KEYWORDS: Nikodemos the Hagiorite, Mysteries-Sacraments, Baptism, Holy Eucharist, Confession.

In his recent book, *Encountering the Mystery*, His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew writes the following concerning the Holy Sacramental Mysteries of the Church: “Unfortunately, the sacraments have themselves often been reduced to ritual observance… We have been accustomed to seeing the sacraments narrowly as community rituals or spiritual requirements.” There has always been the danger of reducing the Holy Mysteries to mere ritual, turning the sacramental life into something one has to do as a religious obligation. Worse yet, the Sacramental Mysteries are often superstitiously perceived as magical, having an instantaneous and “miraculous” effect on the participant, as if the person’s role in or disposition towards the Mystery were irrelevant. This tendency towards a legalistic understanding of the Sacraments and a barren religiosity has been observed in

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1 This paper is based on a presentation made at the Theological School of the University of Presov, Slovakia, in October of 2009 during a conference entitled, “Social and Spiritual Dimension of Nikodemos the Hagiorite,” held on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the Saint’s repose. I am indebted and grateful to the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and the Department of Inter-Orthodox Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations for making my presence at the conference possible.


3 “The sacraments do not work in some magical manner; rather, they function ‘mysteriously,’ namely in a silent manner, permeating the hearts and lives of those who choose to be open to the possibility of encounter with God.” *Ibid.*, 86.
both the clergy and the laity, as well as among theologians and their textbooks. This charge has even been brought against our Righteous Father among the Saints Nikodemos the Hagiorite. But as we shall see, one of the many contributions St. Nikodemos has made to the Church through his voluminous writings is exactly concerning this issue. When writing about the Sacraments, St. Nikodemos constantly makes his reader aware of the danger of ritualizing the Holy Mysteries. He does not want his fellow Christians to simply "go through the motions" in a routine or mechanistic manner, to go to Communion or Confession, for example, just because one feels obligated to on account of it being a certain season or Feast Day. Rather, he wants believers to experience the Mystery at the core of their being in an existential manner. There is no doubt that the institutional aspect of the Sacraments is of the utmost importance to the Saint, that is, they must be performed correctly and in accordance with the tradition of the Orthodox Church. But of equal importance to St. Nikodemos, if not of greater importance, and just as

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5 See Alexander Schmemann, *Of Water and the Spirit* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 7-13. And Fr. Alkiviadis Calivas says characteristically: "Both theology and liturgy are devitalized when theology is unwittingly allowed to decline into uncritical, repetitive, and sterile pietistic formulations and when the liturgy is unwittingly allowed to deteriorate into empty actions and words that have little meaning and have no appeal to the heart and mind of the contemporary worshipper" (Aspects of Orthodox Worship: Essays in theology and liturgy, vol. 3 [Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2003], 126).


7 "These Mysteries we honor and praise in all faith and piety as necessary to bring about the salvation of our soul, and we accept the grace and sanctification of these Mysteries according to the form and order by which they are celebrated and safeguarded in the Eastern Church of Christ" (St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, *Confession of Faith* [Thessaloniki: Uncut Mountain Press, 2007], 23-24 [Ομολογία πίστεως, in P. B. Paschos, In Asceticism and Martyrdom (Ἐν ἀσκήσει καὶ μαρτυρίῳ) (Athens: Harmos, 1996), 107]). See also his *Exomoletarion: A Manual of Confession*, where the Saint says that the Mystery of Confession must be correctly performed by a canonically ordained priest who has received an Entalterion from his bishop ([Thessaloniki: Uncut Mountain Press, 2006], 132-134, 185-189 [Ἐξομολογητάριον (Athens: Panagopoulos, 2002), 64-66, 103-106]). Concerning the correct and Orthodox celebration of Baptism, see *The Rudder* ([Chicago: The Orthodox Christian Educational Society, 1983], 81-84 [Πηδάλιον (Athens: Papadimitriou, 2003), 62-66]).
often emphasized by him, if not more often, is the subjective attitude and personal disposition of the Christian when encountering the Holy Mysteries. To demonstrate this, appeal will be made in this paper to the writings of the Saint with particular reference to the Holy Mysteries of Baptism, Communion, and Confession.8

When St. Nikodemos discusses Baptism, which he talks about very frequently in his writings, he brings certain presuppositions to the table. First and foremost, he knows that man is born into a fallen world, and on account of the sin of Adam all men have been polluted and have obscured the image of God within them. Therefore, man is in need of another birth, a spiritual rebirth, as he says: “Without Baptism it is impossible for someone to live the spiritual life and be saved.”9 Secondly, considering the eighteenth century context in which he was writing, and the fact that he was addressing his fellow Orthodox Christians, St. Nikodemos was cognizant of the fact that the vast majority of the people had received holy Baptism as infants and were simply born into the faith. Thus it was a distant event for them, even forgotten. While St. Nikodemos has a highly developed baptismal theology rooted in the biblico-patristic tradition, our present concern is not so much with the rite of Baptism or its innumerable salutary effects, but with what the Saint has to say concerning the Christian’s personal response to the grace of Baptism. He is above all trying his utmost to implant a high baptismal consciousness in his readers so that they may enter into a deep understanding of what they received in Baptism and apprehend and experience baptismal grace to the fullest extent in their lives. He wants to remind them of this great event that happened so long ago and to live up to the expectations of the Gospel. According to his teaching, a life in conformity with one’s Baptism is an absolute necessity if baptismal grace is to be of any effect at all. The gift of Baptism is absolutely free, but there is work to be done by man after Baptism, not only to preserve the grace, but also to cultivate it. His point is that

