



*Dear staff and readers of “Sourozh”*

**I**would like to congratulate you all on the 30th anniversary of the publication of the first issue of the magazine. “Sourozh” appeared at a time when it was virtually impossible to establish a new religious periodical in Russia. But such a magazine was established in the British Isles, in London, in the Diocese of Sourozh of the Russian Orthodox Church, at the initiative and under the guidance of Metropolitan Anthony Bloom of blessed memory. “It is our belief,” wrote the publishers in the first issue of “Sourozh”, “that the Russian Orthodox tradition which is experiencing a revival in Russia today is also of interest to the English-speaking world”.

Indeed the magazine almost immediately became the focus of much favourable attention and interest. “Sourozh” is well known in England, the USA and in other English-speaking countries. It is also well known in Russia, and indeed everywhere that Orthodox believers live, work and pray, and where there is an interest in the Orthodox Church, its life and teaching. Throughout the decades and right up to the present day “Sourozh” is evidence of the truth of Orthodoxy, reporting on the major events in the Orthodox world and introducing readers to its key thinkers and figures, while retaining a special connection with the Russian tradition.

As it approaches its 30th anniversary, “Sourozh” has been updated, becoming a colourful, modern publication, thereby adding to the wealth of experience accumulated by the Orthodox mission against the difficult background of the non-Orthodox world. I would like to wish the staff of “Sourozh” patience, diligence and inspiration, and to the magazine’s readers I wish new and interesting articles.

***Elisey***  
***Archbishop of Sourozh***

<p>1 <b>TO THE READERS OF “SOUROZH”</b> Archbishop Elisey of Sourozh</p> <p>3 <b>EDITORIAL</b></p> <p><b>LEGACY</b></p> <p>4 <b>Two Lenten retreat talks</b> Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh</p> <p><b>ORTHODOXY IN THE BRITISH ISLES</b></p> <p>18 <b>Orthodoxy: its origins and future</b> Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia</p> <p><b>FATHERS OF THE CHURCH</b></p> <p>24 <b>Saint Ephrem the Syrian: a voice for our times?</b> Abraham Attrep</p> <p>31 <b>The Venerable Bede and Saint John Damascene</b> Priest Andrew Louth</p> <p><b>READING THE BIBLE</b></p> <p>37 <b>Search the Scriptures: a sermon preached before the University of Cambridge</b> Archimandrite Ephrem (Lash)</p> <p>44 <b>The tears of the Myrrhbearing Women</b> Priest Nicholas Behr</p>	<p>52 <b>Interpreting the Incarnation</b> Archpriest John Behr</p> <p><b>CHRISTIAN VIEW</b></p> <p>65 <b>“The light of Christ enlightens all men”</b> Nicolas Zernov</p> <p><b>MODERN-DAY SAINTS</b></p> <p>68 <b>Father Alexis Toth: a beloved Father, teacher and guide is glorified</b></p> <p>76 <b>Saint Silouan: a modern Athonite saint</b> Nun Magdalen</p> <p><b>ISSUES IN THEOLOGY</b></p> <p>88 <b>Method, mysticism and analogy: Father John Meyendorff and the Areopagitica</b> Nun Seraphima (Konstantinovsky)</p> <p><b>ORTHODOX CHURCH TODAY</b></p> <p>104 <b>Symbolising the Holy: the Divine Liturgy as it is today</b> Priest Gregory Woolfenden</p> <p><b>BOOK REVIEW</b></p> <p>112 by John Harwood</p>
---	---

Editor: *Archpriest Michael Dudko*

This issue was produced with the help of all of the following: *Priest Stephen Platt, Priest Joseph Skinner, Tatyana Brodskaya, Alexander Krasovitsky, Georgy Krasovitsky, Eugene Martov, Maria Petrunova, Mike Stonelake*

Art Director: *Tatyana Demidova*  
 Conceptual layout: *Mikhail Sukhorukov*  
 Translator: *Margaret Jones*  
 Proofreader: *Sue Coxhill*  
 Distribution: *Julia Kaplya*

Sources of illustrations (pages are given in brackets):

*Archive photographs of Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh (4-17; 67); Archpriest Michael Dudko (front cover);  
 Protodeacon Dmitry Nedostupenko (21, 105); archive of the Cathedral of Dormition and All Saints (32);  
 St Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary (89-90); various free online resources.  
 Front cover: Central stained glass window behind the altar, the Cathedral of the Mother of God and All Saints, London.*

Address: “Sourozh” Magazine, 67 Ennismore Gardens,  
 London SW7 1NH, Great Britain  
 Email: [editorial@sourozh.org](mailto:editorial@sourozh.org)

To subscribe to the magazine or  
 to order individual issues:  
 Tel. +44 (0)20-7584-0096, Fax: +44 (0)20-7584-9864  
 Email: [distribution@sourozh.org](mailto:distribution@sourozh.org)

---

## Editorial note



**T**his year marks a major anniversary in the history of “Sourozh”. It was thirty years ago, in August 1980, that the first edition of the magazine appeared. The leaders and members of the Russian Church in Great Britain believed it was important to publish a new English-language magazine here which would write about the current status of Orthodoxy in the world, its history and sacred places, its figures and thinkers.

Looking through the issues of “Sourozh” from the past thirty years one never ceases to be amazed that it

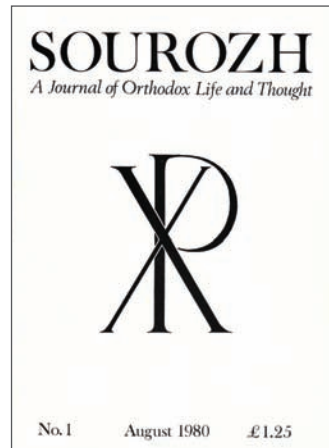
was possible to create an extremely attractive and wide-ranging picture of the life of the Ecumenical Orthodox church using very simple means (usually the editors would borrow articles which they found interesting from other magazines or publish papers from various conferences).

The magazine played a key role in the mission undertaken by Metropolitan Anthony in Great Britain. It helped people to understand that the life of the church extends beyond the parish, the diocese and their established traditions, and that the Orthodox Church is vast and diverse. It reaches out widely over countries and continents, far back over the centuries and ages, and with great depth in the diversity of its thinkers and theological concepts. It is rich in saints, among whose number there are also saints from England, Ireland and other countries which are not Orthodox today but which have an ancient history of an Orthodox presence spanning many centuries.

This approach was greatly appreciated not only among Orthodox believers but also among researchers and theologians who trusted the judgment of the “Sourozh” editors, and of Metropolitan Anthony personally. Among the subscribers to “Sourozh” in those years were famous theological centres, educational establishments and libraries far beyond the country’s shores.

Unfortunately back issues of “Sourozh” are not readily available. We have decided to give today’s “Sourozh” reader the opportunity to take a look back at the past. We believe that the selection of articles chosen for this issue gives a good idea of the life of “Sourozh” over these past decades and of the subjects which were important to the Church.

**Archpriest Michael Dudko**



Cover of the first issue of “Sourozh”. August 1980

# TWO LENTEN RETREAT TALKS

*Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh*

*We print below a slightly edited transcript of two Lenten retreat talks given by Metropolitan Anthony on 20 February 1988 at the Russian Cathedral in Ennismore Gardens, London, SW7 1NH.*

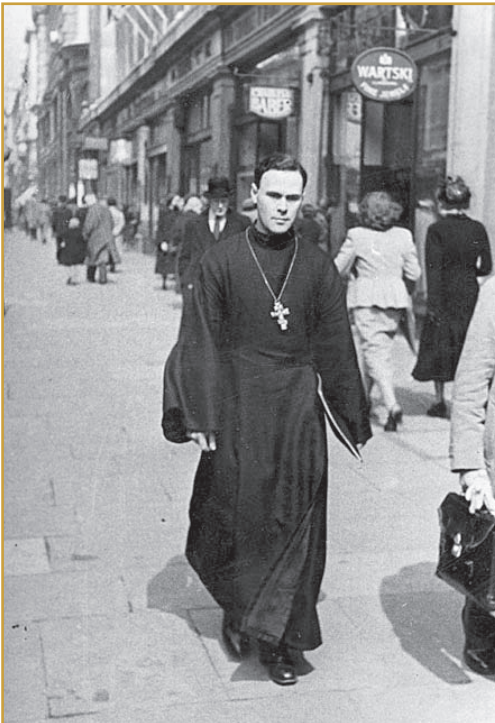
I

**W**E ARE THIS WEEK coming to the beginning of Lent, and all our journey is now towards the Passion of Christ, his Crucifixion and also his Resurrection, his victory. We think very often of the victory of Christ mainly, if not only, in terms of his Resurrection. And yet the victory of God was not won in the Resurrection alone; it was won by his Passion; it was won by his death upon the Cross. I think it is very

important for us to realize the place of the Resurrection as a revelation of the final divine victory which is won through the sacrificial life and death of Christ.

I should like to read, to begin with, a passage from St Mark's Gospel in the tenth Chapter:

*They were in the way of going up to Jerusalem. And Jesus went before them. And they were amazed, and as they followed, they were afraid. And he took again the twelve, and began to tell them what things should happen unto him. He said, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man shall be delivered to the chief priests, and to the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles; And they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him; and the third day he shall rise again. And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him, saying, Master we would that thou shouldst do for us whatsoever we shall desire. And he said to them, What would ye, that I should do for you? They said to him, Grant to us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory. But Jesus said to them, Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? And they said to him, We can. And Jesus said to them, Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized; but to sit on my right hand or on my left hand is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared.*



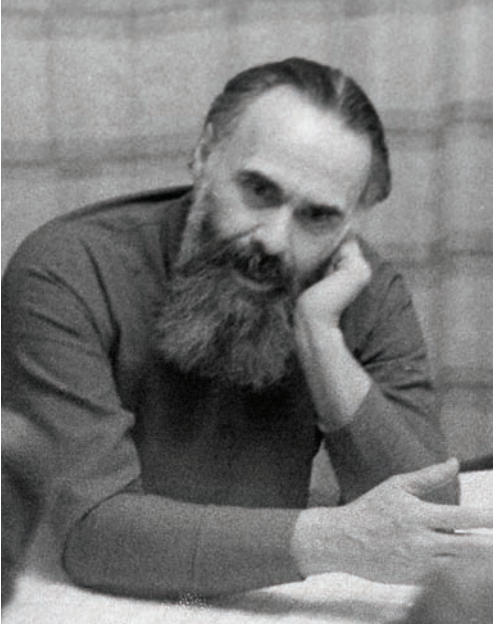
Father Anthony in London. 1948



Some time ago, speaking of our Christian vocation to be in the world in which we live, in this world which is so dark, so frightening, so distorted in all its human relationships – and also because of the way in which the whole cosmos is treated by us – I had a reply that troubled me much. I was told that this story which I have just read applied to people before the Resurrection. We now live in the world where Christ rose; we live in the world which God has conquered, a world of victory; we belong to him who has conquered. What place is there, then, for us on the Cross? And this was a phrase that not only troubled me intellectually – that would be nothing – but hurt me very deeply, as this particular passage of the Gospel hurts me, because doesn't it sound extraordinarily insensitive? The Lord Jesus Christ, hated, rejected by the chief priests, by the Pharisees, by the Scribes, by a multitude of people, had left Jerusalem for a while, and now, as the Passover was coming near, he called his

**Metropolitan Anthony preaching in the Troitse-Sergiyeva Lavra Cathedral of the Assumption. Zagorsk (now Sergiyev Posad), 1968**

disciples to go back, to go back to Jerusalem, which was the place where all opposition to him was concentrated, the place where not only hatred for him was abroad, but where people were present who had power in their hands to destroy him. And they followed in fear, in fear for him whom they loved as a friend, as their teacher, as their hope, but also afraid for themselves – naturally afraid for themselves, because if he was smitten, they would be also destroyed, according to the old saying from the Bible that once the shepherd is smitten, the flock is scattered. What they could expect was more than being scattered. It was to share with him the horror of defeat, the ostracism and the suffering, the physical suffering and the physical death. Christ spoke to them of his Passion. He did not say to them: Fear not, I have conquered and I shall conquer finally, definitively, for ever. He began to tell them of his Passion, of what



Metropolitan Anthony. 1972

was to happen to him and of what would cast a shadow of terror upon them. Remember, after his Crucifixion and his death upon the Cross, all the disciples fled and hid in the house of John Mark. He spoke of his Passion, word after word, adding terror to terror, and he resolved this terror by one phrase that was so short: “Yet on the third day the Son of Man shall rise.” And what did the disciples hear? This is what I find so incredibly painful, because it does not apply only to the twelve or to the two who spoke to Christ. It applies to me. It applies also, if not always, at times, to each of us. The message of the suffering, of the Passion, of the torment, of the dereliction, of the death they heard and forgot. They forgot it because the last word was a word concerning victory, and they felt that if he is victorious they will be safe.

James and John, so perceptive, so deep, as we can see from their Epistles, somehow in a moment forgot every word about the Passion and came to Christ thinking not of his Resurrection, not even rejoicing that death will not hold him a prisoner, that

Hades will not be his eternal home away from God – no, they rejoiced that if he is victorious they will not only be safe, but will share his victory. When you come into your kingdom, having conquered your enemies and overcome death itself, can we sit on your right and on your left in your glory? This corresponds in a very painful way to what I heard which I reported to you, that the time of the passion is over, that we live now in the realm of Resurrection. Isn’t that what the Apostles felt, that death will be a moment, while victory will be eternal? Doesn’t it sound – in a way again that hurts, hurts so much – as though they were saying, implicitly: “Lord, win the victory by your suffering and your death, and let us reap the fruits of it in glory.”

When we look at it this way, I think we can hardly help being hurt, at times horrified at what we hear. But when we think of ourselves, day in, day out, aren’t we very much in the same spirit as James and John at that moment? God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son to be born into it, to live in it, to die not only in it but for it. But has the world changed? Don’t we live in the same distorted, tragic world of twilight? Is hatred dead? Is our alienation from God and from each other gone? Is love abroad? Can we see it grow? Can we see it conquer? We see moments in history and we see short moments in our own life when love suddenly flares up like a beacon, like a light, like a candle, like a spark, shines brightly and illumines a smaller or a bigger space of life. But how often – I was about to say how continuously – it is twilight that lives within our hearts, a twilight in which light fights against darkness! But in this struggle do we always choose the light, or do we choose darkness? Not cold-bloodedly, not in an act which is an apostasy, a rejection of God, an act of hatred for God’s gift, a turning away from him deliberately; but don’t we feel that the dark side in us – resentment for offence received, hatred, envy, jealousy, coldness

of heart – leads to a kind of frightening, monstrous discrimination which allows us to choose people whom we love and people whom we reject – not actively, not in a struggle, for this is still a relationship – but simply by ruling them out of existence? They don't exist in my life. They are not. Whether they exist for God or not is not one of my problems. For me they are more than dead. They are nought.

We think so often, with a sense of horror, of Cain and of Judas. But what did Cain do? Abel was an offence to him. Abel had to go. If there was no Abel then there was no condemnation looking him in the face. If all were darkness then the light would not be there to condemn the darkness. And he killed Abel. Isn't this what we do when we think: if only this person did not exist; if only this person dropped out of my life; if only this person could be forgotten altogether, together with the hurt and the pain and the tragedies of the past! But that is what Cain did! We cannot condemn Cain without realizing that in so many ways he is our brother in humanity and that his sin, which he brought to fruition by killing, is rampant in us – this radical negation of the other. If we only could reduce him to non-existence, then the world would be free, I would be free. No, the world would not be free, and I would not be free. There would be a new darkness, and the little paradise that is budding in the heart and life of each of us, even this little paradise would go, would no longer exist.

There is a novel in French literature in which we are told of a man who spent many years on various islands in the Pacific. There he had learned to love all that God has made, with all his heart, with all his tenderness, all his sense of reverence and worship. He had also learned that love can breed life, that one can sing songs of love to the earth and that the earth is capable of responding and bringing forth beauty and life of tree and of grass and of flower and of fruit. He came back to France and

bought a piece of land that was barren, stony, worthless and he hugged it within his love. He sang God's love for the earth to this piece of land and it began to come to life. It began to produce plants and flowers and trees, and became a sort of garden of Paradise, born of worshipful love. And the animals around felt that it was a place where love had conquered. They came to the place and they began to live without fear of one another, without predatory attacks on each other. They lived as they had lived in Paradise before the fall of man, because there was nothing there except love and worship. Yet one animal remained outside. It was a fox. He did not



Blessing the waters of the Thames. 1960

trust love. He did not believe in the goodwill of the old man, and to begin with, this man felt heartbroken for this animal who could not understand the bliss that would be his if he came and joined in the mystery of Paradise recovered. Then temptation came into him, because as long as the fox was not there, Paradise was incomplete. He tried to beguile him, to call him, to entice him. The fox refused to come. In the end this man thought a thought which was a new thought. If only the fox did not exist, Paradise would be fulfilled. There would be nothing outside of it. And he killed that fox. But when he came back to his plot of land, nothing was

**Metropolitan Anthony with students from the Moscow Theological Academy. Zagorsk (now Sergiyev Posad), 1968**

left of Paradise. The animals had scattered, the plants had withered. It was again a wasteland.

Isn't this what we do so often when we try to create a circumscribed Paradise, a Paradise into which we will allow only those who are our own – those people, those relationships, those things – leaving outside all that is a sign of disharmony, like the fox. By doing this we never achieve this Paradise. Paradise cannot be achieved on earth, but it can at least not be destroyed by an attitude of mind which says, like Cain: If only he, she, they did not exist; if only they could be blotted out of my memory, since they cannot be blotted out of existence. Then the Paradise that could exist within us – you remember the words of Christ that





the Kingdom of God is within us before it is anywhere around us – then this Paradise could be secure. Yet, in a strange way, the moment we wall in this Paradise and try to protect it against invasion or destruction, as we try to protect our gardens against weeds, it ceases to be Paradise.

It is a strange thing that it is only by opening oneself to the invasion that we can be sure of not being destroyed by it. A fort can be taken, a land overrun, but an open heart remains free.

There is a story in Swiss history about the wars between the Swiss, who were trying to possess themselves of their legitimate freedom, and the Austrians who had overpowered them. During a retreat of the Swiss a man took upon himself to defend a narrow passage in the mountains. He stood there, and when the lances came he gathered them with his hands and pressed them against his chest, and he disarmed his enemies by plunging their weapons into his own heart. There is something here which is very much akin to what we see in the lives of so many saints, who open themselves to the wound, who open themselves to what might seem to be destruction and who thereby disarm evil.

I have mentioned not only Cain, but also Judas. We think of Judas with a horror which is perhaps even more concrete than the one we feel about Cain. The story of Cain is an old story, one which happened at the outset of biblical history. Cain seems to us very often – unless you think of it the way I do – so far from us. We don't kill. We have never killed someone whom we want to rule out of our life. Yes, Cain is alien to us, it seems. It is Judas who is more offensive to our feelings, because he betrayed someone whom we proclaim to be our God, our Master, our Guide, someone for whom we have some feeling of reverence, of admiration, of veneration, of awe. I say some feeling, because each of us is different and relates to Christ in a different way. There are moments



**With parishioners of the Cathedral of the Dormition. London, 1981**

when we are overwhelmed by the unutterable beauty and depth of him, and other moments when we are almost insensitive. But still he is real and concrete in a way in which Abel is not to us, and so we are horrified to think that Judas could betray his Master to death.

But I remember my spiritual father saying to me something similar to what I said about Cain. What did he do? What did Judas do in the darkness of the night? He knew where Christ, the Living God and the perfect, true Man was in the darkness of the night. And he took his enemies and brought them to that very place that might have been a place of safety, that was a place of holiness because it was the place where Christ was bringing himself as an offering to God for the whole world. He brought there, to that place, those who wanted to destroy all that was of God, and if possible, God himself.

Isn't this similar to what we do when we destroy in someone's heart and mind his faith, his hope and love, his integrity, his purity, his truth. The heart of each of us is



**Metropolitan Anthony performing the proskomidia (Liturgy of Preparation) in the Church of Saint Nicholas in Khamovniki. Moscow, 1969**

like the garden of the Mount of Olives, at the heart of which God stands ready to die for us to live. And in his presence, in him, can be summed up all beauty, all truth, all purity, all love and hope and faith, and all that is possible. And don't we from time to time intrude into this sanctuary, into this holy place and bring into it devastation?

Then what have we done – perhaps on another scale – but what Judas did in his betrayal?

I am not even mentioning Peter and his threefold denial of Christ. If we only did it three times in our life! But we deny Christ as our Master, as our Saviour, as our God, all the time – all the time when we are unworthy of our own selves, when we are unworthy of the trust and love of others,

when we prove unworthy of God's love and of Christ's death.

So this is what we are confronted with when we consider the passage in the Gospel which I read. James and John thought to themselves: "Yes, he will suffer, he will die, and that will be a short event. But his Resurrection will be definitive. So we can wait until he dies and gather the fruits of his victory." What about us? We know more. We know more than the Apostles knew, because they have spoken to us with an honesty and an understanding which is far greater than ours, and greater than the one they had before the day of the Resurrection and before Pentecost. They have not only told us, they have explained to us; they have made it possible for us to understand what they couldn't understand, to see what they were blind to. Where do we stand, in spite of their testimony?

Christ said to his Apostles: Are you prepared to drink my cup? It is an image which throughout history has meant sharing in another's destiny. People drink from the same cup at the marriage service, because this cup is their common destiny, and they drink it together. Christ said: Are you prepared to share my destiny? Are you prepared to be baptized with my baptism? The Greek word for baptism means merging. Are you prepared to be merged in what will be my ordeal? But again neither James nor John, presumably, could see what this ordeal meant and was. What they could see was the short horror of the Passion and the abiding glory of victory. "Yes, we can," they said. And they did. They did share it, as every Apostle did, with the exception of St John, who died old on Patmos. Everyone else became a martyr, and John was left behind to be a witness, to testify to all that had happened, so that what happened to the others should not be forgotten.

And here we are, Christians. Each of us is being asked: Are you prepared to drink my cup? Are you prepared to be merged into my ordeal? Are you prepared to take life on my

terms? Not on terms which he presses upon us, forces upon us – but if you are my friends, aren't you going to share with me? If you are my people, aren't you going to partake of my destiny? I came into the world to save the world. If you are mine, are you not going to feel, to know, that this is your vocation, that you are – I am using the words of Moffatt's translation – the vanguard of the Kingdom, and that your role is to build the Kingdom on earth, to whatever extent you can? But we can do this within our hopeless frailty only by allowing the grace of God to act within us freely. We are not in this world as lost sheep. We are as Christ's own people sent into this world. He said *to us*: You are the light of the world that dispels darkness; you are the salt of the earth that prevents corruption.

