



## The Mystery of Knowledge

By St. Justin Popovich

Man has always been fascinated by ultimate things--life, death, the origin of the world--and his discoveries in other fields of knowledge have given him confidence to assume that some day these mysteries will also yield to the power of his intellect. Such pride of mind, however, can only lead away from the truth, which, according to Orthodox teaching, is the aim and foundation of all true knowledge. How is such knowledge acquired? Here we have part of a longer essay by the renowned Serbian theologian of blessed memory, Archimandrite Justin Popovich (+1979), in which he distills the writings of Saint Isaac the Syrian on the Orthodox theology of knowledge. Briefly, he explains that because man's understanding became darkened through sin, through consorting with evil, he became incapable of true knowledge. Man can come to this knowledge only when his soul (the seat of understanding) is healed. This is made possible by means of the virtues, and the primary virtue in this remedial process is faith. "Through faith, the mind, which was previously dispersed among the passions, is concentrated, freed from sensuality, and endowed with peace and humility of thought .... It is by the ascesis of faith that a man conquers egotism, steps beyond the bounds of self, and enters into a new, transcendent reality which also transcends subjectivity." In separate sections, Fr. Justin discusses prayer, humility, love and grace, all requisite companions of faith, before leading the reader into "The Mystery of Knowledge," which we have reprinted below with slight abbreviations.

According to the teaching of St. Isaac the Syrian, there are two sorts of knowledge: that which precedes faith and that which is born of faith. The former is natural knowledge and involves the discernment of good and evil. The latter is spiritual knowledge and is "the perception of the mysteries," "the perception of what is hidden," "the contemplation of the invisible."

There are also two sorts of faith: the first comes through hearing and is confirmed and proven by the second, "the faith of contemplation," "the faith that is based on what has been seen." In order to acquire spiritual knowledge, a man must first be freed from natural knowledge. This is the work of faith. It is by the ascesis of faith that there comes to man that "unknown power" that makes him capable of spiritual knowledge. If a man allows himself to be caught in the web of natural

knowledge, it is more difficult for him to free himself from it than to cast off iron bonds, and his life is lived "against the edge of a sword."

When a man begins to follow the path of faith, he must lay aside once and for all his old methods of knowing, for faith has its own methods. Then natural knowledge ceases and spiritual knowledge takes its place. Natural knowledge is contrary to faith, for faith, and all that comes from faith, is "the destruction of the laws of knowledge"--though not of spiritual, but of natural knowledge.

The chief characteristic of natural knowledge is its approach by examination and experimentation. This is in itself "a sign of uncertainty about the truth." Faith, on the contrary, follows a pure and simple way of thought that is far removed from all guile and methodical examination. These two paths lead in opposite directions. The house of faith is "childlike thoughts and simplicity of heart," for it is said, "Glorify God in simplicity of heart" (cf. Col. 3:22), and: Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:3). Natural knowledge stands opposed both to simplicity of heart and simplicity of thought. This knowledge only works within the limits of nature, "but faith has its own path beyond nature."

The more a man devotes himself to the ways of natural knowledge, the more he is seized on by fear and the less can he free himself from it. But if he follows faith, he is immediately freed and "as a son of God, has the power to make free use of all things." "The man who loves this faith acts like God in the use of all created things," for to faith is given the power "to be like God in making a new creation." Thus it is written: "Thou desiredst, and all things are presented before thee" (cf. Job 23:13). Faith can often "bring forth all things out of nothing," while knowledge can do nothing "without the help of matter." Knowledge has no power over nature, but faith has such power. Armed with faith, men have entered into the fire and quenched the flames, being untouched by them. Others have walked on the waters as on dry land. All these things are "beyond nature"; they go against the modes of natural knowledge and reveal the vanity of such modes. Faith "moves about above nature." The ways of natural knowledge ruled the world for more than 5,000 years, and man was unable to "lift his gaze from the earth and understand the might of his Creator" until "our faith arose and delivered us from the shadows of the works of this world" and from a fragmented mind. He who has faith "will lack nothing," and, when he has nothing, "he possesses all things by faith," as it is written: All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive (Matt. 21:22); and also; The Lord is near; be anxious for nothing (Phil. 4:6).

Natural laws do not exist for faith. St. Isaac emphasizes this very strongly: All things are possible to him that believeth (Mark 9:23), for with God nothing is impossible .... To step beyond the limits of nature and to enter into the realm of the supernatural is considered to be against nature, as something irrational and impossible .... Nevertheless, this natural knowledge, according to St. Isaac, is not at fault. It is not to be rejected. It is just that faith is higher than it is. This knowledge is only to be condemned in so far as, by the different means it uses, it turns against faith. But when this knowledge "is joined with faith, becoming one with her, clothing itself in her burning thoughts," when it "acquires wings of passionlessness," then, using other means than natural ones, it rises up from the earth "into the realm of its Creator," into the supernatural. This knowledge is then fulfilled by faith and receives the power to "rise to the heights," to perceive him who is beyond all perception and to "see the brightness that is incomprehensible to the mind and knowledge of created beings." Knowledge is the level from which a man rises up to the heights of faith. When he reaches these heights, he has no more need of it - for it is written: We know in part, but when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away (I Cor. 13:9-10). Faith reveals to us now the truth of perfection, as if it were before our eyes. It is by faith that we learn that which is beyond our grasp -by faith and not by enquiry and the power of knowledge. /... /

There are three spiritual modes in which knowledge rises and falls, and by which it moves and changes. These are the body, the soul, and the spirit .... At its lowest level, knowledge "follows the desires of the flesh," concerning itself with riches, vainglory, dress, repose of body, and the search for rational wisdom. This knowledge invents the arts and sciences and all that adorns the body in

this visible world. But in all this, such knowledge is contrary to faith. It is known as "mere knowledge, for it is deprived of all thought of the divine and, by its fleshly character, brings to the mind an irrational weakness, because in it the mind is overcome by the body and its entire concern is for the things of this world." It is puffed up and filled with pride, for it refers every good work to itself and not to God. That which the Apostle said, knowledge puffeth up (I Cor. 8:1), was

Faith presents a new way of thinking, through which is effected all the work of knowing in the believing man. This new way of thinking is humility .... It is by humility that the intellect is healed and made whole... The humble man is the fount of the mysteries of the new age.

obviously said of this knowledge, which is not linked with faith and hope in God, and not of true knowledge. True, spiritual knowledge, linked with humility, brings to perfection the soul of those who have acquired it, as is seen in Moses, David, Isaiah, Peter, Paul, and all those who, within the limits of human nature, were counted worthy of this perfect knowledge.

Source: [http://www.sv-luka.org/library/The\\_Mystery\\_of\\_Knowledge.htm](http://www.sv-luka.org/library/The_Mystery_of_Knowledge.htm)