8 For a comprehensive study of St. Nikodemos’ teaching on the sacramental life, see George Dokos, The Sacramental Life as the Axis of the Spiritual Life in the Writings of St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite [Η μυστηριακή ζωή ως ἀξίων τῆς πνευματικῆς ζωῆς στὰ κείμενα τοῦ ἁγίου Νικοδήμου τοῦ Ἁγιορείτου] (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki: Doctoral Dissertation, 2009).
Baptism is not self-sufficient; it does not and cannot stand alone. In saying this, St. Nikodemos is in exact agreement with St. Gregory Palamas, who exerted a great influence on the Hagiorite. In a very telling statement, St. Nikodemos writes concerning both the actual and potential effects of Baptism, demonstrating his teaching regarding the objective and subjective aspects of the Mystery: “Immediately after you came out of the sacred font of Baptism, which is like a spiritual womb of the Holy Church of Christ, immediately, I say, you were reborn and became a son of God in potential and by grace. But this alone is not enough. You must also become a son of God in actuality. How, and in what way? By doing the commandments of Christ, through the acquisition of the virtues, and by imitating the life and manner of Jesus Christ.” The catechetical instruction which traditionally accompanies Baptism must also be nurtured through an active study and comprehension of the faith. St. Nikodemos lamented the fact that the Christians of his

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10 In his Thirty-Eighth Homily, On the First Matins Gospel, St. Gregory Palamas states: “Baptism alone is not sufficient to make a person a disciple of the Gospel; keeping God’s commandments, all of them, is also necessary.” Further on he says: “If we choose to live sinfully, Holy Baptism and the Divine Sacraments that follow it will not save us from eternal condemnation, but we will lose the heavenly inheritance... with our impenitent behavior and disobedience to God’s commandments” (The Homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas, vol. 2 [South Canaan: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2004], 188, 191 [PG 151, 480C, 481D-484A]).


12 St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, New Ladder [Νέα Κλιμάξ] (Thessaloniki: Regopoulos, 1976), 151. Cf. St. Mark the Ascetic: “Grace has been given mystically to those who have been baptized into Christ; and it becomes active within them to the extent that they actively observe the commandments” (On Those who Think that They are Made Righteous by Works 61, in The Philokalia, vol. 1 [London: Faber and Faber, 1983], 130 [PG 65, 937D]). Similarly, later in the same work he writes: “Everyone baptized in the orthodox manner has received mystically the fullness of grace; but he becomes conscious of this grace only to the extent that he actively observes the commandments” (92, The Philokalia, vol. 1, 133 [PG 65, 944A]). See also St. Mark’s work, Concerning Divine Baptism, PG 65, 985C-985D, 1005A.
day hardly had any knowledge of their faith. He says many are called faithful in name alone, and only on account of having undergone the motions of ceremonial Baptism. Although baptized, such “catechized” Christians are rather like catechumens, or as St. Nikodemos puts it, they are more like unbelievers and uncatechized. They may “be” Christian because they were simply born into Christianity, but, to borrow one of Søren Kierkegaard’s most passionate ideas, they must also “become Christian.” Baptism, then, must be followed up by a Christian way of life and a conscious awareness of the great gifts and mysteries of the faith that one was baptized into. St. Nikodemos even goes so far as to say that a Christian must “feel” that he was baptized, sounding very much like St. Symeon the New Theologian. If a Christian, he says, was truly and personally aware of the mystical power and energy that the water of Baptism had when he passed through it, it would be impossible for the believer to be alive to sin and tyrannized by the passions. If, however, one lives a life so contrary to the new birth from the Spirit, it is al-

13 St. Nikodemos speaks of his day as a time when “the faith has gone weak… the Gospel remains idle… and love has grown cold” (New Martyrology [Νέον Μαρτυρολόγιον] [Athens: Astir, 1993], 9-10).

14 St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, Spiritual Exercises [Πνευματικὰ Γυμνάσματα] (Thessaloniki: Regopoulos, 1999), 341-342.


most as if that person had never been baptized at all.\textsuperscript{17} This makes clear St. Nikodemos’ stress on the need for synergy: man’s co-operation with the grace of God, and is reminiscent of what St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote in his \textit{Catechetical Oration}: “If, when the bath has been applied to the body, the soul has not cleansed itself from the stains of its passions and affections, but the life after initiation keeps on a level with the uninitiate life, then, though it may be a bold thing to say, yet I will say it and will not shrink; in these cases the water is but water, for the gift of the Holy Spirit in no ways appears in him who is thus baptismally born.”\textsuperscript{18} Without personal faith and a living out of one’s baptismal vows, Baptism may indeed become ineffectual. This is the warning and exhortation of St. Nikodemos to his readers, as he beckons them to renew their Baptism at every moment of their life.

