

**The Second Sunday of Great Lent: St. Gregory Palamas,
Archbishop of Thessalonica**

By Very Rev. Fr. Lawrence Farley

St. Gregory was born in Constantinople in 1292 of noble and wealthy parents. His mother died when he was young, and he became a ward of the emperor. Hence, he had a brilliant career in the imperial court. When he was about 20, he left all the intrigue of life in the capital to enter the monastic life on Mt. Athos. There he lived in peace and learned the ways of stillness and of hesychasm*, celebrating the transfiguration of human nature through prayer. In 1333, the hesychast monks were attacked by Greek theologian Barlaam, who thought the doctrine and claim that man could see the uncreated light was ridiculous. Barlaam felt their teaching denied the transcendence and unity of God. Gregory supported the monks and wrote his *Triads* in their defense. However, Barlaam was very powerful and influential and Gregory was condemned and excommunicated. As Gregory could not be silent about his teaching, he was also imprisoned. Later, when a new emperor assumed the throne, Gregory was restored and appointed Archbishop of Thessalonica. Councils held in Constantinople examined the hesychast doctrines which vindicated Gregory and his teachings in 1351.

Ever since the fourteenth century, this Sunday commemorates St. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica. St. Gregory was the great defender and theologian of hesychasm and of the uncreated light of Christ, and by commemorating St. Gregory a week after the Sunday of Orthodoxy, the Church enshrines his teaching and confirms it as a standard of Orthodoxy. The Lenten transfiguration we seek cannot be reached apart from godly and humble ascetical struggle.

St. Gregory's description of hesychastic prayer as follows:

"Let us work with the body and pray with the soul. Let our outer man perform bodily tasks, and let the inner man be entirely dedicated to the service of God. As Jesus, God and man, commanded us, saying 'But when you pray, enter into your closet, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father which is in secret' [Matt. 6:6]. The closet of the soul is the body; our 'doors' are the five bodily senses. The soul enters its closet when the mind does not 'roam' among the things of this world and the affairs of this world, but stays within – in our heart. Our senses become closed and remain closed when we do not let them be attached to external sensory things. In this way, our mind remains free from every worldly attachment; and, by secret mental prayer, unites with God its Father."

* Orthodox prayer teaches inner silence. Body and mind are brought to solitude and quietness in order to experience the peace and silence that surround the presence of God. It is a total relinquishment of one's life to God. It is not a Utopian Nirvana-type of peace but a peace in God in the midst of intense daily struggle. The ultimate aim is a mystical union with God within the context of silence. The person who has attained inward stillness or silence listens to the voice of prayer in his own heart and understands that this voice is not his own but that of another speaking within him.