - II ii a (8-13) and II ii c (18-23) - on passions of a less physical character

4. Type and Anti-Type:
 - a. A theme adumbrated in the earlier part of the work is often taken up again at a higher level in a second part.
 - b. Step 2 (detachment) : Step 29 (dispassion)
Step 4 (obedience): Step 26 (discernment)
Step 5 (penitence): Step 25 (humility)
Step 13 (despondency): Step 18 (insensitivity)

5. Progression from Human Effort to Divine Gift:
 - a. God's grace is absolutely indispensable and human effort essential for attaining any virtue, however humble. Yet, on the earlier rungs we are chiefly conscious of our own toil and struggle, while on the higher rungs we are more and more aware of the freely granted grace of God.
 - b. What begins as painful warfare ends as spontaneous joy. "At the beginning of our religious life, we cultivate the virtues, and we do so with toil and difficulty. Progressing a little, we then lose our sense of grief or retain very little of it. But when our mortal intelligence turns to zeal and is mastered by it, then we work with full joy, determination, desire, and a holy flame." (Step 1)

6. Emphasis upon Active Pursuit of Virtues and Struggle with Vices:
 - a. the larger part of the work is concerned with the practice of the virtues and the struggle against the vices; by comparison, the section on the contemplative life (Steps 27-30) is relatively brief.
 - b. John does not want his readers willfully and prematurely to seek after visions and ecstasies, instead of learning penitence and humility. He is constantly warning us not to attempt too much too soon; we cannot "climb the entire ladder in a single stride." He insists that the solitary life and the more advanced forms of prayer is only for the very few, only for those who have been prepared through long years of training in the practice of the virtues.

C. Teachings:

1. Imitation of Christ, Spirituality and Dogma, Grace and Free Will:
 - a. The aim throughout the ascent of the ladder is to **follow Christ**, to become "like God", to imitate and resemble him in his divine love. A Christian is an *imitator of Christ* in thought, word and deed, as far as this is humanly possible, and he believes rightly and blamelessly in the Holy Trinity. (Step 1) Love, by its nature, is a *resemblance to God*, insofar as this is humanly possible. (Step 30)
 - b. **Spirituality and dogma are essentially connected**; there can be no true life of prayer without a right faith in God. For example, in Step 6 John writes: "Christ is frightened of dying but not terrified, thereby clearly revealing the properties of His two natures."

If Christ is truly man, then He has two wills as well as two natures; and it is precisely at His agony in the garden that we see the presence of these two wills most plainly manifested - in tension, yet in ultimate reconciliation. Christ's fear of death indicates that He has a genuinely human nature, and so a genuinely human will, for He could not experience such fear in His divine nature or His divine will. At the same time John makes a further point by distinguishing fear of death from terror of death. It is, he says, natural for man, living under the conditions of the fall, to fear death; terror of death, on the other hand, comes from a sense of unrepented sins. Now Christ is not Himself a sinful man, but at His Incarnation He accepts to live out His earthly life under the conditions of the fall. He therefore accepts the fear of death natural to fallen man; but, being Himself sinless, He does not experience the sinful terror of death.

The doctrinal point is vital for spirituality. Imitation of Christ, in a full and genuine sense, is only possible because God has become completely man, taking upon Himself the entirety of our human nature - including a human will - and so experiencing from within all our moral conflicts, our fears and temptations, only without sin. Because we see in Christ a human will exactly like ours, yet freely obedient to the will of God, we know that such free obedience is also possible for us.

- c. The spiritual way involves the convergence or synergy of two factors, unequal in value but both equally necessary: **divine grace and human freedom.** What God does is incomparably more important. Yet our part is also essential, for God does not save us against our will.

“Anyone trained in chastity should give himself no credit for any achievements. . . . When nature is overcome it should be admitted that this is due to Him Who is above nature. . . . The man who decides to struggle against his flesh and to overcome it by his own efforts is fighting in vain. . . . Admit your incapacity What have you got that you did not receive as a gift either from God or as a result of the help and prayers of others? . . . It is sheer lunacy to imagine that one has deserved the gifts of God.” (from Steps 15 and 23)

2. Joyful Sorrow:

- a. The imitation of Christ signifies sharing, at one and the same time, in His death and in His resurrection.
- b. Strong dualism in John's thought: between the unfallen and the fallen, between the natural and the contranatural, between immortality and corruption, between life and death.
- c. Everywhere John negates in order to affirm: Exile involves a painful sacrifice - the loss of parents, friends, familiar surroundings - but the overriding motive is creative, to make us free for God. "Exile is a separation from everything, in order that one may hold on totally to God." Obedience is "a total renunciation of our own life . . . death freely accepted," but it is also a "resurrection." Repentance is not just death but life - the renewal of our baptismal generation. It is not despair but hope. To repent is not only to fear God's wrath but to respond to His love: the grief that accompanies penitence is the grief that comes from loving God.
- d. a basic optimism without denying reality of fall. For the penitent, Christian sorrow is constantly interwoven with joy. Tears, like the experience of repentance, spring from a sense

not only of our sinfulness but of God's mercy; there is gladness in them as well as grief.

- e. John sums up the point in the composite word of his own creating: *charmolypti* - signifying "Joyful sorrow." Spiritual mourning leads to spiritual laughter; it is a wedding garment, not a funeral robe.