Coming now to the subject of the Holy Eucharist, we will again see how important the role of personal faith and, indeed, deliberate preparation and a holy life are for the Christian when approaching the Holy Gifts. For St. Nikodemos, there is absolutely no doubt that the offered bread and wine are changed, by the power and descent of the Holy Spirit, into the real and actual body and blood of Christ during the mystical and bloodless sacrifice of the Divine Liturgy. The sanctified bread and wine, as he explicitly says, are the very body and blood of the Lord Jesus, “the body actually conceived of the Holy Spirit, the one actually born of the Virgin, the one actually baptized, the

\textsuperscript{17} St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, \textit{Garden of Graces [Κῆπος Χαρίτων]} (Thessaloniki: Regopoulos, 1992), 33.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{The Great Catechism} 40, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series, vol. 5 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 508 [PG 45, 101D]. St. Gregory repeats this view in his \textit{Life of Moses}: “If someone should still serve them [the passions], even if he should happen to have passed through the water [of Baptism], according to my thinking he has not at all touched the mystical water whose function is to destroy evil tyrants” (\textit{Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses} [New York: Paulist Press, 1978], 85 [PG 44, 364D]). St. Cyril of Jerusalem, too, boldly attests to the need for subjective faith and a virtuous life if Baptism is to be of any benefit: “Even Simon Magus once came to the Laver of Baptism, he was baptized, but not enlightened. His body he dipped in water, but admitted not the Spirit to illuminate his heart. His body went down and came up; but his soul was not buried together with Christ, nor with Him raised” (\textit{The Procatechesis} 2, \textit{St. Cyril of Jerusalem’s Lectures on the Christian Sacraments} [Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995], 40-41 [PG 33, 336A]). Cf. Abba Neilus, \textit{Epistles II}, 223, PG 79, 316D and \textit{Epistles III}, 8, PG 79, 369C. According to Origen, some people are even baptized “unto condemnation” because they do not live in accordance with the new life in Christ received at Baptism (\textit{On Ezekiel} 6.5, PG 13, 713D).
one which actually suffered, the one which was actually crucified, the one which was actually buried, the one which actually resurrected, the one which actually ascended into the heavens, the one which is actually seated at the right hand of the Father, and the one which will actually come to judge the living and the dead.\(^19\)

This has serious implications for the believer. A Christian cannot haphazardly draw near to the eucharistic elements as if they were mere bread and wine without any acknowledgment and deep understanding of the mystical reality before him.\(^20\) Such a \textit{laissez-faire} attitude and spiritual ignorance not only demeans the Mysteries, but can also deprive the communicant of their grace and, worse yet, may even bring spiritual harm upon that person. Generally speaking, it is for two reasons that St. Nikodemos insists very often in his writings that proper and serious preparation is necessary to approach the divine Mysteries: 1) in order for the communicant not to be harmed by unworthily partaking of the body and blood of the Lord, as the Apostle Paul warns,\(^21\) and 2) in order to receive the maximum benefit from the Holy Mysteries.\(^22\) St. Nikodemos’ teaching on this subject is summed up

\(^{19}\) Confession of Faith, 98 [Ὁμολογία πίστεως, in P. B. Paschos, \textit{In Asceticism and Martyrdom} (Ἐν ἀσκήσει καὶ μαρτυρίῳ), 167-168]. For a thorough discussion of St. Nikodemos’ eucharistic theology, see Archimandrite Nikodemos Skrettas, \textit{The Divine Eucharist and the Prerogatives of Sunday According to the Teaching of the Kollyvades} [Ἡ θεία Εὐχαριστία καὶ τὰ προνόμια τῆς Κυριακῆς κατὰ τὴ διδασκαλία τῶν Κολλυβάδων] (Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 2004), 49-93.

\(^{20}\) St. Nikodemos states that the discerning and prepared communicant will contemplate and understand the reality of Who is before him on the Holy Table and Who it is that he is receiving, “namely, that it is the very Son of God Himself mysterically present beneath the form of the sanctified bread” (\textit{Explanation of the 14 Epistles of the Apostle Paul} [Ἐρμηνεία εἰς τὰς ΙΔ ἐπιστολὰς τοῦ ἀποστόλου Παύλου], vol. 1, [Thessaloniki: Orthodoxos Kypsele, 1989], 565). Cf. St. Symeon the New Theologian who says that one must receive Communion “with contemplation and understanding” (\textit{Ethical Chapters} 10, SC 129, 316) and “with feeling and knowledge” (\textit{Ethical Chapters} 14, SC 129, 438).

\(^{21}\) “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself” (1 Cor. 11:27-29).