Today, as we enter into this first week of Lent and begin to ascend towards the Passion, I think it is right for us to ask ourselves: Where do I stand? Am I saying to Christ: For you the Cross, for me the glory? Or am I going to say, as a faithful friend, as Thomas said to the other disciples when they were returning to Jerusalem for the raising of Lazarus: Let us go with him and die with him?

## 2

**I**HAVE BEEN LED in the course of the last months to think of the kind of God whom Christianity proclaims and to try to understand what this vision of God, what this God has got about him which is relevant to all nations and to all times. When we read books that belong to the early Church, or to the history of the Church throughout the last two thousand years in the West or the last thousand years, approximately, in Russia, we see that the vision of God has differed. God is infinitely rich and our understanding can be infinitely varied. Every epoch, according to its particular tragedy or glory, sees God with new eyes. When we say that God is contemporary with every epoch, he

is a contemporary of every one of us, and whatever our inner situation may be, singly or collectively. Whatever context is ours, God is relevant.

But the situation of the Slavs a thousand years ago is not so different from our own situation. What makes us akin to one another is the hunger, the hunger that existed in the early days preceding Russian Christianity among our Slav people for a God that was vast enough for man, deep enough to satiate the desperate hunger of a human soul, that was great enough to be our God and yet close enough not to be an object of terror.

When we think of our days, be it in Soviet Russia, in other communist-controlled countries, or indeed in our midst, when we think of the many people who are longing desperately for plenitude, for fulfillment, who try, or wish to reach a stature and an experience which could fill them to the brim, we find the same hunger for a God who is great enough for man and for a God who is close enough not to be an object of terror, a God that makes sense in the context of history.

All this may sound very theoretical. Yet when we think, each of us about ourselves, isn't it this kind of God we long to possess? There were epochs when God appeared to us and to our ancestors, so great, so awe inspiring, and yet so powerful and distant. And there were epochs very close to our time when he appeared to be so irrelevant, because one could see no power of his manifested in history. One could not see him at work, working miracles, working salvation, bringing to those who long for him that which could fill their souls and make sense of their longing, of the pain of their life, of their agonies of mind.

These are the two extremes, perhaps, but between these two visions there is the complexity of the richness and the unutterable simplicity of God. I would like to think together with you, not about God as I perceive him, but about God as many do



With Metropolitan Nikolai (Eremin). London, 1964



During the visit of the Patriarch Alexy I to the Cathedral of the Dormition of the Mother of God and All Saints. Archbishop Anthony second from the left. London, 1964

perceive him, a God who makes sense. I have said a certain number of things so often that I must apologize for repeating them. But they still remain true even when repeated.

When the first messengers of the Slavs came to Constantinople, what they perceived was a presence – a presence that was overwhelming, a presence that brought them down to their knees, but at the same time a presence that was an inspiration and what they called a vision of beauty.

A modern writer of the 19th century has said that when beauty reaches a certain

dimension, it is terrifying or awe-inspiring. Perhaps this is why the early Slavs spoke of beauty, because for them the sense of the divine presence was overwhelming; it filled them with awe and yet freed them from the terrors of life, from the fear of pagan gods, and from the more essential fear of their own unquenchable thirst, from the hopelessness of the search for a God who is not vast enough for men.

The word God means one before whom one prostrates in adoration. Adoration implies a sense of the greatness of him before whom one bows, but at the same time the joy and the tenderness that unites the two. This is at the root of our experience of God. How can that be? What is there in God which simultaneously is so great and so close to us?

It seems to me that when we speak of God as seen by us in the Christian Church, we are speaking of a God who is love, a love which is beyond our own experience, but the hem of which we may touch from time to time when we are filled by the ecstasy of love with regard to one or another person. I am not thinking in romantic terms. I am thinking of ecstasy in its real sense: a condition in which we are beyond and above ourselves, where we can forget ourselves in the vision of something so important to us, so beautiful, that we cannot remember ourselves because all our being is riveted to the vision.

One could adduce here the words of the Gospel of St John: “And the Word was with God”. But the Word was God-wards. The Word was moving, looking, living towards the Father. When Christ says: If you want to follow me, forget yourself, renounce yourself, he does not speak in moral terms only, in terms of action or behaviour. He says: Forget yourself. Turn your gaze away from self and look beyond you. And beyond you you will see the Living God, who is Life, who is Beauty, who is all the intensity of Being. To use the words of the Old and the New Testament, “the One who is”; without any

adjective, without any further qualifying clause. He is. Christ uses these very words about himself in St John's Gospel: "I am he who is." And in the Orthodox Vigil service, at the end, we say: Blessed is he who is, even Christ, Christ himself, our true God.

So he is the one who is plenitude of being without restraint, without limits. Yet within this very plenitude of being there is a mystery – I have no better word than a mystery of self-denial, of renunciation of selfness. When we say that God the Father gives birth to the Son and calls out the Holy Spirit, it is already an image of the renunciation of selfness. He has renounced to be alone, to be self-contained, to be fullness in himself, unshared. He gives existence being.

Then when we think of internal relationships within the Holy Trinity we are confronted with the same mystery: the relationship of three, in which at every moment, in a timeless round – as the Greek say, in a timeless 'dance' – every two persons of the Trinity in an ecstasy of love are at one, and the third one worshipfully renounces to intrude and accepts not to be. The Cross is present in the very mystery of the Trinity. It is not in vain that at the beginning of the evening service, when the priest proclaims: "Glory be to the holy, consubstantial, life-giving and undivided Trinity", each word marks the end of one of the arms of

**With parishioners of the Church of Saint Nicholas in Khamovniki. Moscow, 1969**





With Elizabeth Briere and Archpriest (at that time Deacon) Maxim Nikolsky. 1986



The first summer youth camp. Wales, 1961

the Cross. He describes the Cross in the proclamation of the Living God, because the Living God is love, and love is ultimate renunciation of self.

Then again this God creates the world. He does not force it into existence by an act of power. He calls it into being in an act of love. He calls it into being to give himself to it unreservedly, renouncing himself again in a new way. He delivers himself by the gift of freedom which allows us to reject him, to act with regard to the Living God as Cain acted with regard to Abel. He renounces

himself and gives himself to us helpless and defenceless and ultimately vulnerable.

This is the God whom we have, a God who is plenitude, who lacks nothing, who needs nothing, and yet who, being love, gives himself both in the depth of the divine mystery, renouncing all selfness, and in relation to the created world presents himself to this world as an offering – an offering of which man can make a blood-offering, because in the Incarnation God reveals to us what his love is in the form of the Babe of Bethlehem. Love is frail, love is defenceless, love is vulnerable, love is given. And this is what we see in the Babe of Bethlehem. In an incarnate, tangible, visible form we see what divine love is. At the same time we see in the Babe of Bethlehem what human love should be, is called to be, if it is to be worthy of being called by the same word which is the name of God. Can we comprehend this? Do we realize that we use the same word, and that this word, in our many, varied human relationships, is a spark of the divine, and that if we believe in the word, we must learn to grow to that measure which is God, the God of love and the love of God? This God, in the world in which we live, is to me meaningful and relevant.

In Christ we see a God who has no power. Of course, he has power over evil, but he has no power over men. He addresses himself to us, speaks words of truth, words of life. He lives and enacts divine love and human love, and if we are not convinced in our hearts that what we see, what we hear, what reaches us is the Word and the Person of Christ, he has no means of forcing the truth and the life and the love into our lives.

You may remember the passage in the Gospel in which we are told that after Christ had spoken many of the hearers turned from him and went away. And Christ, turning to his disciples, says: Will you also go away from me? Peter, speaking in the name of the others, says: Where should we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.

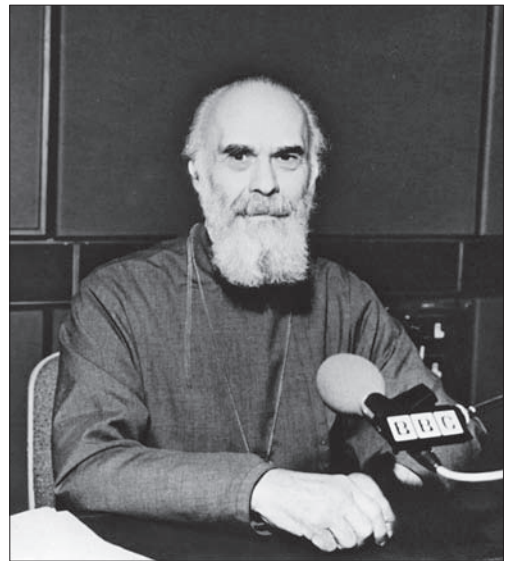
What are these words of eternal life? Christ did not describe eternal life. He did not speak of it in any particular way. As it seems to me, what Peter was saying is this: When you speak, a dimension which is eternity unfolds within us. Your words are life eternal communicating itself to us, if only we receive it. If we only receive it!

A God of power has no meaning for us any more. We have seen the man of power throughout history. We have seen man show incredible power within the last seventy or eighty years in all the world, and we have seen that power does not effect anything. It does not bring happiness, it does not bring about a city of man that could be coextensive to the city of God. It brings ruin. When we think of the man of power of whom the Scriptures speak, Antichrist, we see how barren power can be. God is not a God of power. He is a God of love, a God of self-denial, not in the sense that he commands us or calls us to self-denial. He renounces himself in the very mystery of the Trinity, in the very mystery of creation, in the mystery of the Incarnation. Throughout history and throughout our individual lives he renounces himself. St Paul says that he took the form of a servant. He speaks to us in the Gospel and says: Those of you who want to be free, let them be the slaves of others. That is what God is, not only in Christ, but in every motion of his, from the creation to the end of the world: our Servant. This very God who reveals himself as a servant, at times as a slave, certainly as a victim of whom mankind has made a blood-offering, this self-same God speaks to us about ourselves and says: Realize your greatness. Realize your greatness; for nothing less than greatness is your measure. You find this in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Having rejected his father and spent all the riches which the father had given him, he falls on days of misery and then comes to his senses. On his way back home he prepares a confession: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against thee; I am

no longer worthy to be called thy son. Accept me as one of thy hirelings.

I have more than once drawn the attention of some of you to the fact that the father does not allow his son to say the last part of his confession. He allows him to recognize himself as unworthy of being called a son, but he does not allow him to make this sacrilegious attempt at being nothing but a hireling, a good hireling instead of an unworthy son, because God does not readjust his relationships with us. To him we are his sons and his daughters, we are all his children. When Christ in the beginning of the Lord's Prayer says: "Our Father", he does not simply tell us not to forget that we are a brotherhood of man. He spoke these words, and this "Our Father" means that the God to whom we turn is his and ours. We are brothers of the Son of God, sisters of the Son of God, in the Only-begotten Son of God, by vocation the Son of God, as St Irenaeus puts it.

Yes, and then there is a final vision of the greatness of man, not only as a promised vocation or as a call, but as a vision. In Christ the fulness of God abides in the flesh.



In a BBC studio. London, 1993

If it is true that once in history the fulness of God could abide in a human person it means that man, the human being, is so great, so deep, so fast as to be able to contain the divine, while he is contained by the divine. We cannot imagine it. Images have been given, analogies have been offered, but here there is neither analogy nor image. It is historical fact: the living God, true God, very God, has become true man, very man, and revealed to us that, short of being what Christ was, at one with God, pervaded in flesh and soul with divinity, we are not truly human. This is the measure of the greatness of man. This is why Christ teaches us that there is nothing in the world that is more important than a person. There is no notion of collectivity in the Gospel. There are persons of absolute value who unite together in the struggle to reach their full and true, their only true stature.

In the world in which we live this also is relevant, because the person is being replaced by communities that are collections of individuals, instead of being a harmony of people in the image of God, One in Trinity. We are the only ones to proclaim the ultimate and absolute meaning and importance of every person. Lately I was so struck by this that I mentioned it in a sermon when I spoke of the story of the healing of the mad man in the land of Gadarenes: the whole cosmos, the whole of humanity, all the becoming, tragic and glorious, of the world, is, as it were, forgotten in a contest between God and Satan over one human being, his sanity, his earthly destiny, eventually his eternal destiny. The whole world could stand hushed in silence and amazement. Insignificant in the eyes of all the people around, this man had an ultimate importance to God.

This is what each of us is to God. It is because God is what I tried to convey to you that this is possible. Yes, he is the Holy One of Israel. He is the unapproachable, unsearchable God. He is what St Gregory of

Nyssa calls the divine darkness, explaining that it is not God who is dark, but that we, when we look at him, are blinded by a light that our eyes cannot endure. He is all that. But at the same time he is to us the Servant, the closest and the humblest of all; and this he is not only functionally, but in his very essence: a God who is responsible for his actions and takes all the consequences of them. He has created us in an act of love in which we cannot even believe when life turns hard and cruel. Yet he believes in life. He has a certainty that he can place his trust in us, that through all the meanderings of history and the hesitations and vacillations of our will, we will one day bow down before him and say: Lord, it is you alone for whom I have been searching.

When he gives us the freedom to love and to hate, the freedom to choose for him or against him, the freedom to become truly human in the image of Christ or totally in- or sub-human, he does not simply give us this freedom without which no love relationship is possible, but he also takes all the consequences of his creative act and his gift. He becomes one of us. He renounces the plenitude of freedom which is his, to become a prisoner of a human flesh, a prisoner of a human nature, a prisoner of a political and human situation and – what is more tragic – a prisoner of a world which he created as beauty and harmony, but which we have made into something dark and monstrous, an instrument of torture. He bears the consequences of this because of what we call his love, which is not sentimental tenderness – although it is tenderness and deep feeling and compassion – for it is first and foremost renunciation of self for our sakes.

In the world in which we live we must be Christians on Christ's own terms. Christ stands in the midst of this mystery of sacrificial love, and so it is not a matter of forcing ourselves into submissive obedience to his commandments. It is a matter of





understanding what God we have, what mankind is, and what is our privilege and our vocation.

Let us ask ourselves, then, with regard to this vision of God, with regard to this vision of man: who am I, and what is it that in my concrete situation I can or should do and be in order to be faithful to my vocation? ■

**Metropolitan Anthony during the liturgy in the Cathedral of Three Hierarchs. Paris, 1968**

*Sourozh 35, February 1989*

# Orthodoxy in Britain: Its Origins and Future

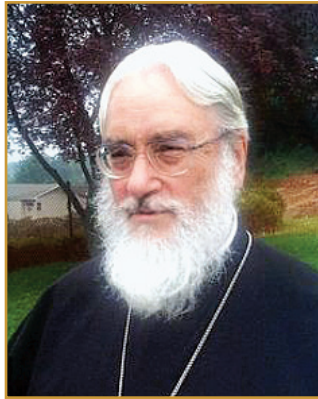
*Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia*

*The above article, 'Orthodoxy in Britain: Its Origins and Future', originally written in 1989, has been reprinted without any alterations; twenty years later, I continue to hold the same views that I express in it. But it may be helpful to record briefly a few of the main changes that have happened to Orthodoxy in the British Isles during the past two decades.*

## NOT YET OLD

“Too late have I come to love you, beauty both so old and new, too late have I come to love you”, exclaims St Augustine of Hippo in an invocation to God not far from the end of his *Confessions*. Orthodoxy in the British Isles is also in its own way both old and new. Its newness will be evident at once to anyone who compares this Directory, the third to be issued by the Orthodox Fellowship of St John the Baptist, with the Year Book published in 1962 by the Orthodox Youth Association of Great Britain and Ireland. The 1962 Year Book listed 29 Orthodox places of worship, five Bishops, 37 priests and eight deacons. A quarter of a century later, the 1988/89 Directory lists in its statistical section (a new feature) 143 places of worship, twelve bishops, 116 priests and 22 deacons. This indicates how very recent in origin is the great majority of the Orthodox parishes in this country. Eighty per cent of them have existed for less than twenty-five years. Compared with other Christian bodies in this land, the Orthodox Church is indeed a new presence.

Yet Orthodoxy in Britain is old as well as new. The existing Greek and Russian communities in London have a ‘prehistory’ extending back to the 17th and early 18th



Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia

centuries. Nor is this all. British Orthodoxy also has roots in this land that are much more ancient. We Orthodox living in Britain today should never forget that the British Isles were converted to Christianity at a time when there was no schism between East and West. Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England were once as much an integral part of the Orthodox world

as Greece, Russia, Serbia and Cyprus have been in recent centuries. We have behind us a thousand years of Orthodoxy on British soil. We are not here as strangers or newcomers. We have as British Orthodox our own local Orthodox saints, our own specific places of pilgrimage. It would be good for us if we knew them better.

I remember how, when I was visiting Greece as a layman, a Greek once said to me, “You must have found it very hard to leave the Church of your fathers.” But another Greek who overheard this interjected, “He has not left the Church of his fathers; he has returned to it.”

## PREHISTORY

The story of Orthodoxy in the British Isles since the schism falls into four chapters: first, the period of ‘prehistory’ during the 17th and 18th centuries; second, the beginnings

of organized parish life, from the early 19th century until the end of the Second World War; third, the era of major expansion from 1945 to 1970; and fourth, the time of transition from 1970 onwards. The fact that the stage of ‘beginnings’ extends as late as 1945 underlines very clearly the newness of our Orthodox church life in Britain.

In the early 17th century, at the stage of ‘prehistory’, isolated Greeks begin to appear in different parts of England. Theodore Palaeologus, a descendant of the Byzantine imperial house who died in 1636, lies buried in the churchyard of Landulph in Cornwall. During the reigns of James I and Charles I Oxford harboured several Greeks, such as Christopher Angelos or Angell, author of the earliest account of the Greek Church written for English readers, and also a future Patriarch of Alexandria, Metrophanes Kritopoulos. Another Greek at Oxford from 1637 to 1648, Nathaniel Canopius, exercised an influence on our national life more decisive than any other Orthodox has so far done up to the present, for he is credited with introducing coffee-drinking into England. What, one wonders, did these Greeks do about Holy Communion? Kritopoulos and Canopius were both priests, but I know of no evidence to suggest that they celebrated the Orthodox Liturgy while at Oxford. More probably they and Angell simply ‘conformed’, attending the Anglican services in their college chapels. Later in the 17th century, from 1694 to 1704, there was even an attempt to establish a ‘Greek College’ at Oxford, but the scheme was over-ambitious and came to nothing.

The first Orthodox Church to be opened in London was established in 1677 by the exiled Greek Archbishop of Samos, Joseph Georgirenes, in the then fashionable district of Soho. Its memory is still preserved in the name ‘Greek Street’. It proved short-lived, and was closed around 1682. The Bishop of London, Henry Compton, was unsympathetic to Orthodox practices: considering that the

Greek church in Soho came under his own episcopal jurisdiction, he demanded of its clergy that they should use no icons and should refrain from invoking the Mother of God and the saints in their services. But the next Orthodox place of worship opened in London, the Russian embassy chapel, founded around 1721, enjoyed diplomatic immunity and so was free from interference by the Bishop of London. For more than a century this was the only Orthodox church in Britain, and Greek clergy as well as Russian served there on a regular basis.

Two unexpected Orthodox contacts occurred later in the 18th century. Orthodoxy was involved in the origins of Methodism. In 1763 John Wesley, unable to find any Anglican bishop willing to ordain his preachers, somewhat surprisingly invited an exiled Greek bishop living in Amsterdam, known as Erasmus or Gerasimos, to perform an ordination for him. Yet more surprisingly, Erasmus agreed to come and do this. It is possible that Wesley was duped by an impostor, but on the whole this seems unlikely. Three decades later, in 1791, Frederick North, a young member of the English aristocracy, the son of a former prime minister, was received into the Orthodox Church in Corfu. Later he was elected Member of Parliament for Banbury, and up to the present time, so far as I know, he remains the only Orthodox to have sat in the House of Commons. (The late Gerald Palmer, translator of the *Philokalia*, who died in 1984, was Member of Parliament for Winchester from 1935 to 1945, but this was before he had joined the Orthodox Church.) North, who afterwards became Governor-General of Ceylon and fifth Earl of Guildford, kept his Orthodoxy secret, but remained faithful to it until the end of his life. In the registers of the Russian embassy chapel preserved in the Public Record Office, the Chaplain Fr Yakov Smirnov records that he visited North on 13 October 1827, to give him communion on his death-bed.

**THE BEGINNINGS OF PARISH LIFE**

The second chapter of the story, the beginnings of organised parish life, starts with the arrival of Greek refugees in the years following 1821. Fleeing from Turkish reprisals during the Greek War of Independence, they came especially from the island of Chios. In the later 19th century they had grown into a wealthy community, mainly of shipowners, but they were never large in number. Some of them intermarried with the English upper classes and became Anglicans. A Greek church was opened in the City in 1838; services at the present Greek Cathedral of St Sophia in Bayswater began in 1879. Meanwhile in 1843 a Greek church was established in Manchester (the present building dates from 1861), while further churches were opened at Liverpool in 1870 and at Cardiff on the eve of the First World War. Between the two World Wars, however, no further Greek parish was established, and so the total number of churches up to the late 1940s was no more than four. The first Orthodox hierarch to reside permanently in this country was Metropolitan Germanos of Thyateira; appointed in 1922, he remained in office until his death in 1951.

On the Russian side, there was a modest increase in numbers following the 1917 Revolution, but the bulk of the Russian *émigrés* went to Paris or Berlin rather than London. After the closure of the embassy chapel, the Anglicans in 1921 put St Philip's Church, Buckingham Palace Road, at the disposal of the Russian community. In 1926 the Russian parish split between the 'Evlogy' and the 'Karlovtsy' jurisdictions, but both groups continued to share the same church, each using it on alternative Sundays, an arrangement that continued until St Philip's was demolished in 1956. The 'Evlogy' parish passed under the Moscow Patriarchate in 1945. Up to the Second World War, then, the Russians were limited to a single church in London, and did not build up any parish network outside the capital.

**EXPANSION, CONSOLIDATION, TRANSITION**

The real time of Orthodox expansion came only in the third period, 1945-70. There were two major developments in the post-war years. There was first a wave of Orthodox immigrants from Eastern Europe, far larger than that which followed the 1917 Revolution, and not limited to Russians but including Serbs, Ukrainians, Byelorussians and Poles. Within a few years Slav parishes had been founded across the Midlands in most of the major industrial towns. Secondly, from the late 1940s onwards there was also a major influx of Greeks from Cyprus. A second Greek parish in London, serving mainly the Cypriots, was opened in Camden Town in 1947. By the early sixties there were eleven Greek parishes in Britain, four of them in London, but these were altogether insufficient to meet the pastoral needs of a Greek community that now numbered about 150-200,000. Large-scale parochial development only began with the arrival of Metropolitan (later Archbishop) Athenagoras II of Thyateira in 1964.

