St. John Climacus & the Ladder of Divine Ascent

John Climacus is also known as John of the Ladder, John Scholasticus, or John Sinaites. He was a 6th-7th century Christian monk at the monastery of Mt. Sinai. He is revered as a saint by the Eastern Catholic and Orthodox Churches, as well as the Roman Catholic Church. His Feast Day is observed on March 30th on the church calendar of all the above-mentioned Churches. However, besides this designated date, the Eastern Catholic and Orthodox Churches commemorate him on the Fourth Sunday of the Great Fast (Lent).

John Climacus entered the Monastery of Mt. Sinai, now called St. Catherine’s Monastery. As a novice there, he was spiritually preparing himself to enter the monastic life. He studied the lives of the saints. He sought to achieve a greater level of asceticism and had become a “hermit.” He lived in isolation at the foot of the mountain. St. John Climacus had become one of the most learned Church Fathers.

His main literary work is entitled the “Ladder of Divine Ascent.” It was written in the early part of the 7th century upon the request of his abbot. This literary work quickly became one of the most widely read books of Byzantine spirituality. The “Ladder of Divine Ascent” describes how to raise one’s soul and body to God through the acquisition of ascetical virtues. St. John Climacus used the analogy of “Jacob’s Ladder” as the framework for his spiritual teaching. Each chapter is referred to as a step and deals with a specific aspect of spiritual life.

In the work, John speaks about developing a life of virtue which is necessary in order to practice asceticism. He then instructs us how to overcome vices and to build (develop) corresponding virtues. Next is the development of higher virtues. The last step or final rung of the ladder is Love—evoking peace and tranquility going beyond prayer.

An icon of the same title “Ladder of Divine Ascent” depicts a ladder extending from earth to Heaven. In the icon, several monks are depicted climbing the ladder. At the top is Jesus, Who is prepared to receive them into Heaven. Angels help the climbers ascend. But demons attempt the climbers from reaching the top. On the lower right-hand corner is St. John Climacus gesturing towards the ladder and inviting others to begin the ascent.
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