\(^{22}\) Cf. Protopresbyter Athanasios Gikas, \textit{Presuppositions and Frequency of Participation in Divine Communion, A Pastoral Approach} [Προϋποθέσεις καὶ συχνότητα προσελεύσεως στὴ θ. μετάληψη, ποιμαντικὴ προσέγγιση] (Thessaloniki: 1994), 35. See also Archimandrite Nikodemos Skrettas, \textit{The Divine Eucharist and the Prerogatives of Sunday According to the
well in one of his characteristic statements: "Frequently approach the immaculate Mysteries and partake of them. Take care, however, to receive Communion with the appropriate preparation, namely, with confession, with fasting (as much as you are able), with the preparation of self-control, with prayer, with attentive care, with contrition in your heart, and with a pure conscience, having examined yourself just as the Apostle commands you, so that your partaking of the divine Mysteries not be unto your condemnation. You will receive the grace of Communion in proportion to the extent of your preparation for receiving it."23 The immaculate Mysteries of Christ are, of course, in and of themselves life-giving and salvific, full of divine grace. As Panayiotis Nellas states, "In the sacraments God offers everything and nothing can be added beyond that."24 But just as the sun is beneficial and pleasing to the person who has healthy eyes, but harmful and damaging to the person who has unhealthy and weak eyes, so also, says St. Nikodemos, is Communion beneficial and life-giving to those who partake of it worthily, but damaging and condemning to those who eat and drink in an unworthy manner.25 Furthermore, through diligent preparation and living a godly life in response to God’s extreme love, the communicant opens himself up to the love of God and to union with Him.26 Therefore, St. Nikodemos

23 St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, Festal Guide [Ἑστιοντος Υμηρον] vol. 1 (Thessaloniki: Orthodoxos Kypsele, 1987), 68-69. Cf. what he says in his Spiritual Exercises [Πνευματικα Γυμνασματα]: "According to the greater or lesser preparation a man performs, so does he receive greater or lesser grace from the divine Mysteries" (220). And St. Nicholas Cabasilas states: "It is clear how we must prepare ourselves to touch the sacred Gifts, and that we must indeed cleanse ourselves of our own accord before the sacred rite" (The Life in Christ [Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974], 132 [PG 150, 605D]).

24 Deification In Christ (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987), 130. He continues: "It is necessary, however, for a person to appropriate the treasure which he has received in the sacraments by his personal co-operation."

25 Explanation of the 14 Epistles of the Apostle Paul [Ἐρμηνεία εἰς τὰς ἸΔ´ ἐπιστολὰς τοῦ ἀποστόλου Παῦλου], vol. 1, 565.

26 St. Nikodemos warns his reader that through a sinful life one can shut out the divine grace of Holy Communion: "But alas! How do you respond, my brother, to such love from your Lord? Whence arose in you such contrary actions? How is it that God so greatly desires to unite with your wretched soul, and you, on the contrary, so little desire to unite with Him, Who is the most supreme good? How is it that God displays such tender warmth towards you,
urges his reader to prepare properly to receive Communion, to approach “with the fear of God, with faith, and with love” and, above all, to draw near to the Holy Table of Christ with a pure conscience and a deep understanding of the fact that the communicant is truly present with the Son of God Himself at the Mystical Supper of the Lord. In this way the faithful and prepared Christian will partake worthily of the sacred Gifts and render himself receptive to God’s grace. He will bear fruit in his spiritual life and especially enjoy the innumerable and sublime benefits of the Mystery.

What has been said thus far concerning the Christian’s personal attitude and disposition towards the Holy Mysteries of Baptism and Communion applies also to the Sacrament of Holy Confession. As is well known, St. Nikodemos had quite a lot to say about the Mystery of Confession everywhere in his writings, even dedicating an entire lengthy book to the subject. Again, our primary concern here is with what he has to say about how the penitent should approach the Mystery in order for it to be fruitful and effectual. It should be noted, however, that St. Nikodemos held up the Mystery of Repentance and Confession as absolutely necessary for every Christian, cler-

and you, who are but clay, display such coldness towards Him? How is it that God deigns to seek to come and dwell in your heart by means of this Mystery, in order to enlighten you, in order to sanctify you; and you, the thankless creature, shut the door and do not allow Him to enter in?” (Spiritual Exercises [Πνευματικά Γυμνάσματα], 217). That the Sacraments are not effective without human co-operation is stated clearly also by St. Nicholas Cabasilas: “There are two ways in which grace operates in the precious offerings; first, by grace they are sanctified, and secondly, by grace we are sanctified through them. The working of grace upon the offerings – the first of which we spoke – cannot be invalidated by any human evil… But the second, the working of grace within us, demands our co-operation, and, as a result, our negligence can impede it. In other words, grace will sanctify us through the sacred offerings if it finds us ready and fit for sanctification; if it should, on the other hand, find us unprepared, not only do we reap no benefit, but we suffer grave harm and loss.” (A Commentary On the Divine Liturgy 34 [Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998], 85-86, [PG 150, 444D-445A]).