Within six years the eleven parishes had increased five-fold to more than fifty, and at the same time a fundamental diocesan reorganization was taken in hand, involving the establishment of a proper central office, the publication of a magazine, the holding of clergy-laity conferences, and a regular programme of charitable and youth work.

What of the present, from 1970 onwards? In the Greek Archdiocese expansion has continued, but at a more moderate pace. The most striking rate of growth has been in the Russian Patriarchal Diocese of Sourozh. Whereas it listed only a single parish outside London in the 1962 Year Book, it now has over twenty eucharistic centres in different parts of the country, although some of these are quite small in size. The period since 1970 may be characterized above all as a time of transition. A new generation of



Orthodox born and educated in this country, usually speaking nothing but English, has been growing up alongside the original immigrants: We are ceasing to be a Church of foreigners, a Church of the ‘Diaspora’, and we are developing into a local Church with firm cultural roots in this land. The process of transition has progressed furthest in the Russian Patriarchal Diocese, finding articulate expression at the annual diocesan conferences held in Effingham since 1974 under Metropolitan Anthony. The transition is less far advanced in the Greek and Serbian parishes, yet here too the same factors are plainly at work.

The transition, as we all know, poses urgent pastoral problems. The immigrant Orthodox, whether or not they are active in supporting their Church, will never cease – save in rare cases – to look on themselves as Orthodox. But what of their children? All Christian bodies in Britain are losing their young people at an alarming rate; but the sharp cultural shift from immigrant parents to children born and brought up in this country makes us Orthodox particularly vulnerable to the loss of our youth. It is certainly possible that during the next few decades we shall see Orthodoxy in Britain shrink rather than expand. There are many

**Pan-Orthodox Vespers in the Serbian Orthodox church of St Sava in London. 2010**

different lines of approach to the problem – more literature and church teaching for our children, more youth camps, more English at services – but there is no simple solution. Above all, in the Greek Archdiocese there is a need to find future priests among the members of the new generation in Britain, instead of importing almost all of them ‘ready-made’ from Greece or Cyprus. One priority for British Orthodoxy in the immediate future is surely to provide a more effective programme for training clergy in this country.

The number of converts to Orthodoxy in Britain remains restricted. About twenty per cent of the clergy listed in this Directory are people who have joined the Orthodox Church as adults, but the proportion of converts among the laity is very much smaller – perhaps less than one per cent of the total number of Orthodox in this land. Yet the converts, with their varied gifts and their roots in the local cultures, may have a role to play in the present time of transition out of all proportion to their numbers.

Among the converts and within the new generation of Orthodox born and brought up

in this country, there is a deep desire for fuller Orthodox unity. We value the distinctive riches that we have received and continue to receive from the various Orthodox national traditions – Greek, Arab, Russian, Serbian, Romanian – and we have no desire to see this life-giving diversity extinguished. But we long also for more effective inter-Orthodox co-operation. Such precisely is the task to which the Fellowship of St John the Baptist is dedicated.

The process of transition is far from complete. It may well be that in the next twenty-five years the outward form of Orthodoxy in the British Isles will be changed in ways that none of us can foresee. ■

*Sourozh 42, November 1990*

\*\*\*

### ADDITIONAL NOTE (2010)

**1. STATISTICS.** Here are the current figures, based on the 2010 Directory produced by the Orthodox Fellowship of Saint John the Baptist. For comparison, I give in brackets the 1988/89 numbers (note that the figures are for the British Isles: for instance for Ireland as well as Great Britain). There has been a continuing increase: we have almost doubled in size in the last twenty years.

**Places of worship:** 245 (143) (in many of these places the Liturgy is not celebrated on every Sunday but only occasionally)

**Bishops:** 14 (12) (this figure includes all bishops having pastoral responsibility in the British Isles; only 7 of them are actually resident here)

**Priests:** 207 (116)

**Deacons:** 39 (22)

As regards immigration, the last major wave of Greek Cypriots was in 1974, following the Turkish invasion, and since then there has been no major influx. With the acceptance of Greece as a full member of the EEC in 1981, the number of Greek citizens working in Britain has certainly

grown, but most of them have only come here on a temporary basis. The greatest increase in numbers has come with immigrants from the former Soviet Union and from Romania, following the collapse of Communism in 1988/89. This is reflected in the striking expansion of the Romanian presence in the British Isles: in 1989 there was only one Romanian parish, while in 2010 there are 22 Romanian places of worship; but many of them do not yet have a resident priest.

Alongside the Romanians, the most notable increase has been in the Antiochian presence in the British Isles. In 1989 there was only one Antiochian parish, formed of immigrants from Syria and Lebanon, while in 2010 there are 24 Antiochian places of worship. However, almost all of these are largely formed, not of immigrants from the Near East, but of former Anglicans who left the Church of England because of the 1993 decision to ordain women priests.

**2. NEWCOMERS.** In addition to the Orthodox groups already established in 1989, we now have two new ‘ecclesial families’ (as far as we can, let us avoid the word ‘jurisdictions’). First, the Patriarchate of Georgia has a parish in London, under a resident bishop. Second, following a division in the Diocese of Sourozh, there is now a deanery belonging to the Archdiocese of Orthodox Parishes of Russian Tradition in Western Europe (Ecumenical Patriarchate). This consists of about half of the clergy and parishes of the Diocese of Sourozh, as it existed under the late Metropolitan Anthony; the other half has remained with the Moscow Patriarchate, which is also in the process of founding several new parishes in the British Isles.

**3. CONVERTS.** In my article, I reckoned that in 1989 almost twenty per cent of the Orthodox clergy in the British Isles were persons who had joined the Church as adults. Today, judging from the 2010 Directory, the

proportion is considerably higher: perhaps around 36 per cent. This is surely a surprising figure. Three of the 14 bishops are converts, and so are about 90 of the 246 other clergy. My 1989 estimate that no more than one per cent of the Orthodox laity are converts is, so far as 2010 is concerned, almost certainly too low.

**4. TRAINING OF CLERGY.** I express concern in my article about the need to provide a more effective programme in this country for training clergy. Twenty years later, this remains a major desideratum: we still have no Orthodox seminary in Britain. But obliquely, if not directly, important progress has been made. In 1999 the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies (IOCS) was opened in Cambridge, with the blessing of the Orthodox bishops who have pastoral responsibility in Britain. This is pan-Orthodox in character, and the teaching is given in English. It maintains a varied programme. It has usually about 5-6 full-time students, studying for the MA in Pastoral Theology awarded by Anglia Ruskin University. It has a larger group studying for the part-time Certificate (2 years) and Diploma (a further 2 years): this requires attendance for lectures in Cambridge on one weekend in each month, and also participation in the 5-day summer school. Recently IOCS has launched a Distance Learning programme. It has also developed a basic presentation of the Orthodox faith, entitled ‘The Way’, that has been successfully introduced in a number of parishes. While IOCS does not claim to be a centre specifically for training clergy, many future priests – and some already ordained – have benefitted from its courses. The establishment of IOCS is certainly one of the most positive developments in British Orthodoxy during the last twenty years.

**5. ORTHODOX UNITY.** In my article, I note the “deep desire for fuller Orthodox unity” felt by many clergy and laity in this

country. Here too there have been positive developments. Following the decision of the Fourth Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference, held at Chambésy (Switzerland) from 6-13 June 2009, the ‘Pan-Orthodox Assembly of Bishops with Churches in the United Kingdom’ has been set up. In many parts of the Orthodox world, similar pan-Orthodox episcopal committees have existed for many years: in the United States, for example, there is the ‘Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas’ (SCOBA), founded in 1960, while in France since 1967 there has been an Interepiscopal Committee, now known as the ‘Assembly of Orthodox Bishops of France’. But we in Britain have until now had no such body. Decisive steps have recently been taken to remedy this omission. On 21 January 2010, a preliminary meeting was held in London, and the first full gathering of our British ‘Pan-Orthodox Assembly’ is to be convened on 21 June 2010. We should all pray for the success of this new venture, which has the potential to bring great blessings for our future work as Orthodox Christians in Britain.

**6. OUR HOPES FOR THE FUTURE.**

What is our ultimate hope for Orthodoxy in the British Isles? Surely it must be the establishment, with the blessing of all our Mother Churches, of a single local Orthodox Church in this land. (Whether this Church is ‘autocephalous’ or ‘autonomous’ is a minor point.) We are still a long way from that. What in my article I term the “process of transition” – transition, that is, from a Church of immigrants to a Church with firm local roots – is far from complete. But, by God’s grace and mercy, we have made a significant advance in the last two decades. ■

# Saint Ephrem the Syrian: A Voice for Our Times?

*Abraham Attrep*

*The tradition of the Orthodox Church is much broader than is usually thought to be the case, and in particular has deep roots in the Aramaic and Syriac speaking peoples of the Middle East. Most of the Christians in this area now speak Arabic in everyday life, but Syriac is still used by some liturgically. In this article Professor Attrep examines some aspects of the thought and poetry of the greatest poet of the Mesopotamian Church, Ephrem the Syrian.*

In 306 AD<sup>1</sup>, the same year that Constantine, the first Roman Emperor to embrace Christianity, began his ascent to power as his father's legions acclaimed him in England, there was born on the opposite end of the empire, in the city of Nisibis, a son to Christian parents. When the son reached young adulthood, he began his full life in the Church, receiving the sacrament of baptism and being chrismated with the ancient Hebrew name, Ephrem. As he advanced to the age of choosing his life work, Ephrem became a deacon, one who serves; and throughout his life, he never aspired for a higher office. Early in his life, Constantine chose the imperial purple for his lot. His struggle for power spanned the years, 306-324 AD, during which he advanced from strength to strength for control of the empire. From 324-337 AD, he ruled as an autocrat who championed the Christian Faith, and



Abraham Attrep

was received into the Church by baptism just before he died. The Church has honoured both: Constantine, the Equal of the Apostles; Ephrem, the Harp of the Spirit.

Like a number of monumental religious leaders, far more is known about the writings of Saint Ephrem the Syrian than is known about the life of this deacon who found his greatest opportunity to serve as a poet. In fact, according to Sidney H. Griffith, an eminent scholar of Aramaic and Ephrem, the one date associated with the life of the saint which is beyond dispute is the date of his death, 9 June 373<sup>2</sup>. After the judicious scholarly discussions have been presented<sup>3</sup>, a number of salient points emerge concerning this personality whose stature in academic circles seems to increase year by year<sup>4</sup>.

Ephrem lived in decisive and turbulent times. His home city, Nisibis, was on the

<sup>1</sup> Sebastian Brock states as authoritatively as he can, without making a declarative statement, that the year of Ephrem's birth was 306 AD: "He (Ephrem) must have been born about 306, in the region of Nisibis..." Sebastian Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit. Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem* (2nd enlarged edition), *Studies Supplementary to Sobornost*, No. 4 (London, Fellowship of Saint Alban and Saint Sergius 1983), p.7.

<sup>2</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, "Faith Seeking Understanding" in the Thought of Saint Ephraem the Syrian; in *Faith Seeking Understanding: Learning and the Catholic Tradition. Selected papers from the Symposium and Convocation celebrating the Saint Anselm College Centennial*, ed. George C. Berthold (Manchester, New Hampshire: Saint Anselm College Press 1991), p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Murray, S.J., "The Theory of Symbolism in Saint Ephraem's Theology", *Parole de l'Orient* (Kaslik, Liban: Université Saint-Esprit 1970), pp. 1-20.

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately Griffith, in his article, "Faith Seeking Understanding" in the Thought of Saint Ephrem the Syrian, refers to two articles which he has written but which have not yet been published. See footnotes 5 and 12, p. 53.



eastern fringe of the Roman Empire, under the menace of the Persians. As a deacon, the first bishop whom he served was Jacob, who had participated in the Council of Nicaea. In the years following the episcopate of Jacob, the Persians stormed against Nisibis three times; and three times they were repelled. Ever-anxious about the eastern flank of the Empire, Julian the Apostate led his legions against the Persians, only to be crushed and humiliated. His successor, Jovian, had to negotiate a demeaning peace with Shapur II, who styled himself 'King of kings', an august title whose origins can be traced back to Hammurabi. Among the territories Jovian had to concede was Nisibis. Rather than falling under the domination of the Zoroastrian arch-enemy of Rome, many Christians of Nisibis fled. Among them was Ephrem. He became a resident of Edessa, and in this city, where he could continue to live as a Roman citizen, Ephrem pursued his ministry as a deacon, serving the bishop and writing poems, sermons, and hymns<sup>5</sup>. How voluminous were his writings! According to the fifth century Church historian, Sozomen, possibly as many as 300,000 verses flowed from Ephrem's pen and mind and heart<sup>6</sup>. These multitudinous verses constitute hymns and poems on Paradise, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, the fasts of the Church, the virtues and on the ministry. Their volume is equalled by their richness of thought and expression. Sozomen pays a supreme compliment to the vitality and power of Ephrem's works, claiming that even when they are translated, they are as

moving in the second language as they first appeared in the original tongue<sup>7</sup>. It is to the prowess of his poetry that we now turn.

\*\*\*

Most Eastern Orthodox Christians know Saint Ephrem the Syrian through his Lenten Prayer. It is a spiritual gem. Very short, very much to the point and yet lyrical, this petition is a restatement of the Law of Christ within the context of the Beatitudes:

*Lord and Master of my life, grant me not  
a spirit of slothfulness, meddling, ambition  
and vain talk.*

*Bestow upon me, your servant, the spirit of  
chastity, humility, patience and love.*

*Yes, Lord and King, grant that I may see  
my own sins, and not judge my brother, for you  
are blessed to the ages of ages. Amen<sup>8</sup>*

Today, more and more scholars in the West are happily encountering the thought of the 4th century saint<sup>9</sup>. The Syrian Church Father draws from such immense wellsprings of substance and inspiration. He writes in Syriac, a form of Aramaic, the language Christ spoke; some aspects of his poetical structure are rooted in Sumerian paradigms<sup>10</sup>. Jewish forms and motifs are found everywhere in his poems and hymns; metaphors, similes, themes and personalities from the Old Testament and the New Testament flow into his writings as naturally as drops of rain form into little streams. Though the hymnographer is not from Arabia, the love of words in simple and complex poetry is a vibrant force of his life

<sup>5</sup> *Saint Ephraim the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise*, Introduction and translation by Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, New York: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press 1990), pp. 8-25.

<sup>6</sup> Sozomen, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 11.1, 16, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans 1983), Second Series, II, p. 295.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Charles Joanides, "Saint Ephraim's Prayer", *Orthodox Observer*, February 21, 1990. The centrality of the Lenten prayer to all of Ephrem's works is strikingly manifest in that Brock begins his study of the saint with this very prayer, *Hymns on Paradise*, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> It was just around the 1960s that high quality translations of Ephrem's works appeared in the West through the research of the Benedictine scholar, Edmund Beck. Cf. Brock, *Hymns on Paradise*, p. 1. For the names of other prominent scholars engaged in the study of this Church Father, see Murray, "The Theory of Symbolism," *Parole de l'Orient*, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> See especially Nisibene Hymns, 52, in Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit* pp. 70-72.



Saint Ephrem the Syrian

and work<sup>11</sup>. His primary sources are Nature and Scripture. And whereas Ephrem is the friend of reason, he does not equate a role for reason with the role of faith. Reason is indispensable in understanding Nature and equally vital in reading Scripture<sup>12</sup>. Reason is the dependable helper who ever assists him in presenting his teachings. The eloquent

deacon excelled in the use of parallelism and contrast, a favourite poetic form of the Semites<sup>13</sup>. But Reason, a created faculty and gift, cannot understand the Uncreated Deity<sup>14</sup>. The transcendence of YHWH in the Jewish tradition is revealed in an even more mysterious and resplendent way in the Trinitarian understanding of God. As Robert Murray, S.J., has shown in *Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, Ephrem champions faith, not so that he may understand the Godhead, but that he may adore the Mystery<sup>15</sup>.

The loftiness of Ephrem's mysticism is complimented with an immediacy and direction to the everyday world. This aspect of his thought is the principle theme of this brief survey of just one facet of Ephrem's prodigious writings. Ephrem wrote poetry in two genres, the *madrasha*, for the major hymns, and the *memra*, for sermons in stanzas and refrains. It is the latter form that will be the object of our attention.

On the occasion of the consecration of Abraham, the fourth and last bishop whom Ephrem served, the deacon, wise in earthly and heavenly truths, composed a *memra* intended primarily to counsel the new shepherd in his episcopal office. This sermon consists of 70 strophes, each with a refrain. Amidst the many verses of this eastern, lyrical homily, several strophes are particularly impressive. In the 22nd verse of the 5th division, Ephrem deals with the ever problematic issue of Church and State. In seeking the harmony that would be pleasing to God and man, Ephrem's position is both Jewish and Pauline. It is Hebraic in that power is held by an anointed ruler. It is

<sup>11</sup> Philip K. Hitti, *The Arabs, A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1943), pp. 21-22.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the Syrian mystic writes in *Hymns against Heresies* 28,11: "Look and see how Nature and Scripture are yoked together for the Husband-man..." Cf. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> For example, in *Hymns on Virginity*, 33, the Semitic churchman writes: "Nain shall worship and offer Him a crown; may it crown the Living One with that dead child who was restored to life!" *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> Again, the Syrian mystic declares in *Hymns on Faith* I,16: "If, then, our knowledge cannot even achieve a knowledge of itself, how does it dare investigate the birth of Him who knows all things? How can the servant, who does not properly know himself, pry into the nature of his Maker?" *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Murray, S.J., *Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge 1975), p. 89, as cited in Griffith, "Thought of Saint Ephrem the Syrian"; p. 50.

Pauline in that the king holds this position of authority for the Christian people. It is Pauline in that the appropriate analogy is found in marriage<sup>16</sup>. Hear the chant of Ephrem's extolment:

*From the king's office, laws, and  
from the priest's office, propitiations.  
That both should be mild is hateful;  
that both should be strong is grievous.  
Let one be strong and one be tender;  
in prudence and discretion,  
let fear with mercy be mingled.  
Let our priesthood be tender, likewise our  
king, strong.*

*Refrain: Blessed be He who has mingled  
our helps<sup>17</sup>!*

To be sure, the saintly poet does not explicitly use the term marriage, but the description of the relationship between State and Church graphically implies a marriage. To begin with the last line, the refrain: "Blessed be He who has mingled our helps!" Surely this exclamation harks back to Genesis itself: "And the Lord God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone; let us make him a help like unto himself'<sup>18</sup>". Furthermore, the yoking of the natural opposites to form the necessary, natural unity for Christian society speaks so much of the natural institution of marriage. It is significant that Ephrem is emphatic that the roles should neither be confused, nor duplicated, nor abdicated: "...that both should be mild is hateful; that both should be strong is grievous." Still another indication that the Syrian servant is employing the marriage motif finds its reference in Saint Paul's delineation of the assertiveness of the husband and the tenderness of the wife in the oft repeated passage in Ephesians<sup>19</sup>.

One cannot leave Ephrem's characterisation of Church and State and the interpretation presented here without returning once more to Genesis, to Eden. In the Judaeo-Christian perception of history, it is a mighty realization to grasp that before the Church, before that nation, before the covenants, the family was established as the integral institution for humanity. Retracing our steps to Ephrem's portrayal of the civil and ecclesiastical institutions that are to labour one on behalf of the other, the learned deacon presents the singular gift that each brings in this vocation: the State provides the laws; the Church, the prayers.

An amplification of the duties of the ruler and the obligations of the Church is found in the stanza immediately following the first depiction of the State-Church relationship. Both are enjoined to labour for the welfare of humanity in this terrestrial life:

*Let the priests pray for the kings,  
that they may be a wall to mankind!  
From besides the kings be victory;  
and from besides the priests, faith!  
May victory save our bodies and  
faith, our souls!  
May kings put an end to war,  
priests put an end to strife!  
May disputing and quarreling cease!*

*Refrain: Blessed be the Son of Him  
who gives peace to all!  
Praise to Thee for Thy gift<sup>20</sup>!*

The king is to be the defender of society, battling against its enemies until peace is established. The ruler is to be the protector, 'the wall', interposing himself between his people and their opponents. His struggle hopefully will be crowned with triumph, not glory for himself, so that the victory which is

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Ephesians, 5:22-33.

<sup>17</sup> Ephraim the Syrian, "Concerning Abraham..." The Nisbene Hymns, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, XIII, p. 193.

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 2:18.

<sup>19</sup> Ephesians 5:22-23.

<sup>20</sup> Ephraim the Syrian, "Concerning Abraham", p. 189.



Saint Ephrem the Syrian left many written works which are highly prized by the Holy Church. Like the Greek theologians who were his contemporaries, Ephrem the Syrian tried to find a precise expression of Christian doctrine and to defend Orthodoxy against the heretical teachings which were disturbing the Edessan Church.

Ephrem the Syrian wrote a great many prayers and hymns, developing the tradition of hymn-writing which had been passed on by other Christian writers. His works have come down to us partly in Greek but mostly in Syrian. Among those in Syrian the most important are: songs for the Nativity, songs of repentance and funeral hymns. The words of Saint Ephrem the Syrian are still said today in prayer on days of penitence: "O Lord and Master of my life, let me not have the spirit of emptiness, despair, domination or idle talk ...".

His fellow-countrymen called him "the Syrian prophet" but his fame spread far beyond the boundaries of his native land throughout the Universe of the Church.

to be the companion by his side, will ensure peace. Through her prayers, the Church is to help in this earthly contest against the adversaries that assail her people. Added to her supplications, indeed underlying all her

entreaties to God, is to be faith. Along with her role as faithful intercessor for king and her flock, she is to be peace-maker. Now her attention moves from external danger to internal threats. Her work and genius are channelled to clear away the wrangling that foments dissension within her own household. For a second time in this poetical sermon, implicitly, the marriage motif is sounded. Courage, in the person of the king, takes the initiative to safeguard his subjects; mercy, in the body of the Church, follows to enhance this strength with entreaties to the omnipotent God. With victory, the king guarantees peace on the borders; with patience and pity, the Church guarantees peace within her own ranks. And from the Messiah, the Prince of peace, comes peace to His entire creation<sup>21</sup>.

If this interpretation of Ephrem's political teaching is correct, it might bring to light a new theory in the array of political axioms that emerged in the medieval era. Most scholars are familiar with the Gelasian doctrine of spiritual and secular authority, and the depiction of the joint rule of emperor and patriarch in the Byzantine world. But little has been written about the Eastern Christian Semitic principle of viewing State-Church relations within a marital context.

