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The distinction between the essence of God and His energies



One of the most delicate—yet important—issues in the Church is the distinction between the essence of God and His energies.

Because God is the uncreated Creator and is above everything else, this implies that, theoretically, we humans, as His creatures—especially in our state of fallen nature—are on a completely different existential plane. Therefore, we cannot have a relationship with God, such that is is totally inaccessible.

However, experience shows God’s loving presence in our daily lives, experience validated in the Church over time. Beyond that, the problem is paramount because, as we are the image and likeness of God, our target is our archetype—that is, God. So our purpose is deification: to become gods, with the help of God.

How do we reconcile the two planes?

The essence of God and His energies

The truth is that there is an unutterable difference in God between His essence which is wholly unreachable, perfectly incommunicable, and His energies (grace, works) that are perfectly communicable, yet without breaking the freedom of intelligent beings.

God’s essence defines what God is, while God’s energies represent what God does.

If, in the case of created things, the essence of a creature is broken by what the creature does—in God, because of His perfection and His simplicity above all limitations, His essence and energies are all God.

Holy Fathers often explain this through an image that, although it cannot fully comprehend reality, still gives us an idea that brings us closer to what is happening: as fire is totally inadequate in its core, in its essence, however, is communicable in its energy—in heat and in light—so also God is untouchable in His essence but perfectly communicable in His energies.

Based on Saint Gregory Palamas

A snapshot from the refectory of the Monastery of Vatopedi, Mount Athos.

— Source: asceticexperience.com