27 Explanation of the 14 Epistles of the Apostle Paul [Ἐρμηνεία εἰς τὰς Ἐπιστολὰς τοῦ Ἱούντος Παύλου], vol. 1, 563.

28 Concerning Frequent Communion of the Immaculate Mysteries of Christ, 67 [Περὶ τῆς συνεχοῦς μεταλήψεως τῶν ἁρώντων τοῦ Χριστοῦ μυστηρίων, 27]. Cf. St. Maximus the Confessor who speaks about the communicant’s “receptive capacity” with regard to Holy Communion: he receives Christ in proportion to his personal spiritual ability (On the Lord’s Prayer, PG 90, 896D-897C, and Second Century on Theology 56, PG 90, 1149A-1149B).

29 See his Exomologetarion: A Manual of Confession [Ἐξομολογητάριον].
gy and laity alike, and considered it essential for salvation. In fact, in one place he explicitly states that Confession is just as necessary for salvation as Baptism: “[Confession] is a bath,” he writes, “which is a second Baptism for penitents, more laborious than the first Baptism, and just as necessary for salvation as the first Baptism.” This is because, as he says in another place, it is impossible for a Christian, being human, not to fall and commit sin after Holy Baptism, and for this reason God has provided Confession and repentance. What St. Nikodemos stresses most in his writings concerning the Sacrament of Confession is what he calls pain of heart. It is an absolutely necessary element of a sincere confession, just as nec-

30 See especially St. Nikodemos’ lengthy footnote where he wishes to “overturn that most awful custom” of the clergy not thinking Confession necessary for themselves (Exomologetarion: A Manual of Confession, 302-353 [Ἐξομολογητάριον, 236]).


32 Concerning Frequent Communion of the Immaculate Mysteries of Christ, 70-71 [Περὶ τῆς συνεχούς μεταλήψεως τῶν ἁχράντων τοῦ Χριστοῦ μυστηρίων, 46-47]. Cf. St. John Climacus who says: “As Baptism is received in infancy, we have all defiled it” (The Ladder of Divine Ascent 7 [Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1991], 71 [PG 88, 804B]).

33 In this, St. Nikodemos is primarily following the teaching of St. Mark the Ascetic, but also St. John Climacus and St. Isaac the Syrian.

34 Note that perfect pain of heart arises out of love for God and from having disappointed one’s heavenly Father, as St. Nikodemos writes: “[Be] sad for no other reason than because you sinned against God and grieved the Holy Spirit” (Exomologetarion: A Manual of Confession, 315 [Ἐξομολογητάριον, 207]). Imperfect pain of heart, but still of use in acquiring compunction after sin, arises “not because a person disappointed God by his sins, but because that person was deprived of divine grace, lost Paradise, and gained hell... it proceeds not out of love for God, but out of fear and out of love for themselves, just as a hired hand repents on
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essay as revealing one’s sins to the Spiritual Father and receiving forgiveness for those sins.\textsuperscript{35} In fact, as we shall see, pain of heart is “the inseparable companion of true repentance,” as St. Nikodemos states, and without it no true confession can take place.\textsuperscript{36} If this pain of heart is absent, says St. Nikodemos, then the penitent is not truly in a state of repentance and he remains, in effect, actually unconfessed and unrepentant even after having gone to sacramental Confession.\textsuperscript{37} We will return to this important, and possibly controversial, point shortly. Sacred Confession, according to St. Nikodemos, is not merely a verbal recitation of sins. As essential as this aspect of the Mystery is, it alone is not enough. Authentic confession and repentance does not consist of going through the habitual and automatic motions when Great Lent or Christmas happens to be approaching. Or, as one author puts it, “Confession is certainly not a mere mechanical repetition of a formalized custom.”\textsuperscript{38}

While it has an external element, the greatest and most noble part of the Mystery is the internal conversion of the heart. If a Christian’s confession is not accompanied by compunction and contrition, “a broken spirit, a broken and humbled heart,” according to the 50th Psalm, St. Nikodemos warns that this sort of confession will not differ from the false and futile confession and repentance of King Saul, Antiochus, or Judas, whose confessions were with the mouth alone, and not with the heart.\textsuperscript{39} An effortless recital of one’s sins, with no pain of heart, does not heal the sinner or reconcile him with God,

\textsuperscript{35} St. Nikodemos writes in one place: “It is a dogma of our Orthodox Church… that this pain and inner sorrow of the heart is one of the necessary and constituent and essential elements of the Mystery of Confession and Repentance” (\textit{Ibid.}, 406 [\textit{Ibid.}, 283]).

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.}, 408 [\textit{Ibid.}, 284].

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid.}, 407 [\textit{Ibid.}, 283].