Both State and Church, in their endeavours, were to work for peace. Peace often comes to the contentious through efficacious speaking. And though the peacemaker is often a person of serenity, in Ephrem's view, he is not a person of passivity. How active is the one who reunites the dissidents; how patient and humble is the realist who seeks to bring together the estranged: in verse 10 of the 2nd division of this sermon in strophes, the experienced deacon gives this episcopal charge to Abraham:

<sup>21</sup> In the 5th century, the Bishop of Rome, Gelasius I, set forth the doctrine that of two chief powers in this temporal world, the authority of the Church took precedence over that of the State. Brian Tierney and Sidney Painter, *Western Europe in the Middle Ages, 300-1425* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1970), p. 76.

*Contend not with the mighty, despair not of  
the outcast;  
soften and teach the rich, exhort the poor;  
with the harsh join the forbearing,  
and long-suffering with the wrathful;  
catch them that are evil by them that are good,  
and them that spoil by them that give,  
and the defiled by means of the sanctified.*

*Refrain: Blessed be He who made thee our  
hunter*<sup>22</sup>.

Seldom in all of the literature of the Church has a bishop been hailed as a hunter. Over the centuries we have heard of a bishop being described as a shepherd, or a fisherman, or a counsellor, or a pontiff, or a servant, or an equal of the Apostles, but this designation as hunter is a new image for Christians. Without straining the power of the metaphor, Ephrem shows in phrase after phrase how apt is this characterisation. The wise hunter knows not to expend his energy in frustrating pursuits and clashes that are destined to end in exasperation, hence he will not “contend with the mighty”. With similar insight, and it is the splendour of spiritual wisdom, the new bishop, Abraham, is to realize that he can never abandon hope for even the most despicable. Kindness to the rich will build a bridge of trust so that they can be reached through instruction; with ingratiating understanding, the bishop is to instruct the poor that they must not slip into self-pity. He is to bring the malicious and angry to bay by patience; and then set the following heavenly traps: note the verb selected by Ephrem, ‘to catch’. The good will spring the lever that will hold the evil in the power of charity. The generous will slip a noose around those who constantly agitate to ruin happy occasions by holding them in the bond of magnanimity. And those whose hearts and minds have been cleansed will lure those whose lives have been blotched to a hidden pit, where they will fall into the cavity of purity.

Closely akin to the art of peace-making, indeed, an integral part of this noble work, is the art of speaking. For centuries, the Mediterranean world had placed a premium upon oratory. The Sophists had declared that the sophisticated speaker is the person guaranteed to succeed in his pursuits. The Greeks in their philosophical pursuits had shown in an inimitable way that the word illuminates understanding. The Hebrews had revealed that the word is sacred, dynamic. Through words YHWH had created the cosmos from nothingness. The Church Fathers, true heirs of the Hellenic-Hebraic tradition, faithfully taught the holy preciousness of words. Saint Ephrem, pre-eminent spokesman of the Aramaic world, likewise shows in strophe 10 of the 5th division of the sermon that the Christian shepherd must know well not only the great value of words, but must also know how to dispense them. The gift of words must come in order. And the order, according to Ephrem, is highly selective: seek out the old with whom to converse, for they have a treasure-house of wisdom gleaned from their many years; admonish the young to listen far more than to speak, for the thoughts of life are just surfacing in their maturing minds; and as for the stranger, let him realize that the bishop has set an order of precedence for each to speak. Thus Ephrem concludes, if all will regulate their talking and know their rank, then they will thank Abraham for the order that silences the babel of indiscriminate speaking<sup>23</sup>.

Long ago, many centuries before the ministry of this Syrian churchman, the Greeks had highlighted the supreme importance of speaking. Their tongue, characterised by precision of meaning, depth of insight, and serene coherence, became for them the distinctive attribute of a civilized person. Anyone who did not speak Greek,

<sup>22</sup> Ephraim the Syrian, “Concerning Abraham”, p. 189.

<sup>23</sup> Ephraim the Syrian, “Concerning Abraham”, p. 192.

but whose tongue sounded like *bar-bar*, was a barbarian<sup>24</sup>.

\* \* \*

Both the Hellenic and the Judeo-Christian, hence Semitic, interpretations of history stress the didactic nature of this field of study. In keeping with this view point, several conclusions from this short survey of this 4th century poet and homilist can be deduced. Consider first his teaching on words: in our age, in which there is an outpouring of words unprecedented in history, could it be that Ephrem's counsel to a new bishop could help us steer our way through the flood? If there is an order in words we may perhaps begin to regain a respect for their quality and quickening force. Consider Ephrem's teaching on State and Church relations and the role of the leader of the Church: admittedly we must first recognize that structurally and ideologically the world of the 4th century is very different from our late 20th century world. Nevertheless, both ages recognized the great need for a stable society. In the 1990s there seems to be a yearning for the recovery

of some of the foundational principles of family life. Setting aside the office of king and bishop, attention may be directed to the talents with which each has been entrusted for the welfare of those people under their jurisdiction. What Ephrem seems to be teaching is that in society there is a definite role for both strength and tenderness, each complimenting the other, neither trying to eclipse the other or retreat from the other. And finally, consider the Syrian deacon's words to Abraham on the exercise of his episcopal power. Ephrem's language helps to give us new insight into the very nature of a peace maker: the gentleness of the reconciler is not that of the shy, naive person afraid of confrontation, but of the patient, keen-minded searcher, ever alert for holy strategies to pull back the wayward from the abyss.

These lessons from a 4th century deacon are gifts to a world on the threshold of the third millennium. If they are accepted, then without question Ephrem would be more than gratified. For most of all, to employ the Syrian Aramaic term, Ephrem was a *melpana*, a Teacher<sup>25</sup>. ■

*Sourozh 61, August 1995*

<sup>24</sup> H.D.F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (Baltimore: Penguin books 1951), p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Griffith, "Thought of Saint Ephrem the Syrian", p. 37.

# The Venerable Bede and Saint John Damascene

Priest Andrew Louth

*The following article was submitted to “Sourozh” by Father Andrew Louth, professor at Durham University and priest of the Diocese of Sourozh, and is an extract from his book ‘Saint John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology’ published by Oxford University Press in 2002. This is the first comprehensive book on Saint John and his theology. Professor Louth draws parallels between the lives and approaches of Bede and Saint John, and highlights points of contrast in their situations and approaches.*

In 735 the Venerable Bede died in Jarrow in the north-east of England, almost as close as one could be to the Roman Wall, built at the Emperor Hadrian’s command to mark the northernmost frontier of his Empire. Bede the Northumbrian and John the Damascene were therefore contemporaries; they may, indeed, have been coevals, though we are more sure of the date of Bede’s birth, AD 673, than we are of John’s (sometime between 650 and 675, probably). In Western scholarship they are both conventionally regarded as marking the end of the Patristic period: Bede for the Latin world and John for the Greek<sup>1</sup>. Neither was aware of the other, though both thought of themselves as belonging to the same *oikoumene*, constituted by the Roman (or Byzantine) Empire. John was just about aware of the region that Bede inhabited: he speaks of an “Iberian Sea” beyond the Pillars of Hercules, names the two British provinces of the Roman Empire, and knows of the



Priest Andrew Louth

Celts, who live in the remote north-northwest corner of the Empire (though all these references occur in appendices to chapters in *On the Orthodox Faith*, that may have been added by a later hand)<sup>2</sup>. Bede, on the other hand, was well aware of the region in which John lived his monastic life, and indeed wrote a short treatise on the holy places, which not only discusses the holy places of

Jerusalem, but also briefly mentions John’s birth-place, Damascus, as well as having a chapter on Constantinople, principally because it was in the Great Church of Hagia Sophia that there was preserved, in Bede’s day, the relic of the True Cross. Nevertheless, in relation to the great Christian Empire to which they felt themselves to belong (more in imagination than in political reality), they both lived on the periphery. That empire was itself by then fragmented and already undergoing a process of transmogrification, which would result in the Roman Empire of their individual imaginations soon becoming

<sup>1</sup> This is neatly evidenced by the concluding volumes of Quasten’s *Patrology*, just brought to completion by scholars under the direction of Angelo di Berardino of the Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum in Rome: Vol. IV (1996) ends with Bede, Vol. V (2000) ends with John Damascene.

<sup>2</sup> Expos. 23b. 4; 24b. 2-3, 34-5 (all references to John Damascene are to Boniface Kotter OSB’s critical edition of his works in *Patristische Text und Studien*, 7, 12, 17, 22, 29 [Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter 1969-88]).



Venerable Bede, fragment of sgraffito from the Cathedral Church of the Sourozh Diocese in London

two quite separate political realities (already foreshadowed in the fact that ‘Roman’, for Bede, evokes the Pope, whereas ‘Roman’, for the Damascene, means the Emperor in Constantinople).

In his history of the Church of Durham, the monk Symeon says of Bede: “Now Bede lived hidden away in an extreme corner of

the world, but after his death he lived on in his books and became known to everyone all over the world”<sup>3</sup>. Much the same could be said of John of Damascus, but with this difference: whereas Bede would have recognized himself in Symeon’s words, John would have been surprised that Jerusalem and the holy places could ever appear to be an “extreme corner” of the world. However, knowledge of John, other than awareness of the fact of his protest against iconoclasm, seems to have taken generations to make any impact at the centre of the Byzantine world; the events of the 7th century had rendered the religious centre of the Christian world (both for John and for Bede) peripheral to political reality.

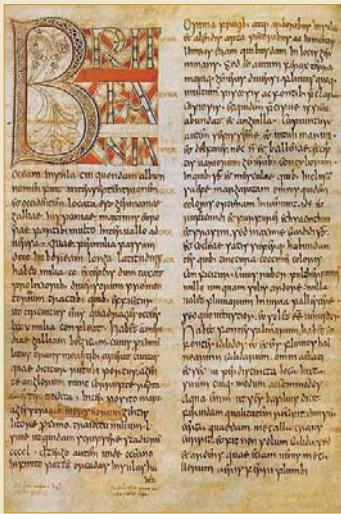
There are, then, more points of similarity between these two contemporary monk-theologians than might at first appear. Living at two extreme corners of the original Christian world – once coterminous with the Roman Empire, but now disintegrating – John and Bede were grappling with problems that were similar in general terms, though in many ways different in detail. They were both monks, and both teachers, though there were significant differences in their lives as monks and teachers. Bede had known no other life; as a child he had become an oblate of the twin monastery of Jarrow-Monkwearmouth, and he remained there all his life<sup>4</sup>. John, in contrast, seems to have had a secular education and pursued a secular career in the service of the Caliph in Damascus, before renouncing it for the monastic life. Both were teachers; but Bede seems isolated in his teaching office, and there is a sense in his writings of him rebuilding in England the foundations of Christian Latin education for those who would come after, whereas John clearly belonged to an established and developing tradition, educated in Damascus in the

<sup>3</sup> Symeon of Durham, *Libellus de Exordio atque Procursu istius hoc est Dunhelmeruis Ecclesie* 1.14, ed. and trans. David Rollason, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press 2000), p. 64.

<sup>4</sup> Benedicta Ward, SLG, *The Venerable Bede* (London: Geoffrey Chapman 1990), pp. 4-5.



THE VENERABLE BEDE AND SAINT JOHN DAMASCENE



The magnum opus of the Venerable Bede – *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*)

traditional Hellenic way (though perhaps one of the last to benefit from this then still unbroken tradition), and, as a theologian, forming part of a tradition of defence and exposition of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy that the monks of Palestine (and also of Sinai) had established in the centuries since Chalcedon, and in particular in the decades since the Arab Conquest.

This contrast takes on a sharper profile if we look at the writings of Bede and John. Bede gives a list of his works (not all of which have survived) at the end of his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*<sup>5</sup>. He begins with an impressive list of works of biblical exegesis, mainly on particular biblical books, though including two works, on the tabernacle and on the temple, determined by the arrangements for worship detailed in the Pentateuch. In placing this long list first Bede makes clear that he regards these as his most important writings. The biblical works are followed by various letters on particular issues, both exegetical and calendrical. He then lists

his works of hagiography, especially both the lives, one in verse and one in prose, of Saint Cuthbert, the famous monk and bishop of Lindisfarne. Then follow two works of history: a history of the abbots of his monastery, and then, certainly his most famous work, his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Bede then mentions a martyrology, a book of hymns and another of epigrams, two short books on cosmology and on chronology, and a larger work on chronology. The list closes with some introductory works on grammar and rhetoric. For John there is no such list: we are limited to what has survived. There are striking parallels between the works of the two men: both compiled textbooks (John on logic, Bede on grammar and rhetoric), both were interested in cosmology and chronology (John in his *On the Orthodox Faith*, Bede in various works), both composed lives of saints (in both cases there is an interest in local saints: John writing about Artemios and John Chrysostom, who are associated with Antioch, most of Bede's

<sup>5</sup> Bede, *Hist. 5. 24*; *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1969), pp. 566-70.



St John Damascene

saints belonging to the north-east of England), both were historians (though Bede incomparably greater than John; John's *Passion of Saint Artemios*, however, contains a great deal of well-digested historical narrative, drawn from valuable sources), both were poets (though here John's fame far exceeds that of Bede).

The most striking contrast lies in the area of biblical exegesis: while it is central to

Bede, its place in John's *œuvre* is more difficult to determine. Save for the exegesis contained in his homilies, the only works of exegesis of John's that survive are the *Hiera* (or *Sacra Parallela*) and a commentary on the Pauline Epistles, the latter probably not authentic, the former surviving only in imperfect forms (the original form seems to have consisted of three books – on God, human nature, and the virtues and vices – all consisting of collections of relevant scriptural passages and patristic commentary). The *Hiera* is clearly an important part of the Damascene's *œuvre*, however difficult it now is for us to make much of John's method and intentions in compiling it.

Even on this slender basis, it is possible to draw some contrasts between Bede's approach to the Scriptures and that of the Damascene. Bede's exegetical works seem to be guided by two principles: first, making accessible to his contemporaries the learning of the earlier Patristic period (Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, Gregory the Great), that was expressed in a style probably more elaborate than they could easily cope with (this is especially true of his commentary on Genesis, which had already been much commented on by earlier Fathers); and secondly, filling in the gaps in the tradition of Latin biblical commentaries (e.g. his commentaries on Kings, Esdras and Nehemias – though with these we may also discern the interests of Bede the historian – Proverbs, Mark, Acts and the Apocalypse)<sup>6</sup>. John Damascene's motives seem quite different (though he perhaps shares something of the former in the commentary on the Pauline Epistles, if authentic, where, however, it is brevity he is seeking rather than simplicity of style). In the *Hiera*, John takes for granted the early tradition, and its sufficiency, and draws on its riches to deal with a series of doctrinal and ascetical issues; this is essentially the

<sup>6</sup> See Ward, *The Venerable Bede*, op. cit., pp. 41-87.



same as his method in *On the Orthodox Faith* (though there are puzzling differences in the Patristic resources he uses in these two works). In contrast, what Bede achieves in his exegetical works is essentially the same as the achievement of his predecessors in the Latin Patristic tradition of biblical exegesis, though tempered to his expectations of those he seeks to instruct; this identity of purpose is especially apparent in his attempt to complete the exegetical resources available in Latin. One is tempted to characterize this difference by appealing to threadbare caricatures of East and West: whereas John is conscious of inheriting a highly sophisticated tradition of reflection on the Christian Faith, which is entirely adequate, Bede seems conscious of a new beginning, for which he is concerned to provide an adequate foundation. This contrast is confirmed by the fact that, while both Bede and John were standing at a watershed between a classically formed culture expressed in Greek or Latin, and a new culture expressed in the vernacular of everyday life, whether Arabic or English,

**One of the parts of the famous trilogy of St John Damascene, entitled 'The Fount of Knowledge' is dedicated to listing and describing various religious fallacies and is called 'On Heresies'**

and while both of them were fluent in both the old and the new languages, it is only Bede, so far as we know, who is at all interested in making the transition from the old to the new. It was John's successors, for instance Theodore Abû Qurrah, who sought to make Christianity accessible in Arabic; whereas Bede himself made a start by providing Anglo-Saxon translations of the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and – his last work – a translation of one of the Gospels.

In another way, Bede and John may be seen as standing on the borders: Bede between the worlds of Roman and Irish Christianity, John between the realms of Greek and Syriac Christianity. Bede's attachment to Christianity in its Roman form, of which the controversy over the date of Easter was a symptom, is evident, both from his *Ecclesiastical History* and from his painstaking attempts to explain the calendrical issues involved in the



The tomb of the Venerable Bede in Durham Cathedral

calculation of the date of Easter<sup>7</sup>. But his attachment to the ascetical traditions of Northumbrian monasticism is equally evident in the *Ecclesiastical History*, as well as in his two lives of Cuthbert of Lindisfarne. John was similarly placed between two traditions: Greek and Syriac Christianity. His attachment to the Byzantine tradition is manifest, but, however Hellenized, his family was doubtless of Syrian stock, and it is not unlikely that he knew Syriac. But it is in his great poetical work that his openness to the Syriac tradition is most evident. It is generally accepted that the early Byzantine poetical tradition of the kontakion had Syriac roots, and though these roots are less easily detected in the case of the canon, it can hardly be without significance that not only John, but the other two early composers of canons, Cosmas and Andrew of Crete, were of Syrian origin.

But neither Bede nor John can be confined to the particular historical

situation in which each found himself. As Symeon remarked of Bede, “after his death he lived on in his books and became known to everyone all over the world”. One notable way in which this became true of Bede is through his influence on the *Glossa Ordinaria*, the ‘ordinary gloss’ on the Scriptures, that provided the basis for medieval understanding of the Scriptures<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, John’s influence was destined to be widespread, both in the Byzantine world and beyond: if Bede’s influence on Western medieval theology was spread through the *Glossa Ordinaria*, John’s was no less profound through the Latin translation of *On the Orthodox Faith*. John’s influence can perhaps be characterized in two ways. First and most obviously, it is manifest in the way in which, especially through his *On the Orthodox Faith*, he harvested the wisdom of the formative centuries of doctrinal clarification in the Greek Christian world; this harvest of Patristic theology shaped much later Christian theology, both in the Middle Ages and beyond, and has a value that modern theology – both Orthodox and Western, whether Catholic or Protestant – has yet properly to recover. But secondly and more profoundly, John’s influence is felt through his liturgical poetry, in which this harvest of Patristic theology is turned into song and celebration; for this is not a matter of mere poetical embellishment: rather, in this disciplined praise and confession, theology finds its most fundamental role, in interpreting, as it were, the return of the whole human being, both soul and body, to God, the beginning and end, the alpha and omega<sup>9</sup>. ■

*Sourozh 88, May 2002*

<sup>7</sup> See, most recently, Faith Wallis, *Bede: The Reckoning of Time*, Translated Texts for Historians 29 (Liverpool University Press 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Ward, *The Venerable Bede*, op. cit., p.144.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIa IIae. 83. 1 *ad prim um*, where Aquinas suggests that prayer be understood as *quodammodo ... desiderii interpres* (“in a way, an interpreter of desire”).

# Search the Scriptures: A Sermon Preached Before the University of Cambridge

*Archimandrite Ephrem (Lash)*

*On 4 February 1996, Father Ephrem, who was a long-time reviews editor of “Sourozh”, was invited to preach before the University of Cambridge. This formal occasion, which takes place six times each year in Great Saint Mary’s, the University Church, is regularly attended by heads of college and members of the Faculty of Theology. Father Ephrem took advantage of the occasion to speak of the Fathers use of Scripture, every verse of which they treat as a bearer of God’s self-revelation, and in which they find, through reflection and contemplation, all the breadth and the depth of Truth.*

“**S**earch the Scriptures, for you think that in them you have eternal life. And it is they who bear witness concerning me.”<sup>1</sup>

Christianity is not a religion of a book, but the religion of a Word. Of a Word that is indeed written and proclaimed, but above all a Word spoken by God from all eternity and a Word who became one of us, who as the book of Baruch puts it in a phrase that is frequently quoted by the Fathers and the Orthodox liturgical texts, “appeared on earth and lived among men”.<sup>2</sup> In the original these words describe Wisdom, who is the “book of God’s commandments, the law that endures for ever”, but the Church sees in this prophetic saying a foreshadowing of the Incarnation, of the Gospel, and this is the main point that I would like to make to you this morning. The Christian reading of the Scriptures is a reading, and often, as



Archimandrite Ephrem (Lash)

here, a re-reading, in faith. The Church reads the Old Testament in the light of the New, and the New in the light of her own unfolding reflection on those texts, which springs from her experience of life in the Holy Spirit. I would remind you also that the Orthodox Church, following the Fathers, believes that the Greek Septuagint, including the so-called Apocrypha, is inspired by God. She is not, moreover, alone in this. In the last century, for example, John Keble defended this position, as did the Dominican scholar Pierre Benoit in this.

*The God who is proclaimed in the Old and New Testament is one,” writes Saint John of Damascus, “praised and glorified in Trinity. As the Lord said, “I have not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it” (for he effected our salvation, for which every scripture and every mystery exists), and again, “Search*

<sup>1</sup> John 5.39.

<sup>2</sup> Baruch 3.27

*the scriptures, for they bear witness concerning me.” The Apostle too says, “In many and varied ways God spoke of old to our forebears by the Prophets, and in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” It is through the Holy Spirit, then, that Law, Prophets, Evangelists and Apostles, and Shepherds and Teachers have spoken.<sup>3</sup>*

Not only is this Scripture one; all of it is God’s word to humankind. If one of the keys to understanding Christian spirituality is Saint Paul’s injunction to “pray without ceasing”,<sup>4</sup> one of the keys to the understanding of Christian hermeneutics is his assertion that “every scripture is inspired and useful for teaching”.<sup>5</sup> There is an important principle involved here, one which the Church has inherited from the Synagogue and on which the Fathers lay stress time and again: everything in the Bible is there for a purpose. If, for example, Genesis 14 gives us the exact number of Abram’s servants, then God must have a reason for it, and it is the task of the Christian, or Jewish, exegete to search out that reason. Modern Christians have a tendency to find all those genealogies in Chronicles, or all the ritual details in Leviticus boring, and irrelevant to their living the Christian life, and indeed to find some passages offensive to pious ears. This is no new problem, as we can see from the following remark of Saint John Chrysostom:

*I haven’t prolonged my talk without purpose, but because there are some uncouth people who, whenever they take the Holy Bible in their hands and find either a list of dates or a catalogue of names, skip over them at once and say to anyone*

*who rebukes them, “But it’s just names; nothing useful!” What’s that? God is speaking and you, you dare to say there’s nothing useful in what is said?<sup>6</sup>*

More positively, he begins his homily on John 4, 54:

*As with gold mines, one who is skilled in such things would not bear to overlook even the smallest vein as producing much wealth, so in the Holy Scriptures, it is impossible without loss to overlook one iota or one flourish. We must search into all. For they are all uttered by the Holy Spirit, and nothing irrelevant is written in them.<sup>7</sup>*

This sort of remark can be paralleled in many other passages from his homilies. Saint Romanos makes the same point in a Kontakion on the Mother of God, “Nothing in Scripture is trivial”, he writes; though he is perhaps over optimistic when he continues, “nothing unclear, but everything is direct”.<sup>8</sup> More than forty years ago, Fr L. S. Thornton re-echoed St John’s words, “nothing in the Old Testament can safely be ignored by the Christian theologian”.<sup>9</sup>

Until the rise of what is known as the ‘critical’, or sometimes the ‘scientific’, study of the Bible, the typological understanding of Holy Scripture was normal. As the late Ely Professor, Geoffrey Lampe, wrote, “until this development took place, the unity of the Bible was the fundamental premise on which all were agreed. A common belief linked the authors of the New Testament books with their readers. This was the conviction which they shared, that the whole Bible spoke directly of Christ, in prophecy, type and allegory so far as the Old Testament

<sup>3</sup> *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 90 [IV, 171].