3. My Helper and My Enemy: the Ambivalence of the Body - Eros, the Passions, Apatheia

- a. The **body** is both adversary and friend: adversary in as much as it has been marred by the fall, friend in as much as it remains God's creation and is called to share in the resurrection glory. For the Christian the body is not a tomb or prison, not a piece of clothing to be worn for a time and then cast aside, but an integral part of the true self. The Christian's aim is "a body made holy".
- b. The **passions**, although a consequence of the fall and therefore no true part of human nature, are merely the distortion of the natural impulses implanted by God. While repudiating the passions, we should not reject the natural God-given impulses that underlie them, but should restore to good use that which has become misdirected as a result of the fall. Our watchword should be "transfigure" not "suppress"; "educate" not "eradicate". For example, physical *eros* is not to be considered sinful, but can and should be used as a way of glorifying God. Sin is evil, but not the body and its natural impulses. In fact, physical love can be a paradigm of our longing for God.
- c. **Apatheia** (dispassion) - it is not only a denial of the passions, regarded as the contranatural expression of fallen sinfulness, but it is also a reaffirmation of the pure and natural impulses of our soul and body. It connotes not repression but reorientation, not inhibition but freedom; having overcome the passions, we are free to be our true selves, free to love others, free to love God. Dispassion is not mere mortification of the passions but their replacement by a new and better energy. It is an "inaugurated eschatology" - the resurrection of the soul prior to that of the body. To have dispassion is to have the fullness of love.

4. Obedience and the Spiritual Father:

- a. For one embracing the spiritual path, obedience is a fundamental virtue. Not simply obedience to a monastic rule, but more personally obedience to Christ, and to the

spiritual father as the earthly icon of Christ, the Good Shepherd.

- b. John is emphatic about the importance of the spiritual father. The ascent of the ladder is not to be undertaken in isolation, but under the immediate direction of a guide.
- c. Guidance is received in one of two ways: i) by modeling oneself upon the personal example which the spiritual father sets in daily life, or ii) through the disclosure of thoughts, through opening one's heart to the spiritual father. This may be a confession not only of sins, but doubts, temptations or general thoughts.
- d. The spiritual father is a "healer": the confession of sins is therapeutic rather than juridical. Sin is disease; to go to confession is to enter the hospital and to expose our wounds; the spiritual father is the doctor who makes us inwardly whole by prescribing medicines, by bandaging, cauterizing, amputating.
- e. Openness of heart is required: if this is lacking, if the disciple in disclosing his thoughts deliberately conceals or misrepresents, the object of confession is frustrated; the doctor cannot help if the patient lies about his ailments.
- f. Spiritual father provides a personal relationship within which the disciple can grow, a relationship based on prayer. A spiritual father intercedes for his disciples. He mediates between God and his disciple, pleads on his behalf.
- g. Spiritual father as *anadochos* - one who takes responsibility for his disciples sins. Called to be a living icon of the Good Shepherd, one who shows sacrificial love for those in his care. He is a burden-bearer par excellence. No higher calling than this - he is one who brings repentant souls back to God.

5. Prayer and Stillness - the Invocation of the Name:

- a. Prayer seen by John as a dialogue and union with God.
- b. The primary end for which a human person is created
- c. The mirror that reflects where one stands with God.
- d. John is categorical about the value of simplicity. We are to avoid multiplicity in words. He favors the use of short simple prayers whereby one can enclose his mind and thought.
- e. Various possible formulae can be used: a verse from the psalms or different scriptural texts.
- f. There is one type to which John attached particular importance: the invocation or remembrance of the Name of

Jesus, the **Jesus Prayer**. It is linked with the remembrance of death, making it a prayer of contrition and penitence. John sees it as a powerful weapon against demons and commends its use when on the threshold of sleep. He also suggests a particular bodily posture, with arms outstretched in the form of a cross. Mind, John tells us, conforms to the body; our outward posture influences our inward state.

- g. Such prayer leads to *hesychia* (stillness) - worshipping God unceasingly and waiting on Him. The prayer becomes all-embracing and continuous, linked with the rhythm of one's breathing. The hesychast confines within his body the powers of his soul, his thoughts, desires, imagination and the rest; he is not dispersed, but concentrated upon a single point - Christ. This inward prayer is not so much an occasional occupation as it is a continuous state; it is not merely one activity among others, but *the* activity of one's whole life. The hesychast is not someone who *says* prayers from time to time, but someone who *is* prayer all the time. His prayer becomes, in the true sense, prayer of the heart; the totality of the human person dwelling in communion with God.

III. Why Read The Ladder?

Why read the writings of a monk who lived fourteen hundred years ago - a monk who was writing specifically for fellow monastics? What could such a person have to say to those living in such a different age and world?

Well, the monk in himself presents us with a deep challenge. For he is someone who, so it would appear, has deliberately withdrawn from the usual patterns of living; one who has given up all that the world offers. His very life is a reminder that all things are passing: God alone and His love endure. The monk's existence confronts us with our own mortality and with what and who awaits us when we pass from this world. All that he does, the unrelaxed severity and discipline of his life, has God and the desire for God as its motivation. The monk, as a man of faith, longs for and seeks union and communion with his Creator.

For us as Christians, the path has already been marked out: Christ is the Way, the sure road, into the actual living presence of the Creator. There remains, however, many obstacles to be overcome and avoided. And the greatest struggle lies not outside but within - our own lack of integration. The battle is waged within the human heart and with one's self and one's sin.

It is for this reason that John's work is of such great value: as one who stripped himself of all but the self and God, he is the best of all guides into the inner realms of man; who knows from experience what the spiritual novice will encounter, the dangers to be avoided, and the weapons to be used.