\textsuperscript{38} Archimandrite Nikodemos Skrettas, \textit{The Divine Eucharist and the Prerogatives of Sunday According to the Teaching of the Kollyvades} [\textit{Ἡ θεία Εὐχαριστία καὶ τὰ προνόμια τῆς Κυριακῆς κατὰ τὴ διδασκαλία τῶν Κολλυβάδων}], 100. Cf. John Chryssavgis: “Even those actively involved in church life suffer from formalism caused by the established patterns of religious practice. There is a need to appeal to the deepening of repentance and confession as spiritual realities rather than their imposition as obligatory customs” (\textit{Repentance and Confession} [Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1996], 3).

and this is St. Nikodemos’ ultimate concern. This is because the depths of the heart are not cleansed with a merely superficial and insincere confession. A profound sense of contrition and pain of heart afflicts and wounds the interior person, and the heart itself, which is the primary and main cause and root of all the sins, as the Lord Himself taught. St. Nikodemos gives the example of a hunter who is not satisfied with just finding an animal, but does everything in his power to kill it. So also it is not enough for the sinner to recall his sins and orally confess them. This will be of little benefit. He must struggle in every way to kill his sins with “the sharpest of all axes and tools,” which is pain of heart. Whoever confesses without contrition and pain of heart, writes the Athonite Father, “straightway after confession returns again to his home together with all of his sins.” This is a difficult statement because, essentially, St. Nikodemos is saying that just because someone goes to sacramental confession and confesses his sins does not necessarily mean that he has automatically received forgiveness for his sins. It is not that total forgiveness was not offered to him, however. If the penitent is not remorseful for his sins, has no contrition in his heart or faith in God’s mercy, and even intends on committing the same sins again after his confession, his confession and repentance is insincere and false. It is incomplete at best.

40 Cf. St. Symeon the New Theologian: “I think it is impossible for anyone to be reconciled with God without making a sincere and labored repentance. Never has anyone heard, nor has it ever been written in the God-inspired scriptures, that anyone could accept the sins of another or give an account of them without the sinner having first provided the evidence of worthy fruits of repentance, fruits which are proportionate to the form of his sin, and laying down his own labors as a foundation” (Letter on Confession 6 [St. Symeon the New Theologian, On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses, vol. 3], 192 [Karl Holl, Enthusiasmus und Bussgewalt beim griechischen Mönchtum: Eine Studie zu Symeon dem neuen Theologen (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagbuchhandlung, 1969), 116]).

41 “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Matt. 15:19).

42 Exomologetarion: A Manual of Confession, 312, 420 [Ἐξομολογητάριον, 205, 295].

43 Ibid., 405 [Ibid., 282].

44 St. Nikodemos writes: “God does not simply and haphazardly forgive the sins of those who commit sin... but He forgives those who repent and those who confess their sins with a broken heart” (Explanation of the 14 Epistles of the Apostle Paul [Ἐρμηνεία εἰς τὰς ΙΔ´ ἐπιστολὰς τοῦ ἀποστόλου Παύλου], vol. 1, 465).

45 In one place St. Nikodemos says: “If you do not, with all your strength, avoid all the causes which may lead you to fall again into sin – the people, the opportunities, the places and
fore, he cannot truly receive forgiveness for that which he is not truly repentant. In the words of St. Symeon the New Theologian, and this is very consistent with the teaching of St. Nikodemos, forgiveness and the grace that comes from Confession "is not an automatic thing; it depends on the faith, the disposition, and the humility of those who repent with their whole soul." Without the proper disposition, without pain of heart, the penitent is not opening himself up to the mercy of God and he is not doing his personal part in order to receive the remission of his sins and complete healing.

But let us suppose that an insincere penitent is objectively forgiven his sins through the Mystery of Confession. Still, St. Nikodemos writes, even if he is forgiven, the sins will immediately sprout up again because they were only superficially confessed and not plucked out with a genuine and contrite confession. Because the penitent did not get to the root of the matter and crush the sins lurking in the heart, he will easily return to his former ways and profit nothing from his confession.

Therefore, the sinner was in fact treated, but he did not benefit whatsoever from the treatment. Healing and reconciliation with God is incomplete, and that is the goal of Confession. Here, again, we encounter the mystery of synergy, where the grace of God is offered fully through the holy Sacraments of the Church in an objective manner, but in order for the Christian to benefit from the Mysteries he must be subjectively disposed towards receiving that grace.

ways and dangers – know that your repentance is incomplete, and I fear that your sins remain unforgiven" (Spiritual Exercises [Πνευματικά Γυμνάσματα], 321).


47 St. Nikodemos writes: "The disposition of man is the measure of the mercy of God, and as much as his disposition is open and receptive, so much will he receive the divine mercy" (Garden of Graces [Κῆπος Χαρίτων], 220). Cf. St. Basil the Great, Homily on Psalm 32 10 (PG 29β, 349A).

48 Exomologetarion: A Manual of Confession, 188-189, 324-325 [Ἐξομολογητάριον, 106, 216]. This is in line with what St. Basil the Great says: "So, not even the one who says, I sinned, and then persists in sin truly confesses. But, according to the Psalm, he who finds his sin should hate it. For what profit does a sick man receive from the diligence of a physician when he pursues the destructive things of life? Such a person profits nothing from the forgiveness he receives for his iniquities when he again goes and does wrong" (Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah 1.34, PG 30, 185C-188A).