<sup>4</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5,17.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Timothy 3,16. Or, as the vulgate and the Peshitta understand it, every inspired scripture is useful for teaching. *Omnis scriptura divinitus inspirata utilis est ad docendum*. Note, in the previous verse, the reference to “the sacred writings”, which must refer to the Old Testament. The fact that current critical fashion does not consider Saint Paul to be the author of the Pastorals does not affect the argument. They are part of Holy Scripture.

<sup>6</sup> PG 56:110. He puts it more positively in his comment on Genesis 1, 26 [PG 53:70].

<sup>7</sup> Homily 36,1.

<sup>8</sup> Saint Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion* 37,3. See “On the Life of Christ”. *Kontakia*, translated by Archimandrite Ephrem (Harper Collins 1996), p.18.

<sup>9</sup> “The Mother of God in Holy Scripture”, in *The Mother of God: A Symposium*, ed. E. Mascall (London 1949), p.13. Dr Thornton is in fact more concerned with the New Testament than with the Old.

is concerned".<sup>10</sup> One might argue, on the basis of Luke 24, 27 and 44, that it was the view of the incarnate Lord as well. I cannot help finding a certain irony in the following remarks of John Keble, written a century and a half ago:

*Discarding high associations from our interpretations of Scripture under the notion that a plain man may do well enough without them, appears rather like discarding high notions from our creed as if they were only fit for professed theologians... We all know too well the region of doctrine towards which the merely critical and historical discussions of the last century were continually gravitating*<sup>11</sup>

It is also a basic presupposition of nearly all traditional expressions of Christian piety. How many couples chose as one of the hymns for their weddings that Christian Targum on Psalm 22 [23], 'The King of Love my Shepherd is'? The only alternative seems to be some form of Marcionism, with the assertion, that is still heard from time to time from Christian pulpits, or on 'Thought for the Day', that, unlike the God of the Old Testament, the God of the New Testament is a God of love. In putting the case for a typological reading of Scripture I do not wish to deny the legitimate place of the academic study of the Bible, but to suggest that other ways of reading are equally respectable, have an equal – indeed for Christians, a greater – claim on our attention; to suggest that poetry and preaching are perhaps better vehicles for theology than seminar papers. The point is made vividly by Saint Ephrem in his commentary on the *Diatessaron*:

*Who can understand the sum total of the discovery of one of your sayings? For we leave more in it than we take out, like thirsty people from a spring. Many are the facets of his word, as many as the faces of its learners. He has*

*painted it with many beauties, so that each one of the learners may examine what they love. And in his word he has hidden all his treasures, so that each one of us from that which they study in it, may become rich by it. His saying is a tree of life, which from all its sides presents blessed fruits to you, and like the rock in the desert it is opened and to everyone from every side becomes a spiritual drink. "They ate spiritual food and drank spiritual drink?"*<sup>12</sup>

If the Old Testament, in its entirety, is to maintain its place in our churches today as part of the revealed word of God, then I suggest that a proper use of typology is one of the principal means by which it will be so maintained. At around the time that Geoffrey Lampe wrote his paper on typology, the Bishop of Oxford sent a letter to his clergy reminding them that the lectionary was not simply an anthology of the incumbent's favourite passages of Scripture. St John Chrysostom, I think, would have agreed. Are there not serious theological problems in omitting entirely, or printing within brackets, verses from the Psalter, or even whole Psalms, because they are thought to create difficulties for the contemporary Christian? This is what I believe is known as 'filleting', or the removal of what the Bishop of Salisbury, in a report to the General Synod, calls discreetly, "material thought unhelpful". Thus the final verses of Psalm 136 [137], "Superflumina Babylonis", and the whole of Psalm 57 [58] have vanished without trace from the new Roman Breviary. The Anglican ASB, faithful to the *via media*, prints them, but in brackets. Even the Orthodox in America have not escaped, since an English version of the Psalter appeared recently which omits the titles of the Psalms, on the grounds that they are mostly incomprehensible. The Fathers would not only have approved, they

<sup>10</sup> The Reasonableness of Typology in *Essays in Typology*, (London 1957), p.14.

<sup>11</sup> *On the Mysticism attributed to the Early Fathers of the Church*, §23.

<sup>12</sup> *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, 1,18; 1 Cor. 10,4.g.

would have redoubled their efforts to search out their meaning. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, for example devotes a whole treatise to the titles of the Psalms. Lampe writes, “There would seem to very many Christians to be sound reason, and not merely pious fancy, in the liturgical reading of the history of the Exodus and the Passover at Eastertide.” He continues: “The problem before us is to discover some means of distinguishing between helpful and misleading forms of typology; we have to try to separate those which can be rationally explained and defended from those which are far-fetched.”<sup>13</sup> Some years later Professor Dennis Nineham, whom none could suspect of being a dyed-in-the-wool traditionalist, made a similar observation in his Cadbury lectures. For the Churches of the East, at least one criterion for a legitimate typology is its consecration in the living tradition of the *lex orandi*.

To say that, I believe, is also to say that such a reading of Scripture is not, in an important sense, part of the public and missionary proclamation of the Gospel. The use of Old Testament types as a weapon of Christian apologetic, as proof texts to demonstrate the truth of Christian doctrines, is seldom successful, as Saint Justin discovered in the 2nd century. Rather it is part of the inner heart of the Church’s meditation on God’s word. I do not, moreover, believe, as many modern critics of typology suppose, that the Fathers sat down consciously to ‘find’ types; rather, as day by day they contemplated God’s word, heard it proclaimed, sang it in psalms and canticles, these types and images would have sprung spontaneously to their minds. As John Keble puts it:

*The old Christian writers, either by tradition, or by a feeling so general that it seemed almost like a natural instinct, believed that the phrase ξύλον – “the wood” or “the tree” – wherever*

*it was introduced in the Old Testament was intended to lead their thoughts to the Cross.*<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand David Jones, when discussing the problems of the Christian poet in the middle of the twentieth century, wrote:

*If the poet writes ‘wood’ what are the chances that the Wood of the Cross will be evoked? Should the answer be “None”, then it would seem that an impoverishment of some sort would have to be admitted.*<sup>15</sup>

Their theology emerges from prayer and contemplation, from *lectio divina* in its old sense, which we might roughly translate as ‘chewing the cud’; it is not the product of what the Fathers, particularly Saint Ephrem, call “prying” or “inquisitive investigation”. The Fathers of the Church, like many of the writers of the liturgical texts, often knew the whole Bible by heart. Indeed the second Canon of the last Council of the undivided Church, II Nicaea in 787, lays down that no one who does not have the Psalter by heart shall be ordained bishop, a sort of canonical Tripos paper which I have no doubt that good friend of the Orthodox, the High Steward, would pass *summa cum laude*. Typology springs from Christian faith which sees the whole of the Old Testament as prophecy, as the foreshadowing of the final revelation of Christ, the incarnate Word of God. To use an analogy: the focal point of an Orthodox church is the Holy Table at the centre of the Sanctuary. All the rest, the frescoes, the icons, the choir stalls, the icon screen, the Holy Doors draw the worshipper’s attention to and culminate in the Holy Altar or Throne, on which, at the Divine Liturgy the Word of God is offered in the Sacrifice without shedding of blood, and on which lies the book of the Holy Gospel. But the Holy Table stands apart in the Holy of Holies; it is not generally visible. During most of the ordinary services it is not

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit., p.21.

<sup>14</sup> Op. cit., §11.

<sup>15</sup> Preface to *The Anthemata*.



used at all. Analogously, the daily round of Offices and Services, and the other Mysteries of the Church have their focal point, their culmination in the Divine Liturgy itself, the supreme Mystery. The same is true of the Bible: its centre and focus is the Holy Gospel, which is always proclaimed in church by an ordained minister, is always listened to standing, and, as an icon of the living Word of God, is never bound in leather, the hide of a dead animal. All the other books which make up the Holy Scriptures lead to or flow from the Holy Gospel, just as all human history leads to or flows from the incarnate dispensation of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. If I may, I would like to illustrate these general remarks by looking at a particular example.

On Friday the Churches in both East and West celebrated the feast which is called in the West ‘The Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple’, or ‘The Purification of Our Lady’<sup>16</sup> but in the East ‘The Meeting of Our Lord’. In a report from the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England presented to the General Synod last July, it is proposed that this day be raised to the rank of Principal Feast, that is one on which, under Canon B 14, the Holy Eucharist must be celebrated in cathedrals and parish churches. While an Orthodox Christian may perhaps be permitted to express some surprise that, should this be agreed, this feast will outrank the Annunciation, the feast of the Incarnation itself, he cannot but be grateful that what is for the Eastern Church one of the Twelve Great Feasts should be given greater prominence.

How are we to see this Meeting of the Lord, this Encounter of Christ our Saviour? At one level we see an ordinary Jewish couple bringing their first-born son to the Temple to be redeemed in accordance with the law of Moses. But through the prayer and prophecy of Symeon and Annawe understand that

this child is the long expected Messiah that he is the fulfilment of the old covenant, the promise of light and salvation to Israel and to the Nations. All this makes sense within the Jewish setting in which Saint Luke describes it, but the poets of the Church as they ‘search the scriptures’ of both the old and new covenants are led into a more profound understanding of the inner meaning of this encounter. Most of the texts for the feast were written between the middle of the sixth and the middle of the eighth centuries, that is in the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon, which defined the Orthodox doctrine of the two natures in Christ, and in the heat of the battle with iconoclasm before the second Council of Nicaea, which proclaimed the legitimacy of the Christian veneration of the holy icons. Indeed one of these writers, the Patriarch Saint Germanos, was deposed by the iconoclast emperor Leo III. The principal emphasis, then, of their compositions is on the affirmation of Chalcedon that the incarnate Lord is truly God and truly human – that this child of forty days is none other than the God who is beyond time; that this babe, who is now subject to the Law, is none other than the God who gave the Law on Sinai. One of Saint Germanos’s texts for Vespers expresses this vividly:

*Receive, Symeon, the One whom Moses in the dark cloud saw of old giving the Law on Sinai,<sup>17</sup> now become a babe and subject to the Law. This is he who spoke through the Law. This is he who was told of in the Prophets, incarnate for our sake and who saves mankind. Let us worship him.*

Or again from a hymn, also for Vespers, by Anatolios the Studite:

*The Ancient of Days<sup>18</sup> who also gave the Law to Moses on Sinai, today appears as a*

<sup>16</sup> In the old Roman books the feast was one of Our Blessed Lady, not one of Our Lord. The same is true liturgically of the feast in the Eastern Church.

<sup>17</sup> Ex. 20,21.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel 7,13 [LXX]. The Church normally uses Theodotion’s version of Daniel, which follows the Aramaic, but some of the Greek and Syriac liturgical texts suppose the Septuagint reading.

*babe. And according to the Law, as Maker of the Law, fulfilling the Law, he is brought to the temple and given to the Elder.*

The reference here to Christ as the Ancient of Days reflects the Septuagint of Daniel 7,13, which reads, “The Son of man was present as Ancient of Days and those who stood round were present with him”, not, as in the Aramaic, “And he reached the Ancient of Days and was brought before him”. In a beautiful verse homily in Syriac, ‘On Symeon the Old Man’, which probably dates from the 5th or 6th century, we find the same idea:

*The old man bowed down before the Infant and his many years bore testimony to the Infant, that in very truth he is the Ancient of Days, concerning whom David gives testimony, “You, Child, have existed from the beginning”<sup>19</sup>*

But if this Child is the Ancient of Days, the God whom Moses saw on Sinai “in darkness and in storm”, then it is a fearful thing for Symeon to hold him in his arms, for he is the one whom Isaias had seen on a high exalted throne and whose train filled the Temple. This identification is made explicit in a number of texts for the feast, of which this Ode from Saint Kosmas’s Canon is perhaps the finest:

*When Isaias in a figure saw God on an exalted throne,<sup>20</sup> escorted by Angels of glory, “Woe is me!” he cried, “for I have seen beforehand God in a body, Lord of the light that knows no evening and Lord of peace”:<sup>21</sup>*

*When the godly Elder saw the Word held in the hands of his Mother, he understood that this was the glory revealed of old to the Prophet.*

*He cried out, “Rejoice, holy Lady, for, like a throne, you hold God,*

*Lord of the light that knows no evening and Lord of peace”.*

*The Elder, bending down and reverently touching the footprints of God’s Mother, who did not know wedlock, said,*

*“Pure Virgin, you carry fire.”<sup>22</sup>*

*I tremble to take God as an infant in my arms, Lord of the light that knows no evening and Lord of peace.”*

*“Isaias was cleansed when he received the coal from the Seraphim,” cried the Elder to God’s Mother.*

*“You, with your hands as with tongs, make me resplendent as you give me the one you carry,*

*Lord of the light that knows no evening and Lord of peace”:<sup>23</sup>*

But there is a paradox here, since the movement is reversed. Isaias, entering the temple, saw the vision of God as he looked towards the holy place and the Seraph took the burning coal from the altar and came out towards him. Here Symeon, who is a priest in the liturgical texts, comes out from the holy place and sees God, not in the splendour of Solomon’s temple, not on a high exalted throne with a royal train, but as an infant of forty days in the arms of a simple village girl from Nazareth. Moreover, all the liturgical texts make Symeon address the *Nunc Dimittis* to the Child in his arms. Saint Romanos, for example, in his Kontakion for the feast, says:

*When to the Blameless he had said these things, the just Elder cried to the Child:*

*“Now you let me, your servant, depart in peace, because I have seen you, Lord.”<sup>24</sup>*

<sup>19</sup> Hymns of Saint Ephrem the Syrian *De Nativitate*, Appendix iii, 3,28 (CSCO vol. 186). This has recently been translated by Dr Sebastian Brock in *Moran Etho* 6 (Kottayam 1994), pp.78-88. Psalm 54,20.

<sup>20</sup> The Throne of God is one of the common types, or figures, of the Mother of God.

<sup>21</sup> Much of this ode is based on Isaias, from whom the fifth biblical Ode (26,9-20) is taken. The first stanza refers to Isaias 6,1-7. “Escorted” is the word used of the Angels in the Cherubic Hymn. The last two lines, which are somewhat freely translated for reasons of rhythm, may be inspired by Isaias 26,9.12. The earliest attested use of the word “that knows no evening” is in Origen.

<sup>22</sup> This prepares for the allusion to Isaias 6,6-7 in the next Troparion.

<sup>23</sup> This typology of the burning coal is common in the texts, though more frequently it is used of the Eucharist. The word in Greek for the ‘spoon’ used to give communion to the faithful really means a pair of tongs, with a direct allusion to the vision of Isaias. Immediately after receiving communion the priest is directed to say Isaias 6,7.

*Let me depart to the life without end,  
O incomparable life,  
since this you promised me before you came  
into the world.  
Keep for me, O Word, the decree fixed by your  
word.<sup>25</sup>  
Send me, O All-holy, to Abraham and the  
Patriarchs.  
Let me swiftly depart from perishable things,  
Only Lover of mankind.”<sup>26</sup>*

The image of Christ as the burning coal leads me to my final point. In my opening I said that Christianity was the religion of a Word who appeared on earth and lived among men. But he does more. He gives himself to be eaten by those among whom he lived. This is the supreme Meeting of the Lord with his people, and the texts for the second of February implicitly remind us of it, because in the Liturgy holy communion is given to the faithful with what appears to be a spoon. I say appears to be, since the Greek word for it does not mean ‘spoon’ at all, but ‘tongs’, with specific reference to the vision of Isaias. After drinking from the chalice the priest is directed to say for himself the words of the Seraph to the Prophet, “This has touched my lips; it will take away my iniquities and cleanse my sins”. The vision of Isaias is a type of holy communion, the burning coal is a type of the Bread of Life, matter transformed by the fire of the Godhead. If the burning coal came to Isaias by the hands of the Angel, the Body of Christ comes to the believer by the hands of the priest, who in a sense, one might even say receives it from the hands of the Mother of God. Mary is *Theotokos*, she who

gave birth to God. Symeon, in the tradition, is called *Theodochos*, he who received God from her hands. The double encounter with the Word, in Scripture and in communion is depicted in the traditional iconography of the Holy Doors in the icon screen of an Orthodox church. In the lower part we see the four Evangelists, who write the Word which is preached, in the upper part we see the Annunciation, in Greek *Evangelismos*, the moment of the Incarnation of the Word as flesh, to remind us that through these doors are brought the book of the Gospel for the proclamation of the Word of life, and the Chalice of the Bread and Wine of Life for forgiveness of sins and everlasting life.

I end with a paragraph from what is, I believe, one of the finest defences of the typological reading of Holy Scripture, John Keble’s *Tract 89*, from which I quoted earlier and which has, in my view, been sadly neglected, overshadowed no doubt by its more famous, not to say notorious successor.

*He who looks no deeper than the letter,  
may simply recommend candour, and patient  
investigation, and freedom from sensual and  
other disturbing thoughts: but he who knows  
beforehand, that the Personal WORD is  
everywhere in the written Word, could we but  
discern Him, will feel it an awful thing to open  
his Bible; fasting and prayer, and scrupulous  
self-denial, and all the ways by which the flesh  
is tamed to the Spirit, will seem to him more  
than natural, when he is to sanctify himself,  
and draw near, with Moses, to the darkness  
where God is.<sup>27</sup> ■*

*Sourozh 64, May 1996*

<sup>24</sup> Luke 2.29-30. In the liturgical tradition Symeon addresses his prayer to the Child in his arms, thus underlining the belief that Jesus Christ is God incarnate. The Syriac hymn also has the idea, “Now, Lord, that I have seen you, I shall rest”.

<sup>25</sup> Saint Luke does not say that Symeon was old, but the tradition has always so regarded him, doubtless on the analogy of the widow Anna. The Latin Infancy Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew, which may go back to the 8th century, says that he was 112 years old [XV, 2]. The Syriac hymn speaks of a “covenant” made by God with Symeon, “My eyes see your mercy. According to the agreement that you made, release me, Lord. You bound me and loosed me, and honoured me with old age. Release me from life, because I have seen you”. There is even a tradition that he was one of the translators of the Septuagint and, because he doubted the prophecy of Isaias 7.14, he was bound until the coming of the Messias. In Syriac tradition his epithet is ‘Asir’ the ‘Bound’.

<sup>26</sup> Op cit., p.32f. The “Blameless” is one of the usual epithets of the Mother of God.

<sup>27</sup> Op. cit., §24.

# The Tears of the Myrrhbearing Women

*Priest Nicholas Behr*

*The following talk was given at a conference entitled ‘Women: An Orthodox Perspective’, sponsored by the Fellowship of St John the Baptist and held in Bristol in October 1987.*

## INTRODUCTION: THE TRADITION

**T**he title and the inspiration for this talk has come from the many references in the services of the Church, especially Saturday Vespers and Sunday Matins, to the tears and grief of the Myrrhbearing Women. Amongst these references are also those to the sorrow and captivity of Eve, and through all these references we hear of the sorrow and grief of all women, expressed in the tears of the Myrrhbearing Women.

Sadly, the constant references throughout these services are lost on so many members of the Church, either because the services are in a language which we do not understand, or because we simply do not go to these services. It is a problem that is especially acute in countries like ours, where all that is meant by the tears of the Myrrhbearing Women is not part of the way of life. It is not something that children will automatically receive with their mothers’ milk, if they do not hear it in Church.

Let us listen to some of these verses, taken at random from the Saturday and Sunday services:

*The women bearing sweet smelling ointment came in tears to thy tomb that held life, O Lord, and carried with them spices wherewith they sought to anoint thine all pure Body.*

*But seated on the stone they found a shining angel who called out to them and said: “Why do ye weep for him from whose side flows life unto the world? Why do ye seek him who is*

*immortal as if he were dead in the tomb? Go rather and proclaim to his disciples the good tidings of his Resurrection.” (Lauds, Tone 6)*

*The Myrrhbearing Women bringing spices, hastened mourning to thy tomb, and when they found thy most pure Body gone and learned from the angel of the glorious wonder, they said to the Apostles: “The Lord is risen, granting the world great mercy.” (Aposticha, Tone 1)*

*Thou hast risen from the tomb, O God, in glory, raising the world with thee, and mortal man sings hymns to thee for thou art God, O Master, and death has vanished; Adam makes glad and Eve, delivered from bonds, rejoices and cries:*

*“Thou, O Christ, art he who grants all men resurrection.” (Kontakion, Tone 2)*

*By thy Cross thou hast destroyed death; to the thief thou hast opened paradise; the lamentation of the Myrrhbearing Women thou hast turned into joy, commanding them to proclaim to the Apostles that thou, O Christ our God, art risen, granting to the world great mercy. (Troparion, Tone 7)*

*Weeping, the women poured myrrh upon thy tomb, and then their voices were filled with joy as they said: “The Lord is risen.” (Lauds, Tone 2)*

*The women bearing myrrh hastened early in the morning to thy tomb lamenting, but the angel came to them and said: “The time for lamentation is past; weep not, but tell the Apostles of the Resurrection.” (Evlogitaria)*

*O Virgin who hast borne the Giver of Life, thou hast delivered Adam from sin, and to Eve hast thou brought joy in place of sorrow. He that took flesh from thee and is both God and man has restored the fallen to life. (Evlogitaria)*

In the course of this talk I hope that we will come to understand a little more deeply the nature of this grief and of these tears. May God forgive us as we enter into this holy place.

### THE NATURE OF OUR HUMAN REALITY

Let us begin with ourselves, with what we are. Only in the light of Christ can we see ourselves both as we are and as we shall be. The first is the cause of sorrow, the second is the source of joy.

But in all that we do we must hold on to both realities; the one without the other can have no meaning. If I only see myself as I am now and nothing else, then that is cause for despair. But if I only see myself as I will be in Christ, then I will forget myself as I am. The old Adam who yearns for redemption will be cast to one side and abandoned, whilst what I imagine to be my salvation becomes only an illusion, an illusion which also leads to despair.

We can make no beginning until we see ourselves both as we are and as we can be in Christ. Let us remember the words of Christ to Staretz Silouan: "Keep your mind in hell and do not despair." Let us begin with the first; to see ourselves as we are in all our depths. If we can discover these depths with Christ, then we are going the right way.

These depths within us are shown to us through the Incarnation, in the Cross, the Burial and the Descent into Hell of Christ. We must discover the Cross, the Burial and the Descent into Hell within ourselves. Christ is crucified on the cross of our sinfulness, buried in the tomb of our hearts, and has descended into the depths of the hell that has been formed within us, depths that

were created in the image of God to be full of light, but are now wrenched away from the light and filled with darkness.

This we can discover by the contemplation of the Cross and the Burial of Christ, but only if we make the organic link between ourselves and Christ. Sometimes this same discovery can happen in a different way. It can be given to us to realize our sinfulness, our brokenness and the depths within us, and then to discover that Christ has entered all this and accepted its consequences to the full.

Whichever way it happens, the result is the same. We discover ourselves to the full and the oneness of Christ with our human condition. There is a relation between the depth of our sin and the depth of the love and mercy of God. Without this beginning there is no point in talking of the Resurrection. It becomes irrelevant. If we do not know our betrayal of life, then we do not know that we are dead, and the Resurrection can only be of emotional interest to us. The Resurrection becomes just a relief to our conscience: "Yes, I have crucified Christ, but fortunately God has raised him from the dead, and I am let off the hook." How else can we explain the fact that so many Orthodox churches are full on Easter night for the first singing of "Christ is Risen" and virtually empty by the time the gift of life is offered to us who are dead.

### THE NATURE OF OUR SORROW

The first appropriate response to all this is surely sorrow, mourning, tears and grief. We so often forget that the message of the Gospel, the message of joy, is intended for those who mourn, for those who are filled with sadness and horror at the human condition of death. This Gospel is not for those who are looking for a way to improve themselves, for those who want a blessing, confirmation and sanction for their good works; nor is it a help and aid for us in keeping the commandments of God. As Christos Yannaras has put it:

“What God really wants of man is neither individual feats nor works of merit, but a cry of trust and love from the depths of our being. Or perhaps even one moment of sobriety and agony breaking through the closed, secure subjectivity of our happiness” (The Freedom of Morality, p.47). Christ says to us: “Woe unto you that laugh now, for ye shall mourn and weep” (Luke 6.25), and as the next step he says: “Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5.4). In a world of contrived happiness and canned, artificial laughter, it is almost impossible to understand the true meaning of mourning and sadness. But without that mourning and sadness we cannot begin to understand ourselves. And if we cannot begin to understand ourselves, then we cannot understand God. Let us hear the words of St Isaac of Syria:

*All the saints have left this life in mourning. If, therefore, all the saints mourned and their eyes were ever filled with tears till they departed from this life, who would have no need of weeping? A monk's consolation is born of his weeping. And if the perfect and the victorious wept here, how could a man covered with wounds endure to abstain from weeping? He whose loved one lies dead before him and who sees himself dead in sins, has he need of instruction concerning the thought he should employ for tears? Your soul, slain by sins, lies before you, your soul which is of greater value to you than all the world. Could there be no need for you to weep over her? ...Let us entreat the Lord with unrelenting mind to grant us mourning. For...with its help we shall enter into purity ...Blessed are the pure in heart, for there is no time they do not enjoy the sweetness of tears, and in this sweetness they see the Lord at all times. (St Isaac of Syria, Homily 37)*

I am aware that there is a difference between true and false mourning. St Paul tells us that “godly grief produces a repentance that tends to salvation and brings no regret, but ungodly grief produces death” (2 Cor. 7.10). As in all things in the Christian

life, we need discernment. But actually, in a way, we have nothing to lose, for if a worldly, that is, morbid grief produces death, then so also do its worldly alternatives, contrived happiness and forced laughter. All our fallen ways lead to sickness and death. The only question is at what point in the development of our sickness do we recognize that we are sick and dare to admit it to ourselves, rather than trying to carry on in blind cheerfulness or morbid despair?

As we move to the contemplation of the grief of the Myrrhbearing Women, let us remember that they too were gripped by unhealth. St Luke tells us (Luke 8.1-3) that before they began their following of Christ and their service to him, they had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities.

We can surely see their sickness, at least in part, as being a false and morbid sorrow, possibly some kind of bitterness. But let us also remember that their healing, as we shall see, did not lead them to a happy, cheerful state of mind, but rather brought them the gift of true grief.

### THE MYRRHBEARING WOMEN AS AN ICON OF TRUE SORROW

Let us now turn to the example of the Myrrhbearing Women. When we talk of women's roles or women's perspectives, the Myrrhbearing Women are sometimes brought forward as examples for women to follow: they are the ones who served; they provided for Christ and his disciples, they ministered to them. And we are often reminded that they continued their ministry to the very end: it was the women who stood by the Cross, and it was the women who came to the tomb in one last act of loving service and so became the first heralds of the Resurrection. All this is perfectly true and valuable. But there is surely more for us to understand.

The many references by the Church in so many sticheras and troparia, especially in Saturday Vespers and Sunday Matins and,

of course, during Holy Week and Easter, lay such a constant emphasis on the sorrow and tears of the Myrrhbearing Women, that as a result we begin to realize that there is something more here than an account of the sorrow of a small group of women at the death of their beloved Teacher. The more we listen to these hymns of the Church, the more we begin to see that these women are

this world, yet it is at the very heart of this world. Let us try to reverently look deeper into this sorrow.

### THE ROOTS OF THIS SORROW

At the beginning of the Bible we are given an understanding of all that follows. After the Fall, God says to Eve “I will greatly multiply your pain (sorrow) in childbearing; in pain



an icon of the sorrow of all women, a sorrow that begins with Eve, a sorrow that has been purged of all self-pity, of all sickness and bitterness, a sorrow that has the sweetness of the tears about which Saint Isaac spoke. This sweetness is represented in our icon by the sweet-smelling ointments carried by the women, ointments that are the fruit of the tree of life and not the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil brought to Adam by Eve. It is a sorrow that is hardly of

**The Myrrhbearing Women at the Tomb of Christ.**  
Mosaic. Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo.  
Ravenna, Italy, 6th century

you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3.16). If we regard this simplistically, with no regard for the depth of a human being, we will say that it means that a woman is condemned to experience pain when she gives birth – giving birth ‘hurts’. We might then go on to say that nowadays, due



**The Myrrhbearing Women at the Tomb of Christ. Miniature from a Gospel from the 11th century. Dionysiou Monastery, Athos**

to the advances of medical science, this pain can be overcome. Or, alternatively, we might say that pain is a natural part of childbirth and that it is possible for a woman to learn to give birth in such a way that the pain itself is a significant element in the whole experience, that in fact it adds to a woman's experience of childbirth, and that if it is not there, a woman has been deprived of something vital and important.

But all this is surely a very self-centred view of the pain of childbirth. It centres on

the mother and her feelings as a mother in a way that almost excludes the child. It is expressed in such phrases as "my rights", "my needs", "my fulfilment" in having a child. All of this is summed up today by the extraordinary techniques that are devised to enable a woman to have a child. And we should always remember that in human affairs what is outrageous today is considered normal tomorrow. None of the present developments came about in order that children might be born. It is the satisfaction of the mother-to-be that is paramount – as the rapid growth of abortion clearly demonstrates.



All of this shows how far we have gone from God's judgement: "In pain you shall bring forth children." This pain or sorrow that God speaks of is not one that centres on the mother and her experience, one that she can control or learn to live with in a natural or artificial way. Surely the pain referred to in the judgement of God cannot simply be reduced to a woman's personal discomfort. Rather it is an expression of that painful sorrow which permeates the joy of childbirth over the fact that a child is born, a child who is doomed to die, to share the mortality of his fallen parents. Eve, who is called Mother of the living, is also mother of the dying; as a result of her childbearing not only life but death comes into the world. Every child who is born can repeat with the Psalmist: "For indeed, I was born in sin; guilt was with me already when my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51.5).

Here is the root of the pain, sorrow and tears. Birth is no longer simply the gift of life, it is a sorrow that is expressed at the slaughter of the Innocents at the birth of Christ: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted because they were no more" (Mt. 2.18). Rachel weeps not for herself, but for her children. It is the painful sorrow that Simeon announces to the Mother of God, when he tells her of the sword that would pierce her heart (Luke 2.35). It is the sorrow of the Mother of God as she stands at the Cross. And this time we learn the truth of that sorrow, for on Holy Saturday the Church gives these words to the Mother of God: "Alone among women without pain I bore thee, my Child, but now at thy Passion I suffer unbearable pain." From these words we can see that it is not the pain of physical birth, as such, that causes her sorrow, but what this birth leads to. The death of Christ is the source of all pain and sorrow for the Mother of God, but she also is aware of her part in the tragedy, as every mother will be:



The Myrrhbearing Women at the Tomb of Christ. Vologda icon, 15th century. Russian Museum, St Petersburg

"O Master Christ, from a virgin's womb hast thou taken upon thyself fallen man and been entirely joined to him..." (Sunday Canon, Tone 5, Canticle 9). Christ was born in order to die, and that death was communicated to him in the womb of the Mother of God. All the sorrow and pain spoken of in God's words to Eve are brought to their climax in the birth and death of Christ. Each one of us, man or woman, parent or childless, can respond to the plea of the Mother of God in the Holy Saturday service: "O hills and valleys, the multitude of men and all creation, weep and lament with me, the Mother of our God."

### THIS SORROW AS LIVED BY THE MYRRHBEARING WOMEN

All creation is called to mourn and grieve the impossible death of the One who is the life of all creation. Each part of creation has its unique voice in this universal lament



**The Myrrhbearing Women, fragment of a fresco from the Sucevița Monastery, Romania, 16th century**

for the death of its life. Today we are contemplating the tears of the Myrrhbearing Women. If we read the Gospel attentively, we can find in it hints of a growing awareness on the part of the Myrrhbearing Women. For instance, when Salome, the mother of James and John, brings her sons to Christ and asks that they might occupy places of power and honour in his Kingdom, Christ says to them – all three of them surely: “You do not know what you are asking for – are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” And they (all three) say: “We are able” (Mt. 20.20). Later, as Salome joins the Myrrhbearing Women, we see her accepting the cup to the full. Again, in the story of the anointing of Christ, the event

that forms the main theme of Wednesday in Holy Week, the sinful woman anoints Christ, and in that anointing and in the washing of his feet with her tears she discovers the love of God. She prepares him for what she knows will come, she anoints him with sweet-smelling ointment against the stench of the death which she knows the stench of her own sins has wrought (Luke 7.36-50; Mark 14.3-9).

At the root of the grief of the Myrrhbearing Women is surely their awareness that, as far as they are concerned, the action begun by their mother Eve has been brought to its conclusion: not just a particular child has died, but the Child who is both the Son of the Virgin and the Son of God. Within the sorrow at the mortality of those born of women, there is an awareness of the tragic inevitability of that mortality.

But the One whom the Myrrhbearing Women were hastening to anoint was not just another child, but the Life of all. If he has died, then all creation has come to an end. As the Apostle Peter said to Christ: “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6.68). And now he lies dead as a result of his birth. Christ said to the women on his way to the Cross: “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never gave suck’” (Luke 23.27-31). If this Child has died, then the bearing of children has surely come to an end. Until this moment there could be hope that the next child to be born would be the Messiah. But now he has come, and he, too, has gone the way of all flesh. All would seem to have come to a final and bitter end.

But in the face of this bitter and final end of the One who is their life, the life of all creation, the women come to do what women have always done. They come to take part in the death which they know their birthing has begun. Our age no longer seems to see the tragic connection between birth and death that exists in this fallen world – that in this world birth is the beginning of death. Perhaps women no longer want to know this link, and perhaps this is the greatest oppression placed on women; surely they know it instinctively, but are not allowed to give expression to what they know. Today we cannot – or will not – see the tragedy that is inherent in every joyful birth. And perhaps that is why our churches are full of women, for the Church is one place where this tragic link between birth and death is made.

Perhaps this is also why so many more women than men have mental breakdowns, as they cannot live with this truth. But the Myrrhbearing Women lived this link to the full. Whatever the consequences, they knew

they had to complete what they had begun, even if it was the last thing they did.

### THE TRIUMPH OF SORROW

We have tried to look at the garment of sorrow and though I think we can only touch the hem of that garment, it is enough to give us insight into a great mystery. Let us now remember the triumph of that sorrow. Not triumph over sorrow but the triumph of sorrow.

The story is told very simply: the Myrrhbearing Women come to the tomb and discover the Resurrection. And just as happens when we sing the funeral service, their funeral lament at the tomb is turned into the song, Alleluia. This is the triumph of sorrow. It is not that sorrow is cast away. It is transformed: transformed into joy – Alleluia. And this is the very condition of that triumph, for we can only sing Alleluia if we have a funeral lament, a weeping at the grave of life, which can be transformed. We cannot receive the joy of the Resurrection with empty hands. It is not a gift into emptiness, but the transformation of a reality that itself yearns for transformation.

It is the Myrrhbearing Women who reveal all this to us. They were delivered from a sorrow that was morbid, sick and bitter – an evil spirit. They had learnt about the true nature of sorrow, as did Salome when she asked for power for her sons. They saw the stench of their sins in the woman who anointed Christ. They had discovered the reality and need for true grief and sorrow, a sorrow that leads to repentance and salvation, bringing no regret. And they went to the tomb of Life with this great sorrow because they had discovered death and the tomb within themselves. They went bearing in their hands the sweetness of that sorrow which enables us to see the Resurrection. ■

# Interpreting the Incarnation

*Archpriest John Behr*

*Father John Behr is Professor of Patristics at Saint Vladimir's Theological Seminary, Crestwood, NY. Among other works, he is the author of 'Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement' and 'The Way to Nicaea', volume I. In this paper Father John seeks to place the Incarnation of Christ and Scripture in their proper, patristic relationship to each other: the whole of Christ's life, culminating in the Cross and Resurrection, interpreted against the background of the Scriptures.*

The title for this paper is 'Interpreting the Incarnation'. This is perhaps a rather unusual title. By it, I do not mean to suggest something along the lines of: how do we interpret the Incarnation, make sense of this event, for us, today, etc., but rather to explore how speaking of 'Incarnation' already operates at an interpretative level, and to consider various aspects and implications of this. I have been teaching Patristics at Saint Vladimir's Seminary for six years, and probably the most important thing I have learnt is the need to maintain the proper order (*taxis*) of theology: that one begins with the Gospel proclaiming Christ, and that on the basis of that proclamation one can then trace the theological reflection which culminates in the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas articulated, through toil and blood, in the early centuries. It is within this tradition of theological reflection that we speak of Incarnation, in this perspective. If we fail to recognize how it is that we are speaking of this, then we risk losing the very thing that we are speaking of.



Archpriest John Behr

## TRINITY AND INCARNATION – AXES OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH?

A similar way of putting this is that 'conclusions without the arguments that lead to them are at best ambiguous'. This might seem obvious, but its implications are rarely taken up. An example of this, pertinent to the subject of 'Incarnation' (though not immediately), is the way in which Trinitarian theology,

debated so vigorously during the 4th century on grounds already prepared during the first three, is often reduced to shorthand formulae, such as the three Persons and one nature, the 'three hypostases and one ousia', of 'the consubstantial Trinity'. The reflection that lies behind such phrases is immense, yet it is often glossed over. Indeed, the very familiarity of such phrases results in their being detached from the debates that produced them and divorced from the content that they seek to encapsulate. These 'facts of dogma' are assumed as a given, and so Trinitarian theology concerns itself with reflecting on issues such as how the one God can simultaneously be three eternally distinct persons, without the plurality destroying the



**The Nativity, fragment of a fresco from the Cathedral of the Meeting of the Icon of Our Lady of Vladimir. Sretensky Monastery, Moscow**

unity or the unity undermining the reality of the distinctions. In its textbook form, such theology begins with what can be known and said of this God – that he is one, the uncreated origin of all creation, love, goodness and so on; and then proceeds to the analysis how this same God is three – how the persons of the Trinity are related, their different characteristics and relationships<sup>1</sup>. Having developed what is often called an ‘immanent’ Trinitarian theology, describing

the being of such a God as it is in itself, the next step is to relate this Trinity to the activity of revelation, the economy of salvation recorded in Scripture, the ‘economic’ dimension of Trinitarian theology: how one of the three became man. But now, because of the position already established, it is simply assumed, beginning with Augustine, that the theophanies, the manifestations of God, described in the Old Testament, were not uniquely manifestations of the Son and Word of God (as it was universally assumed in the earlier tradition), but are revelations of any of the three, or the Trinity itself, the

<sup>1</sup> The classic critique of such theology is Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. J. Donceel (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates 1986 [1967]).

one Lord God, as Augustine put it<sup>2</sup>. Finally it is claimed, first by Peter Lombard, though it is still a common presupposition, that while it was the Son who became man, as Jesus Christ, it was nevertheless possible, and still is, for the Father and the Spirit also to be incarnate<sup>3</sup>. Trinitarian theology is made into a realm unto itself, requiring subsequent reflection on ‘the Incarnation’ of one of the three divine persons: Triadology followed by Christology. In this perspective, the Trinity and the Incarnation are taken as being the lynch-pins of Christian theology – Christian faith is ‘Trinitarian’ and ‘Incarnational’. This has become a self-evident, unquestioned premise for most modern theology.

There are a few brief comments which need to be made about this state of affairs before I turn to ‘Incarnation’ itself. First, it must be recognized that the familiar shorthand formulae did not occur at all frequently in the writings of the 4th century Fathers. Although the ‘Cappadocian settlement’ of Trinitarian theology is often said to be the formula ‘one ousia, three hypostases’, the phrase occurs in their writings but once – in a passage from Saint Gregory Nazianzus<sup>4</sup>. More generally the Cappadocians use a variety of expressions to designate what is common to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and in what manner they are distinct. More particularly, they all urge great caution in using numbers at all in matters of theology. As Saint Basil puts it:

*When the Lord taught us the doctrine of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, he did not make arithmetic a part of this gift! He did not say, “In the first, the second and the third” or “In one, two and three”. ... There is one God and*

*Father, one only-begotten Son, and one Holy Spirit. We declare each of the hypostases uniquely (*monakhôs exaggellomen*), and if we must use numbers, we will not let an ignorant arithmetic lead us astray into polytheism<sup>5</sup>.*

This warning has also been sounded in modern times by Vladimir Lossky, though his words are not always heeded:

*In speaking of three hypostases, we are already making an improper abstraction: if we wanted to generalize and make a **concept** of the “divine hypostasis”, we would have to say that the only common definition possible would be the impossibility of any common definition of the three hypostases<sup>6</sup>.*

In other words, there is no common concept of ‘hypostasis’ (by which we would be able to count three), for anything common belongs to the one essence, by definition. The same point can be made about the shorthand manner of referring to the ‘consubstantial Trinity’. It was a key point for Saint Athanasius, following the Nicene Creed, that the Son is consubstantial with the Father; but, for Athanasius, this relationship cannot be reversed, nor can they be said to be consubstantial together, for the simple reason that the Son is begotten from the Father: this is an intrinsically asymmetrical relationship<sup>7</sup>. A few decades later, Saint Basil the Great is happy to say of the Father and Son that “they are called consubstantial”, though he specifies that this relationship necessitates that one is derived from the other; according to Saint Basil, one would not call ‘consubstantial’ things which both derive from the same source, for they are ‘brothers’<sup>8</sup>. If we now, for the sake of brevity,

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 3.1.3.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Peter Lombard, *Libri IV Sententiarum*, 3.1.2.

<sup>4</sup> *On the Great Athanasius*, 35; this point is noted by J.T. Lienhard, *Ousia and Hypostasis: The Cappadocian Settlement and the Theology of ‘One Hypostasis’*, in S.T. Davies, D. Kendall, G. O’Collins (eds.), *The Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999), pp. 99-121, esp. pp. 99-103.

<sup>5</sup> Saint Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, 44. Cf. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *To Ablabius*.

<sup>6</sup> V. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press 1974), p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. esp. C. Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977), pp. 260-266.

<sup>8</sup> Saint Basil, *Epistle 52*.

speak of ‘the consubstantial Trinity’, we must similarly bear in mind the asymmetry of the relationship, based in the monarchy of the Father, the one God. The point of this brief observation is to make clear that we cannot allow detached shorthand formulae to become unconscious presuppositions shaping our theological reflections.

The second point to note is the way in which presupposing the results of the debates, as self-subsisting dogmatic formulae, effectively separates the reflection of the authors of the New Testament from that of the Fathers, that is, from those who continued in the tradition established by the Apostles. The patristic period then is itself divided into distinct controversies – Trinitarian followed by Christological – establishing the already known dogmas of Christianity, in which the writings of Scripture are only used in an *ad hoc*, proof-text manner. This perception of a disjunction between the authors of the New Testament and the Fathers parallels (and is probably due to) the parting of the ways, in modern times, between scriptural studies and patristic studies – with scriptural studies attempting to establish the original authorship, redaction, context and perhaps meaning of their texts, or to retrieve the ‘historical Jesus’ and the original history of ‘the Jesus movement’; while patristic studies trace the development of already known dogmatic positions. Serious engagement with Scripture, let alone scriptural scholarship, is generally absent from patristic studies, ‘neo-patristic syntheses’, and dogmatic works – especially by the Orthodox – during the 20th century, and likewise the Fathers are consulted usually to confirm what is already believed. On the other hand, it is perhaps not surprising that when scholars, trained in the historical-critical methodologies of scriptural studies, have attempted to come to terms with

the dogmas articulated in patristic theology, they have tended to speak in terms of ‘the myth of God Incarnate’<sup>9</sup>. Dogma is, as Harnack put it, the work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the Gospel – if only because it has been forced into this mould by Harnack himself and those who have followed him<sup>10</sup>.