The purpose of the present essay has been to make the reader aware of one aspect of St. Nikodemos’ thought concerning the Sacramental Mysteries of the Church, specifically his pastoral teaching on the need for personal faith when encountering the Sacraments. It is clearly not enough, in the eyes of the Saint, for a Christian to “go to Church” and mechanically-unconsciously undergo the religious routine. He will not tolerate such a minimalistic Christianity reduced to ritualistic obligations, for no salvation lies in this. To reiterate the points made earlier, St. Nikodemos believes that a Christian must be totally aware that he was baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ and that he must live a new life in accordance with the Spirit of God in order for baptismal grace to come to fruition. Concerning the divine Eucharist, one must absolutely believe in the reality of the body and blood of Christ hidden in the Mystery and receive Holy Communion with proper preparation and a pure conscience in order to be benefited by the Holy Gifts. Finally, when going to the Sacrament of Confession, the recollection of one’s sins and the verbal confession of those sins do not in and of themselves suffice for a profitable and fruitful confession to take place. St. Nikodemos stresses that the penitent must have heartfelt remorse for his sins and that pain of heart must be present in order for true forgiveness and healing to occur. In short, the Sacraments of the Church, if not approached in an appropriate manner and with the proper existential awareness, may remain but empty forms. St. Nikodemos tries in every way to instill in his audience a sacramental consciousness that will make the Mysteries real for them. He desires that every encounter with a Sacrament of the Church be an existential conscious-experience of God. It may seem like there is a tension in St. Nikodemos’ thought between “institution and charism,”¹⁰ and that he vacillates between the objective and subjective. The fact of the matter is that, for our Saint, and hopefully this has been extensively proven in this paper, the objective reality is never in question of whether or not, let’s say, baptismal or eucharistic grace in its fullness is available to the believer in the Mystery. In this sense, St. Nikodemos is a sacramental realist, since he is certain that in the Mysteries the presence of Divinity exists a priori, that is, independent of an-

yone’s subjective experience. On the other hand, however, and herein lies the tension, as St. Gregory of Nyssa rather boldly put it, the water of Baptism may remain “but water” for the baptized person if there is no evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in his life. Similarly, the bread of the Eucharist may remain “but bread” for the one who approaches undiscerningly and without the eyes of faith to perceive the presence of the Lord in the Mystery. For this reason, St. Nikodemos is most concerned in his works with the subjective attitude and openness of his Christian brethren towards the mystical sacramental grace so that they may have access to it and reap the maximal benefit. He is, above all, a preacher through his writings and always has a pragmatic goal and pastoral aim in view. What St. Nikodemos is doing, in essence, is calling his reader to a positive and personal response to God’s love made available to all in the Holy Mysteries so as to appropriate, through personal freedom and synergy, divine life into one’s own life.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Ὁ κίνδυνος νὰ ἐλαττωθοῦν τὰ Ἁγία Μυστήρια τῆς Ἐκκλησίας σὲ ἄπλο ρητορικό μοῦ ἔχει πάντοτε υπάρξει, μεταβάλλοντας τὴ μυστηριακὴ ᾳη σὲ κάτι ποὺ πρέπει νὰ γίνει σὰν θρησκευτικὸ καθήκον. Ακόμα χειρότερα, τὰ Μυστήρια συχνὰ ἀντιλαμβάνονται δεισιδαιμονικὰ ώς μαγικὰ, σὰν ὁ ρόλος ἢ ἢ διάθεσιν ἐνὸς προσώπου πρὸς τὰ Μυστήρια εἶναι ἄσχετα. Αὐτὴ ἢ τάση πρὸς μιὰ νομικική κατανόηση τῶν Μυστηρίων καὶ μιὰ στείρη θρησκευτικὴ κόψη τὰ ἔχει παρατηρηθεῖ σὲ ἀμφότερους τοὺς κληρικοὺς καὶ τοὺς λαίκους, καθὼς καὶ μεταξὺ τῶν θεολόγων καὶ τῶν διδακτικῶν βιβλίων τους. Τέτοια κατηγορία ἔχει ἀκόμα ἐπιφερθεῖ ἕναντι τοῦ Ὀσίου Πατρὸς Ἡμῶν Νικόδημος τοῦ Ἀγιορείτου. Ἀλλὰ μὰ ἀπὸ τὶς πολλὲς συνεισφορὲς ποὺ ἔχει προσφέρει ὁ Ἁγιος Νικόδημος στὴν Ἐκκλησία μὲ σὰν τῶν συγγραμμάτων του

51 Cf. St. Ambrose of Milan who, with reference to Baptism, characteristically says: “What did you see? Water, certainly, but not water alone… We must not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen… Believe, therefore, that the presence of the Divinity is there” (On the Mysteries 3.8, SC 235*, 158, 160).

52 As St. Nikodemos succinctly puts it: “The Mysteries demand faith, not the senses” (Confession of Faith, 101 [Ομολογία πίστεως, in P. B. Paschos, In Asceticism and Martyrdom (Ἐν ἀσκήσει καὶ μαρτυρίῳ), 170].
άφορά αυτό τό θέμα. Ύστερα γράφει γιά τά Μυστηρία, ὁ ἄγιος Νικόδημος συνεχώς κάνει τόν ἀναγνώστη τοῦ ἐνήμερο τοῦ κινδύνου τοῦ ρῖτουαλισμοῦ τῶν ἀγίων Μυστηρίων. Θέλει οἱ ἀναγνώστες νά τάς αἰσθανθοῦν στά βάθη τῶν καρδιῶν τους σὲ ἕνα ὑποτλιακό τρόπο. Γιά νά ἐπιδειχθεῖ αὐτή ἡ ἁπογέφαση τῶν διδασκαλιῶν τοῦ Ἁγίου, σὲ αὐτό τό κείμενο ἐπικαλοῦνται τά συγγράμματα τοῦ Ἁγιορείτου μὲ εἰδική ἀναφορά στό Βάπτισμα, Θεία Κοινωνία, καὶ Ἐξωμολόγηση. Ο ἄγιος Νικόδημος πιστεύει ὅτι ὁ Χριστιανός πρέπει νά εἶναι ἐνήμερος καθ’ ὀλοκλήρως καὶ νά ἔχει συναίσθηση ὅτι βαπτίσθηκε στό θάνατο καὶ στήν ἁπάστασι τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ὅτι πρέπει νά ἔχει μία νέα ἥρα σύμφωνα μὲ τό Πνεῦμα τοῦ Θεοῦ òντως ὅστε νά καρποφόρησει ἡ βαπτιστική χάρη. Ὅσον ἀφορά τή Θεία Εὐχαριστία, ὁ πιστός πρέπει νά πιστεύει ἀπόλοι στή πραγματικότητα τοῦ σώματος καὶ ἁμάτου τοῦ Χριστοῦ κεκρυμμένα στό Μυστήριο καὶ νά λαμβάνει τή Θεία Κοινωνία μὲ κατάλληλη προετοιμασία καὶ μὲ καθαρή συνείδηση γιά νά ὅφεληθεί ἀπό τά θεία Δώρα. Ύστερα κανείς πηγαίνει στό Μυστήριο τῆς Ἐξωμολόγησεως, ἡ ἀναπόληση τῶν ἁμαρτίων του καὶ ἡ προφορική τῆς ἐξωμολόγησης τῶν ἁμαρτίων δὲν ἐπαρκοῦν καθ’ ἕαυτά νά πραγματοποιηθεί μία ἐπωφελή καὶ γόνυμη ἐξωμολόγηση. Ὁ ἄγιος Νικόδημος τονίζει ὅτι ὁ μετανούν πρέπει νά ἔχει ἐγκάρδια τώση συνείδησις γιά τίς ἁμαρτίες του καὶ ὅτι ὁ πόνος τῆς καρδιάς πρέπει νά εἶναι παρόν γιά νά ὑπάρξει πλήρης συγχώρηση καὶ θεράπευση. Ἐν συντομί, τά Μυστήρια τῆς Ἐκκλησίας, ἐὰν δὲν προσεγγισθοῦν μὲ κατάλληλο τρόπο καὶ μὲ πρέποντα ὑποτλιακή ἐνημερότητα, δύναται νά ἁπομείνουν κενοὶ τύποι. Ὁ ἄγιος Νικόδημος προσπαθεῖ μὲ κάθε τρόπο νά ἐνσταλάξει στούς ἄκρατας τό μία μυστηριακή συναίσθηση γιά τήν πραγματικότητα τῶν Μυστηρίων. Επιθυμεῖ ὅτι κάθε συνάντησις μὲ ἑνά Μυστήριο τῆς Ἐκκλησίας νά εἶναι μία ἕπειρα ἐνημερότητα-πείρα μὲ τό Θεό. Ὅτι ἄγιος Νικόδημος ἐπὶ τό πλείστον ἐνδιάφερεται στά ἔργα του μὲ τήν ὑποκειμενική διάθεση καὶ τήν ἀνοιχτότητα τῶν ἐν Χριστῷ ἀδελφοῦ τοῦ πρός τή μιστική χάρη στά Μυστήρια οὕτως ὅστε νά δυνηθοῦν νά λάβουν τή μέγιστη ὄψεις. Ὡστάραν ὅλων, ὁ ὅσιος Πατήρ εἶναι ἐνας ἱεροκήρυκας μέσω τῶν συγγραμμάτων του καὶ πάντοτε ἔχει ἕνα πραγματικό τελικό σκοπό καὶ ποιμαντικό στόχο ἐν ὅψει. Αὐτοῦ πώς κάνει ὁ ἄγιος Νικόδημος, στήν οὐσία, εἶναι νά καλεῖ τόν ἀναγνώστη τοῦ σὲ μία θετική καὶ προσωπική ἀπάντηση στήν ἁγάστη τοῦ Θεοῦ ποὺ εἶναι διαθέσιμη σὲ ὅλους στά ἁγιά Μυστηρία ὅστε, μέσω προσωπικῆς ἐλευθερίας καὶ συνεργίας, νά ὀἰκουποιήσει θεϊκή ἥρα στή δική τής ἱωή.