The final and most important comment that needs to be made regarding the orientation of much modern theology (including Orthodox) is that, construed in terms of the gradual development of a dogmatic edifice, the reflection of the Fathers has effectively been divorced from the given revelation of God in Christ, and been made to retell that revelation in a different manner, so that the Word of God is no longer the locus of God’s self-expression (for it is now held that any of the three appeared in the Old Testament theophanies), and the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, is not so much ‘the exact imprint of the very being’ of the Father (Heb.1:3), but is rather the incarnation of a divine person which could have been otherwise if so desired. This, to be blunt, is nothing short of a distortion of the Gospel itself. Rather than establishing that what is seen in Christ, as proclaimed by the Gospel, truly is what it is to be God, that he is divine with the same divinity as his Father, a recognition only possible in the Spirit (who alone enables us to recognize Christ as Lord, the bearer of the Divine Name, cf. 1 Cor.12:3; Phil. 2:8-9), Trinitarian theology, in the style outlined earlier, concerns itself with the heavenly existence of three divine persons; and their interrelationship, as persons in communion, is then taken as the constitutive element of our own existence in the image of God, so marginalizing even further Christ – for, according to the New Testament it is Christ alone who is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), in whose pattern Adam was

<sup>9</sup> Most notoriously in J. Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM 1977).

<sup>10</sup> A. Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. from 3rd German edn. by N. Buchanan (London, Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate 1894), 1.17, pp. 21-22. A. McGrath points out, “From its beginnings, the history of dogma has been written about by those concerned with its elimination” (*The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans 1997], p.138).



The Nativity, Late 17th century. The Art Museum, Yaroslavl, Russia



already moulded (Rom. 5:14), and to whose image we are conformed (Rom. 8:29) when we are crucified with him (Gal. 2:20, etc.).

### THE CANON AND TRADITION OF THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE

Christian theology quite simply is not based upon the supposed two axes of Trinity and Incarnation, and I have indicated some of the problems which arise when it is treated as if it does. Rather, theological reflection, beginning with the original Apostles and continuing with all those who follow in their tradition, develops as a response to the marvellous work of God in Jesus Christ, the crucified and exalted Lord. This is the starting point of all theological reflection. More specifically, and significantly, it develops by reflecting through the medium of Scripture – the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets: Christ died according to Scripture and he rose according to Scripture, as Paul puts it (1 Cor. 15:3-4), in a phrase which reappears in practically every later creed, referring to the same Scriptures. Christian theology is a response to the Passion of the Saviour, and reflects on the work of God by using Scripture read through the prism of the Passion. Considered in this way, theological reflection has its cohesion in the paschal faith, and operates or unfolds in the *interpretation* of this event through an engagement with Scripture.

Before turning to consider the paschal basis and interpretative dimensions of ‘Incarnation’, I should say a few more words about what is meant by this phrase ‘according to the Scripture’. The place and function of literature in the ancient world, and especially the idea of *mimesis* or emulation, provides the context for understanding this. To be cultured in the ancient world, to have acquired a *paideia*, meant to be versed in the classics. The classics not only provided models of sublime style and speech, but also supplied moral exemplars, encouraged

virtue and piety, and provided the material in which to learn to think and on which to hone one’s critical skills. In a word it meant providing a context, a ‘symbolic world’, in terms of which one understood oneself and the events of one’s life. The same also goes for the Scripture of Israel. Throughout its history, the writers of Israel used images and figures of earlier events and figures to understand, explicate and describe the events and figures at hand. For example, Noah, in Genesis 9:1-7, is blessed to preside over a renewed world which is described in the vocabulary and imagery of Genesis 1:26-31: Noah is presented in terms which make him a new Adam, establishing a typological relation between them. And what has been established with Noah then becomes a paradigm for understanding subsequent events. So, for instance, after referring to the overflowing wrath which resulted in Israel being forsaken, in exile, Isaiah adds the following oracle:

*“For this is like the days of Noah to me; as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, But my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed.” Thus says the Lord who has compassion on you (Is. 54:9-10).*

The description of the divine wrath of the flood followed by the covenant of natural order established with Noah is used to explain the divine wrath of the exile that will give way to the eternal covenant of divine grace. And so, again, a typology is created between the two episodes.

A similar typology is created by Isaiah between Abraham and the post-exilic situation of Israel. Isaiah encourages the despairing people, and urges them to “look to Abraham your father, and Sarah who

bore you; for he was one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many” (Is. 51:2). However small the remnant has become, the people are promised a national renewal if only they imitate the patriarchal action and return to their ancestral land: Abraham is a ‘type’ both of the required action and of the promised outcome. And again, this invocation of Abraham as a type for the new exodus seems to be based upon an earlier typology already at work in the description of Abraham, this time between Abraham and the original exodus. Genesis 12 describes how Abram was forced to leave Canaan, when the land was struck by famine, and migrate to Egypt. When Pharaoh made amorous advances towards Sarai, believing her to be Abram’s sister, the Lord brought a plague against Pharaoh and his household, prompting Pharaoh to send the patriarch away from his land. The typological parallelism is clear: Abraham is described as foreshadowing in his life the destiny of his descendants<sup>11</sup>.

This process, re-employing images to understand and explain the present in terms of the past, and so as being anticipated by the past, which is evident throughout the Scriptures, continues in the New Testament and its presentation of Christ ‘according to the Scriptures’. For instance, Christ’s Passion is described in terms of being the true and primary Pascha (now etymologized as Passion), of which the Exodus Pascha is but a type; Christ is the true Lamb of God. Or, according to another typology, in John 3:14: “Just as Moses raised the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that those who believe in him may have eternal life.” This refers back to Numbers 21, where the Israelites were complaining to Moses that it was folly to remain in the desert – the wisdom of the world arguing that it is preferable to go back

to Egypt. God then struck the people with the deadly bites of serpents, and at the same time provided a remedy, the bronze serpent lifted up on a pole: by looking upon the serpent, the people regained life. Paul also appeals to this concatenation of images when he points out, to those in his Corinthian community who were seduced by wisdom, that the folly of God (Christ lifted on the Cross, as the bronze snake lifted on the pole) overcomes the wisdom of the world, and, as such, Christ is the true power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:22-25). In another vein, but using the same scriptural or literary technique, Matthew describes Christ as a new Moses, going up a mountain to deliver the law, while Paul describes Christ as the new Adam, correcting the mistakes of the first Adam, whom Paul explicitly describes as being “a type of the One to come” (Rom. 5:14).

Paul and the evangelists continued this redeployment of Scripture in their reflection on Christ and his Passion. Yet the Gospel of Christ also claims itself to be definitive, not only in the sense of ultimate or final, but also as singular – the Passion of Christ is once for all (*ephapax*, Rom. 6:10; Heb. 7:27). This singularity, in reverse, provides the diverse books of Scripture with a unity and a coherence: The eschatological *apokalypsis* of the cross, as Richard Hays puts it, provides a hermeneutical lens through which Scripture is refracted with “a profound new symbolic coherence”<sup>12</sup>. This sense of the unity of Scripture – the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets – is vividly captured by Saint Irenaeus in his comparison of “the order and the connections of the Scriptures” to a mosaic of a king, which his Gnostic opponents were rearranging into a picture of a dog (AH 1.8). These Gnostics, he claimed, were not working from the ‘hypothesis’ which the prophets preached, the Lord taught and the Apostles handed down (‘traditioned’), but

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 375-376.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1989), p. 169.

rather from their own myths and fabrications. However, Irenaeus continues, those who know the ‘canon of truth’ – that there is one God the Father, one Son Jesus Christ, and one Holy Spirit who spoke of Christ through the prophets<sup>13</sup> – such are able to restore the passages to their proper order so that the image of the King may once again be seen (AH 1.9-10). In this way, the coherence and unity of Scripture when viewed from the perspective of the Cross, the matrix within which the Gospel was preached from the beginning, is intimately connected to the dynamics of canon and tradition.

It is by this canon, the ‘canon of truth’, that the ‘canonical’ books of the New Testament are marked out. It is interesting to note that ‘canon’ does not and cannot refer to a ‘list’, ‘catalogue’, or ‘collection’, and was never used that way until 1768; to speak of ‘the canon of Scripture’ is a confusion of terms and categories<sup>14</sup>. The canonical Gospels are, of course, centred on the Passion. Origen suggests (in a passage incorporated by Saints Basil and Gregory into their *Philokalia*) that while Christ is presented in many different ways in the Gospels, this refers to “anything he did before the Passion and whatever happened after his Resurrection from the dead”<sup>15</sup>. That is, the unchanging identity of the Word of God is revealed through the Cross, and everything else is patterned upon this, so that each episode within the narratives of the canonical Gospels proclaims, in varying ways, *the Gospel*. It is for this reason that, as John Barton points out, in Anglican liturgy one begins the reading by saying: “‘The holy gospel is written in the Gospel according to Saint X, in the *n*th chapter’, for the whole gospel

is present in any given portion; and that one does not say, ‘Here endeth the gospel’, whereas one does (or did) say, ‘Here endeth the epistle’, because the gospel has no end”<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, the unchanging centre remains the Passion and exaltation, for this is the revelation of the Word of God.

While Paul had declared that the death and resurrection of Christ are “according to Scripture”, the details of this are explored, in the canonical Gospels, by the evangelists’ description of Christ and his activity. So, the Gospel of Jesus Christ begins, in Mark, with a passage from Isaiah; the narrative of Matthew is structured in terms of prophecy-fulfilment; in Luke, the risen Christ enlightens his disciples by showing how the Scriptures speak of him (Lk. 24:27); while in John, Christ asserts categorically that “Moses spoke of me” (Jn. 5:46). In contrast, a non-canonical text, such as the *Gospel according to Thomas*, even if it preserves authentic sayings of the ‘historical Jesus’, does not attempt to understand and present Christ through the medium of Scripture, nor, at least in the *Gospel according to Thomas*, is there a Passion.

Thus, in the material which comes to be collected together as the canonical New Testament, reflection on Christ is an exegetical enterprise. But, it is very important to note that it is Christ who is being explained through the medium of Scripture, not Scripture itself that is being exegeted:<sup>17</sup> the object is not to understand the ‘original meaning’ of an ancient text, as in modern historical-critical scholarship, but to understand Christ himself, who, by being explained ‘according to the Scriptures’, becomes the sole subject of Scripture throughout – he is the Word of God. Seen

<sup>13</sup> It is noteworthy that in the earliest forms of the canon of truth, such as that given by Saint Irenaeus (AH 1.10.1), all the economies of Christ, recounted in the Gospels, are presented under the article on the Holy Spirit, who preached these things through the prophets – Scripture when read according to the Spirit, as speaking of Christ – rather than under the second article, as in the later declaratory creeds, where what the Spirit “spoke through the prophets” is left unspecified.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. J. Behr, *The Way to Nicaea* (New York: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press 2001), p. 13, fn. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Contra Celsum*, 6.77 = *Philokalia*, 15.20.

<sup>16</sup> John Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster 1997), p. 128.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. esp. James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Fortress Press 1993), p. 89.

in this retrospective perspective, reflecting on Scripture in the light of God's action in the crucified and glorified Messiah, Scripture becomes a thesaurus or treasury from which are drawn the images and terms used to proclaim the Gospel.

To ensure that the same image of Christ is preserved, according to the canon and tradition of the Gospel according to Scripture, the Fathers, faced with various distortions, reflected further on the hypothesis of Scripture, the canon of truth. This resulted, of course, in an increasingly abstract theological discussion, which paid ever greater attention to particularly important or disputed passages of Scripture, cited in the manner of prooftexts, for the concern was not to exegete Scripture itself, but to clarify its hypothesis and the canon by which it speaks of Jesus Christ. But the point of such on-going reflection is not to describe ultimate structures of 'reality, to elaborate a fundamental ontology, whether of Being' or 'communion' (or both), which then tends to function as if it constitutes the content of the revelation itself. Rather, the aim of such theological reflection was to articulate as precisely as possible, in the face of perceived aberrations, the canon of truth, so as to preserve the undistorted image of the Christ presented in the Scriptures, constantly returning, as Saint Polycarp urged his readers, to "the Word delivered in the beginning"<sup>18</sup>.

### PASSION AND 'INCARNATION'

It is, I would suggest, in this context – viewing theological reflection as responding to the Passion through the interpretation of Scripture – that we can best understand what is meant by 'Incarnation'.

As we have seen, when the crucified and exalted Christ is depicted by the Apostles and evangelists as 'according to Scripture', that is, with the terms and images contained in the

thesaurus of Scripture, this in turn establishes types and prophecies of Christ in Scripture, making him the subject throughout Scripture. The one present throughout the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets – the crucified and exalted Jesus Christ, the same today, yesterday and forever (Heb.13:8) – is the one who has been revealed *by the Cross*. Irenaeus explains this mystery through the imagery given by Christ in Matthew 13, in a lengthy passage which deserves to be quoted in full:

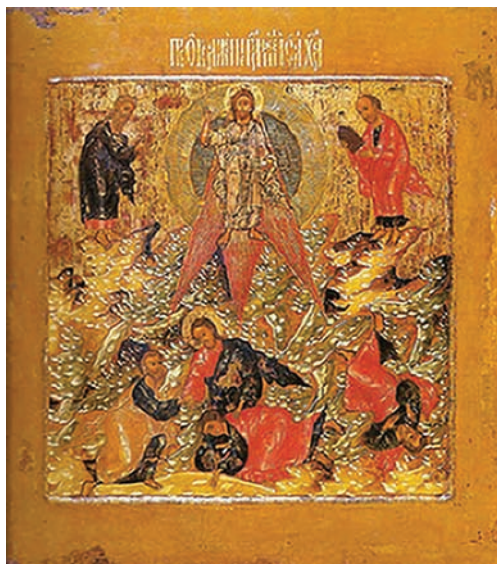
*If anyone, therefore, reads the Scriptures this way, he will find in them the Word concerning Christ and a foreshadowing of the new calling. For Christ is the "treasure which was hidden in the field" [Mt. 13:44], that is, in this world – for "the field is the world" [Mt. 13:38] – [a treasure] hidden in the Scriptures, for he was indicated by means of types and parables which could not be understood by men prior to the consummation of those things which had been predicted, that is, the advent of the Lord. And therefore it was said to Daniel the prophet, "Shut up the words and seal the book until the time of the consummation, until many learn and knowledge abounds. For when the dispersion shall be accomplished they shall know all these things" [Dan. 12:4, 7]. And Jeremiah also says, "In the last days they shall understand these things" [Jer. 23:20]. For every prophecy, before its fulfilment, is nothing but an enigma and ambiguity to men; but when the time has arrived and the prediction has come to pass then it has an exact exposition (exégésis). And for this reason, when at this present time the Law is read by the Jews, it is like a myth, for they do not possess the explanation (exégésis) of all things which pertain to the human advent of the Son of God; but when it is read by Christians, it is a treasure, hid in a field but brought to light by the Cross of Christ, and explained, both enriching the understanding of men and showing forth the wisdom of God and making known his dispensations with regard to man and prefiguring the kingdom of Christ and preaching*

<sup>18</sup> Saint Polycarp, *To the Philippians*, 7.2

*in anticipation the good news of the inheritance of the holy Jerusalem and proclaiming beforehand that the man who loves God shall advance so far as even to see God and hear his Word and be glorified from hearing his speech to such an extent that others will not be able to behold his glorious countenance [cf. 2 Cor. 3:7], as was said by Daniel. “Those who understand shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and many of the righteous as the stars for ever and ever” [Dan. 12:3]. In this manner, then, I have shown it to be, if anyone read the Scriptures (AH 4.26.1).*

The image given by Christ, of treasure hidden in the field, or the world, is used by Irenaeus to refer to Christ himself prior to the Cross, Christ is hidden as a treasure in Scripture. Christ is hidden in Scripture in prophecies and types, in the words and events of the patriarchs and prophets, which prefigure what was to happen in and through Christ in his human advent as preached by the Apostles. However, they are only prophecies and types; what they indicate is not yet known. And so, for those who read Scripture without the explanation of what it is that they foreshadow, the Word they contain and the Gospel they anticipate, Scripture remains only myths and fables. It is through the Cross, the Passion of Christ, that light is shed on these writings, revealing what they in fact mean and how they announce the Word of God. The crucified and exalted Jesus Christ was present prior to the Passion as the veiled content of Scripture, the Word of God hidden in the words of Scripture, being revealed through the Cross, in the *kerygma*, the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel.

So, for Irenaeus the revelation of the Word of God does not occur simply with the birth of Jesus from Mary; rather the revelation occurs in an interpretative context – “if anyone reads the Scriptures in this way” they will encounter the Word, Jesus Christ, as he is revealed by the Cross. Many people saw Jesus during his life, and



**The Transfiguration. Late XVII century icon. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg**

his death on the cross, but not all understood who he is; to understand this requires reflection and an interpretative engagement with the Scriptures. But Irenaeus also goes one step further, in a tremendously dynamic manner: if anyone reads Scripture in this way, focussing on Christ and understanding him by engaging with the Scriptures as illuminated by the Cross, they are, in turn, themselves interpreted, as it were, by the Word of God, in such a manner that they also become transfigured to such a point that others will not be able to behold their glorious countenance. Concerning themselves with Christ, in this engagement with Scripture seen through the Cross, they put on Christ’s own identity.

Irenaeus further unpacks the mystery of the Scriptures being opened by the Cross, by combining John 1:14 with the apocalyptic imagery of the book of Revelation. He points out that, as Christ has been given all things by his Father (Mt. 11:27), Christ alone, as the judge of the living and the dead, has the key of David, and so he alone opens and shuts (Rev. 3:7). Using the imagery of Revelation 5, Irenaeus continues:

*“No one, either in heaven or on earth, or under the earth, was able to open the book” of the Father, “nor to look into it”, with the exception of “the Lamb who was slain and who redeemed us with his own blood”, receiving from the same God, who made all things by the Word and adorned them by [his] Wisdom, power over all things when “the Word became flesh” [Jn. 1:14] (AH 4.20.2).*

Only the slain Lamb has received all power, wealth, wisdom and might (Rev. 5:12), and so he alone is able to open the book, and this, Irenaeus specifies, is the book of the Father. The revelation of the content, the Word, of the paternal book by the slain Lamb, is associated by Irenaeus with the Word becoming flesh, for it is the enfleshed, revealed, Word who alone makes known or exegetes (*exegêsato*) the Father, as the Prologue of John concludes (an. 1:18). Just as the Gospel alone unlocks the treasures of Scripture, so also it is only in the Son, as preached in the Gospel, that the invisible and immeasurable God becomes visible and comprehensible, as Irenaeus repeatedly insists. It is in the Gospel, proclaiming the crucified and exalted Christ in the images and terms provided by Scripture, that we encounter the Incarnate Word.

The central and determinative significance of the Passion for the revelation of the Word, the crucified and exalted Christ proclaimed in the matrix of the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets, is clear from other writers. For example, Hippolytus, in his treatise *On Christ and the Antichrist*, explains how the Word became flesh by reference to scriptural fabric of the Gospel, spun upon the Cross:

*For the Word of God, being fleshless, put on the holy flesh from the holy Virgin, as a bridegroom a garment, having woven it for himself in the sufferings of the Cross, so that*

*having mixed our mortal body with his own power, and having mingled the corruptible into the incorruptible, and the weak with the strong, he might save perishing man.*

*The web-beam, therefore, is the passion of the Lord upon the cross, and the warp on it is the power of the Holy Spirit, and the woof is the holy flesh woven by the Spirit, and the thread is the grace which by the love of Christ binds and unites the two in one, and the rods are the Word; and the workers are the patriarchs and prophets who weave the fair, long, perfect tunic for Christ; and the Word passing through these, like the combs (or rods), completes through them that which his Father wills<sup>19</sup>.*

The flesh of the Word, received from the Virgin and “woven in the sufferings of the Cross”, is woven by the patriarchs and prophets, whose actions and words proclaim the manner in which the Word became present and manifest. It is in the preaching of Jesus Christ, the proclamation of the one who died on the Cross, interpreted and understood in the matrix, the womb, of Scripture, that the Word receives flesh from the virgin. The virgin in this case, Hippolytus later affirms following Revelation 12, is the Church, who will never cease “bearing from her heart the Word that is persecuted by the unbelieving in the world”, while the male child she bears is Christ, God and man, announced by the prophets, “whom the Church continually bears as she teaches all nations”<sup>20</sup>.

As a final example, the connection between the Cross and the revelation of the Word of God, now specifically referred to as ‘the Incarnation’, is addressed most directly by Saint Athanasius, in his classic work, *On the Incarnation*. This treatise is usually read, anachronistically, as an exposition of how and why the second person of the Trinity became man – so that we might become

<sup>19</sup> *On Christ and the Antichrist*, p. 4; see also the extended metaphor in *Antichrist*, p. 59.

<sup>20</sup> *Antichrist*, p. 61.

God. But to do this overlooks completely Athanasius' own stated purpose in the opening words of the work:

*Well then, my friend, let us next with pious reverence tell of the incarnation of the Word and expound his divine manifestation to us, which the Jews slander and the Greeks mock, but which we ourselves adore, so that from the apparent degradation of the Word you may have ever greater and stronger piety towards him. For the more he is mocked by unbelievers, the greater witness he provides of his divinity, because what men cannot understand, as impossible, he shows to be possible, and what men mock as unsuitable by his goodness he renders suitable, and what men explain away and mock as human by his power he shows to be divine, overthrowing the illusion of idols by his apparent degradation through the cross, and persuading those who mock and do not believe to recognise his divinity and power<sup>21</sup>.*

That is, the work which Athanasius calls *On the Incarnation* (just as the previous treatise, to which he here refers, *Against the Heathen*) is meant as an apology for the Cross<sup>22</sup>. The 'Incarnation of the Word' and his apparent degradation are through the Cross, which is mocked and slandered by Jews and Greeks; although this very mockery and slander, the apparent degradation, in fact, demonstrates his divinity. Human conceptions of what befits divinity, human idols, are overthrown by the 'apparent degradation' of the Word on the cross – 'apparent' because for those who understand this properly, that is, 'according to the Scriptures'<sup>23</sup>, this is nothing less than 'the divine manifestation to us' of the Word, which Athanasius sets himself to expound. In this way, Athanasius shows that it is not 'irrational' (*alogos*) to "confess that he who

ascended the cross is the Word (*logos*) of God and saviour of the universe"<sup>24</sup>. And so Athanasius concludes his treatise *On the Incarnation* with an exhortation to study Scripture, "written by God through men versed in theology", so that we might learn of "his second glorious and truly divine manifestation to us", and so participate in "the fruit of his own Cross"<sup>25</sup>.

For all the Fathers considered, and examples could be multiplied easily, the Incarnation of the Word is not located in the birth of Jesus from Mary as a distinct event from the Passion and exaltation. In some ways, such a position results from assuming the shorthand formulae as 'dogmatic facts', rather than as answers to particular questions, and then conflating John 1:14, which does not speak of a birth, with the infancy narratives, which do not speak of an incarnation of a heavenly, previously existing being. That Jesus was indeed born from Mary – a specific, temporal, historical event – was indeed assumed as a given. But, it is essential to note, to describe this event as 'the Incarnation of the Word' can only be done by reflecting on Christ through the medium of Scripture read in the light of the Cross. When this is done, when the Passion, the crucifixion and exaltation, is taken as the central axis of theological reflection, then, as we saw from Origen earlier, this becomes determinative for contemplating the identity of Christ, and everything else is understood through this prism and in this pattern. Thus, the infancy narratives are not an attempt to preserve accurate historical information regarding the birth of Christ, but are, as Raymond Brown has so clearly pointed out, a retelling of the basic *kerigma* in a

<sup>21</sup> *On the Incarnation*, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> For this, see K. Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (New York: Routledge 1998), pp. 28-29, 84.

<sup>23</sup> Note especially the different explanations of the Passion of Christ Athanasius provides for those "outside" and for those "inside" the Church, *On the Incarnation*, pp. 21-26.

<sup>24</sup> *Against the Heathen*, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *On the Incarnation*, p. 56.

mode appropriate for the occasion<sup>26</sup>. This point is equally evident from iconography, which depicts the Christ not in a stable, but wrapped in swaddling clothes and lain in a cave, the shape of which mirrors the posture of the Virgin, just as he was lain in the virgin cave owned by the other Joseph to emerge as the exalted Lord. The same point is made even more dramatically in Orthodox hymnography for the prefast of the Nativity, which consciously uses the same imagery and phrases as the material for Holy Week, which itself culminates in the Paschal reading of the Prologue of John.

Theological talk of 'Incarnation' thus operates at an interpretative level, based on the paschal faith – it is the Crucified One who is the Incarnate Word. But one must also go further, as already indicated by Irenaeus and Hippolytus: if it is from the perspective of the Cross that we speak of the Word becoming flesh, fashioning a body from the Virgin to be the temple in which he dwells, as Athanasius puts it, then this body cannot be separated from the bodies of Christians in whom the Word now dwells. So, in Athanasius' work *On the Incarnation*, there is very little about Jesus' actual birth or his life before the Passion: the treatise is mainly concerned with what the Word has worked through the body, by dying in the body and so granting his disciples life in his body, and consequently the bulk of Athanasius' demonstration of the divinity of Christ argues from the divine works the Word brings about in and through Christians *now*, that is, those in whom he dwells as in a temple. The various levels in all of this reflection are summed up concisely in the second century *Letter to Diognetus*: "He was from the beginning, appeared new yet was found to be

old, and is ever new [or 'young'] being born in the hearts of the saints"<sup>27</sup>.

I have tried to present an understanding and perspective on 'Incarnation' which is at once both more adequate to the development of theological reflection, and also allows us to see some of the wider dimensions of the miraculous presence of God among us – the Incarnation. The affirmation that Jesus Christ is the Word of God become flesh is not based upon a historicizing conflation of John 1:14 with the infancy narratives, in a theology which is little better than a mixture of metaphysics and mythology. Rather, the confession that Jesus Christ is the Word of God is based in the literary dynamics of the relationship between Scripture and the Gospel, which we have examined, a relationship which turns specifically upon the axis of the Paschal faith, the lordship of the crucified and exalted Christ, as proclaimed by the Apostles 'according to the Scriptures', and as continually reflected on thereafter by those who follow in their tradition. In this way, the confession that Christ is the Word of God directs our own attention back to Scripture, to reflect yet further on the identity of Christ, and this is an engagement to which all Christians are called, so coming to understand themselves in the light of Christ and eventually to come to the fullness of his stature (Eph. 4:13). Instead of building metaphysical systems from familiar shorthand formulae, we must recognize the interpretative dimension in which such theological formulae take flesh, are embodied, and so be brought back to the basic question for Christians, the one posed by Christ himself, "Who do you say I am" (Mt. 16:15), and its perennial challenge. ■

*Sourozh 89, August 2002*

<sup>26</sup> Cf. R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday 1993) and, more briefly, *An Adult Christ at Christmas* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press 1988).

<sup>27</sup> *Epistle to Diognetus*, 11.4.



# The Light of Christ Enlightens all Men

*Nicolas Žernov*



Nicolas Žernov with his wife Militza

*Nicolas Žernov (1898 – 1980), one of the outstanding figures of the Russian emigration, had spent 60 years of his long life in exile, which he accepted as a God-given opportunity to Labour for Christ and for his Church. In 1980 "Sourozh" published a translation of the final chapter of his last work, 'Sunset years: epilog of the Žernov's family chronicle', written with the help of his wife Militza.*

Now as I write these lines I see all my life so clearly before me. I see myself as a boy undefended either from the joys and griefs, or from the delights and terrors of the first years of earthly life. I see myself as a youth full of new experiences, inspirations and temptations. And then began the bloody years of revolution, when our family lived in daily expectation of destruction. A miraculous deliverance from encirclement by the Red forces; Constantinople, which gave us both freedom and poverty; Serbia, the University of Belgrade; the beginning of the Russian Student Christian Movement; the move to Paris, the capital of the Russian emigration; encounter with Western Christianity; marriage; the Fellowship of Saint Alban and Saint Sergius of Radonezh; work on

my doctoral dissertation in Oxford; raising funds for the needs of the Russian Church; lectures in theological colleges and sermons in English churches and cathedrals; my first books; the Second World War; the founding of the House of Saint Basil the Great in London; teaching in the University of Oxford; India; America; travel around the world; the House of Saint Gregory and Saint Macrina in Oxford; retirement; the evening of my life.

The nearer I come to the end of my earthly existence and the more I look back on what I have lived through, the clearer it becomes to me that all this time I have been following a fore-ordained path. The events of the past stand out vividly in my memory, and their inner connection is revealed with greater and greater clarity.

Throughout my life I have been faced with urgent problems and have concentrated all my energy on their solution. Frequently the problems facing me seemed insurmountable, sometimes I felt myself on the edge of the abyss, but every time the road continued around the corner and I could go further, though I never knew what awaited me in the future. Hopes and fears alternated in my soul. I could not consider myself the master of my fate; all the more so as the most important changes in my life were brought about by a friendly hand offered to me at the right time either by my friends or by people completely unknown to me, who knew nothing either of me or my aspirations. Without their help I should never have been able to reach many of my goals.

But if neither I myself nor my well-wishers were the architects of my life, who then was its designer? The Gospel teaches that the fate of each man and of all mankind is not the plaything of blind chance, nor is it under the power of inexorable fate. It is in the hands of the Creator, who loves and knows his creature. This faith, however, does not relieve us of responsibility for ourselves, nor for the lot of other people. The Christian view of the world is a paradox: the more entirely man gives himself up to the will of God, the greater the freedom he receives, and the greater his feeling of responsibility. God does not compel anyone. He calls us to filial co-operation, not to servile submission. The man who denies Divine Providence is inclined to ascribe the decisive role in his life to good or bad luck. Thus he becomes the victim of his passions and of the elemental forces of earthly existence.

Looking at the life of the people around me, I have always been struck by how single-minded and full of inspiration some of them were, and how others seemed to be wandering in darkness, complaining about the meaninglessness of their existence. Despite this contrast, I believe that every person occupies a place in the life of

mankind which belongs uniquely to him. His experience is not purposeless or wasted.

What, then, has my life taught me? Thinking over all that I have experienced, the words spoken by the priest during the Presanctified Liturgy in Lent have come to have more and more meaning for me: "The light of Christ enlightens all men." I saw this light for the first time in the terrible days of the Red Terror. In the course of the rest of my life it sometimes blazed up more brightly, sometimes grew dim; but it has never left me. Though I often lost my way, this light enabled me to find it again. Through this light was born in me the strength and steadfastness to go forward; because of it I did not lose faith in the ultimate meaning of everything that happened to me. In the light of Christ I understood myself and all the contradictions of my nature. It helped me to find unity with people who loved me and whom I loved.

It is difficult for me to imagine my life unilluminated by the light of the Gospel. The whole of my understanding of the world has been formed by it, and it has strengthened me in the hope of the victory of good over evil.

People who do not know Christ seem to me to be deprived of the knowledge of true existence. In affirming this, I am aware of the controversial nature of my words, since most people on earth have not known and do not know the good news of Christianity. Now even those people to whom the Gospel was preached are for the most part falling away from the faith. Many people are beginning to feel that the light of Christ was a temporary illusion, and that with the growth of 'enlightenment' and scientific knowledge it proves to be unreal and unnecessary. However, it is precisely our epoch that provides new and striking evidence of how essential the light of Christ is for mankind and how without it man falls victim to forces that tear him apart from within. The vast experiment carried out in the Soviet Union – the organisation of the life of a whole people on the basis of compulsory



Nicolas Zernov with Metropolitan Anthony and Bishop Anthony (Melnikov)

atheism and on an outright denial of all that the Church teaches – reveals with a new force just what it was that Christianity brought to the life of mankind and what it loses in falling away. The main lesson to be learnt from the Soviet experiment is that the man who has denied God has denied himself also. He is more inclined to fall under the power of a totalitarian system with its falsehood, fear and contempt for human dignity. The followers of Lenin are well aware that believers can show a resistance to dictatorship of which the unbeliever is incapable. Hence their relentless struggle against religion and against Christianity in particular. Lenin's followers strive to seize power over the whole world, but as long as the radiant face of Christ is not forgotten by mankind they will not succeed in gaining victory. The never-ceasing struggle between creative and destructive forces in the world has in our time reached a greater intensity than ever before, and Russia has become the centre of a world crisis.

I was eighteen years old when my homeland was dragged into the whirlpool of revolutionary events. All my subsequent conscious life has been coloured by the growth

of communist dictatorship. My family and I were on the side of the defeated. Our lot was emigration. We escaped the tortures, prisons and death-camps – the portion of those who remained in Russia. Our Church suffered persecution and humiliation in those years of dread. But this was also the time of her unseen glory, when martyrs and confessors witnessed that Christ is indeed the 'Light of Knowledge' and the 'Sun of Righteousness'.

There have been periods of our life when the voice of our homeland has not reached us, and when we have felt our tragic isolation from it, but we have continued to believe in its rebirth and to serve it as far as we could. In the course of the last years we have been more and more closely connected with the new generation of Russian youth, our grandchildren and even great-grand-children. Over them shines the light of Christ, and the Christian faith once more illumines their life of self-denial and struggle for the spiritual rebirth of Russia.

Meanwhile Militza and I await a meeting with a new world beyond our comprehension. I believe the light of Christ that I have seen here on earth will not leave us in our new existence. ■

*Sourozh 2, November 1980*

# Father Alexis Toth: A Beloved Father, Teacher and Guide is Glorified

*The following article is about Saint Alexis and was written at the time when the Orthodox Church of America was preparing his canonisation. The article explains why Saint Alexis is known as “the father of American Orthodoxy”.*

**D**uring the Memorial Day pilgrimage at Saint Tikhon’s Monastery this year, Archpriest Alexis Georgievich Toth, will, according to the will of God, be added to the canon of saints of the holy Orthodox church, eighty-five years after his repose. His glorification, signifying the consciousness of the Church that God has granted him entrance into the heavenly Kingdom and that he dwells among the saints, means that we will gain a new intercessor for us before the Lord. No longer will we pray in this way: “Father Alexis, if you have found favour with God, intercede for us with the Lord...” Now, we will be able to pray confidently: “Saint Alexis, intercede for us!”

Father Alexis Toth<sup>1</sup> has been called “an exemplary leader and central force in the development of the Orthodox Church in America” and “the Father of Orthodoxy in America”<sup>2</sup>. His chief work on this earth was his role in the reuniting of countless thousands of Eastern rite Roman Catholics (Uniates) to the holy Orthodox Faith, to the Catholic Church of Christ – for the true Catholic Church (*Catholic* comes from the Greek words *kat’olikon*, words rich in meaning: ‘according to the whole’, ‘wholesome’, ‘complete, perfect’, ‘that which heals/makes whole’, and ‘existing throughout

the whole world’, ‘universal’, ‘appropriate for all peoples’<sup>3</sup>) is the Orthodox church – or more precisely, in the language of the Fathers – the ‘*One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church*’ whose faith is the *Orthodox Faith*.

This group of new Orthodox, whose forefathers had held the Orthodox faith until several centuries earlier, became the second largest group of Orthodox Christians in the Americas (the first being the natives of Alaska) and they were located in the great population centre of the country. They thus became a nucleus of the Orthodox Church in America. It was entirely appropriate and fitting, and according to the divine plan, that the Orthodox church in the Americas should be blessed at an early stage in her history by the *return* of thousands of persons from a faith that was incomplete (and hence not, in truth, *Catholic*, though possessing nonetheless much that was true and good) to the faith that their forebears had held – the faith that *is perfect and complete, lacking in nothing; that is spotless and pure and undefiled, and is thus able to heal and complete and perfect all infirmities, all incompletenesses, all imperfections, and bring them to completeness and wholeness, to health and wholeness*. Through this Faith alone, God’s wonderful, beneficent plan for men can be fully actualised in any individual person who embraces and surrenders to that faith, and

<sup>1</sup> Toth is Father Alexis’s name in the land of his birth, present-day Slovakia. The ‘th’ sound is not a part of the Russian and kindred tongues, and is rendered in those languages by an ‘f’; that is why his name is written in these languages as ‘Toft’.

<sup>2</sup> Deacon Keith Russin, M.Div. thesis presented to the faculty of St Vladimir’s Seminary, March 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Because of the word’s richness, and the difficulty of conveying it adequately in translation, it is transliterated in most languages, rather than translated; hence the English word *Catholic*. Church Slavonic is a major exception, translating it *sobornaya*.



St Alexis

joins himself to the Church – the spiritual communion of God and men – in which that Faith is maintained. It is in this true Catholic Church that salvation is found – for in the New Testament the Greek word translated as ‘salvation’ is also rendered as ‘health’, ‘wholeness’, a concept that is one of the meanings of *Catholic*, one of the marks of *catholicity*.

The Gospel parable of the Prodigal Son, familiar to all since it is read on one of the Sundays preceding Great Lent, teaches us that while the faithful son is much beloved by his father, the return of the unfaithful son occasions even greater joy and celebration and feasting than the faithful son’s faithfulness. “For,” as the father explains, “this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found” (Luke, 15-24). Indeed! *Dead, and now alive; lost, and now found.* Spiritually dead, and now spiritually alive; lost from the assembly of the faithful, the assembly of their brothers and sisters, and now found and restored. And though it was not Father Alexis’s converts themselves, but their ancestors, who had left the Orthodox Church – and they not by their own free, willing, and conscious and deliberate choice but because they were tricked and misled, threatened and deceived – nevertheless, the same joy is known that was felt by the father and his household on the return of the prodigal son.

It is the same joy that was felt also by the shepherd when he found his lost sheep that had gone astray on the mountains. As Jesus, the Good Shepherd, asks the Pharisees and us, “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, will not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? ...And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost” (Luke 15:4,6).

For our merciful God did not leave his lost sheep to die in the spiritual wilderness,

separated from the rest of their flock; he sent a man to find them and restore them to the safe path. Just as he sent the Good Shepherd, his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to find the lost sheep (in symbol, the whole human race), so he has sent countless shepherds in the name of Christ to seek out lost sheep ever since the founding of the Church.

To this flock which was lost, he sent as a shepherd Father Alexis Toth, who was himself one of the lost, whose mind and spirit he enlightened, drawing him to the True Faith in order that he might be a guide to salvation for his brothers and sisters. For they had been lost from the Way of salvation that their fathers and mothers had travelled for seven centuries. What was said of Saints Paul and Silas who preached the Way could also be said of Father Alexis Toth: “These men are the servants of the most high God, who show us the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17).

Why did Father Alexis return to the Orthodox fold? The immediate reasons are well known: his treatment by Archbishop Ireland of Minneapolis when he dutifully reported to him on arriving in the United States as a widowed Uniate priest in 1889. More generally, Father Alexis sought for truth because in his heart he was a true servant of Christ. His love for Christ compelled him to stand up for truth even when it brought him into trials and persecutions, both of which are the lot of all followers of Christ, as the Lord warned us, but which became his lot to a greater degree. In this fallen world, there are Godpleasing separations between men – namely, separations that bring one into unity with God, with his people, and with his will. Courage – together with chastity, truth, and righteousness (justice) – is one of the four divine virtues that are the source of all other virtues. Father Alexis’s stock of courage was such that he did not shrink from such separations. And no doubt this courage was put to the test on many occasions. Surely he must often have prayed fervently

for courage, and in response surely it was divinely bestowed.

By the time Father Alexis reposed on 7 May 1909, over seventeen parishes and twenty-nine thousand people had been established in Orthodoxy through his labours, but his influence surely went beyond these numbers, for he was the initiator of a movement that ultimately touched many more people and parishes. One estimate has it that more than two hundred thousand Russian Orthodox in this country are descended from those he led to Orthodoxy, but this may refer only to those directly converted through his own personal efforts. *And his influence now, as a heavenly intercessor, will be even greater.*

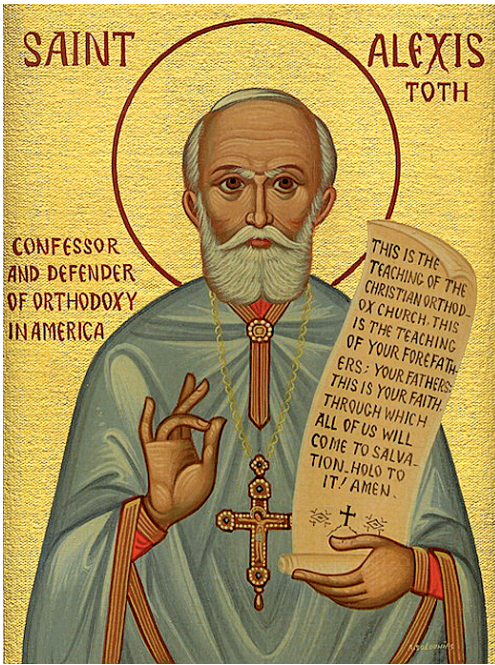
The canonisation of Father Alexis Toth is, first of all, a glorification of a new Saint of the Orthodox Church. It is, as well, one of the highlights of the celebration this year marking two hundred years of Orthodoxy on this continent. *But it is also – quite notably – a celebration and recognition of both the return and the contributions of a people a portion of whom our Lord called into his holy Church.* This group, known as Slav Uniates, also as Eastern rite Catholics, or Greek Catholics, and as Carpatho-Russians or Rusyns – were guided by Father Alexis to find the True Faith. There were, to be sure, shepherds who guided them from the side of the Orthodox Church of Russia (the Church that adopted this hitherto lost flock and accepted it into the Orthodox fold) – among them Patriarch Saint Tikhon, the Enlightener of North America, who worked with Father Alexis and showed great confidence in him – together with many others too numerous to mention. But Father Alexis more nearly personifies the Carpatho-Rusyn people himself, since he was one of them. Thus the honour that is accorded Father Alexis also extends to his people and their posterity. And correspondingly, he is in a special sense their leader, their shepherd,

their *Patron*, their *Father* – much as Saint Sava is the Father and Patron of the Serbs, Saints Cyril and Methodius of all the Slavs, Saint Nicholas of the Japanese, Saint Alban of the English, Saint Stephen of the Syrians, and so on. And as such, he is the *boast*, the *pride*, the *glory*, the *joy*, and the *exultation* of his people, to use the language of Scripture and of the Orthodox liturgy. The Apostle writes: “Let no man glory in men. For all things are yours<sup>4</sup> – that is, Christ is the Truth who is all things to us, and who is more worthy of glory than any mere man. Yet in the person of Father Alexis, Christ was present, *as a shepherd, as a prophet, who guided his people to that Truth, to the house of God*, on account of the love that he held for the Creator and Saviour, and for Divine Truth. It is Christ we honour when we honour him. And he, in turn, can say to his own people, just as Saint Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: “We ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith”<sup>5</sup> – because they are his pride, his joy, his glory, his children, his own people, and they have the consciousness of being a *people* he shepherded to the true Way and tended diligently once he had brought them there – one of the many *peoples* who together comprise a Church that is marked by both *unity* and *universality* (for instance catholicity).

These children of Father Alexis became stones in the house of God on this continent, the house whose foundation and cornerstone is none other than Christ himself. Upon these stones, others were later laid. Consequently, the entire Orthodox Church in America is, in part, the common legacy both of Father Alexis and of his people. And in turn, he is, in an extended sense, not only the father and patron of these his people, and even of their descendants, but of all Orthodox Christians in America, for we are one family indeed. We have but one house of faith, one fellowship, one communion; we are one body in Christ.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor. 3:20

<sup>5</sup> 2 Thess. 1:4



St Alexis Toth of Wilkes-Barre

### The Significance of Saint Alexis for our time

Father Alexis and the people he represents – the Greek Catholics who returned to the bosom of the Holy Orthodox Catholic Church – have a special message for the America of today. Their message is partly told by what they did – their embracing of the Orthodox Faith. But it is partly told by who they were.

Probably more than any other land, America is a land of many peoples, whose multicultural heritage is proclaimed continually at this time in history. Father Alexis Toth did not belong to one of the larger or better known, easily identifiable national groups that immigrated to this country – he was not one of the English, the Germans, the Irish, or the Italians. He was not one of the Swedes or the Finns, the Africans or the Asians. And this is highly significant! Had he been one of these groups,

his – and his people’s – identification with their ethnic origins would have been much more pronounced.

Instead, Father Alexis belonged to an ethnic group which could in a sense be called ‘anonymous’ – for not only was it small against the wide tapestry of this land – but it did not have a well-developed sense of *ethnic identity*<sup>6</sup> (in addition to the names Slavs, Carpatho-Russians, and Rusyns or Carpathokusyns, Father Alexis’s people have at times called themselves or been called Hungarians, Slovaks, Poles, Ukrainians, Lemkos, Ruthenians, Slavonians, Russians, Belorussians, Bukovinians, Little Russians, and Galicians). This very *anonymity* (the word means, literally, ‘namelessness’) means that the Carpatho-Rusyns found their identity above all in Christ, more than in ethnic labels, which were the unifying banner of other immigrant groups to a greater degree. *God arranged things so that Father Alexis’s people did not give their identity to an ethnic group, because they did not have a strong sense that they were an ethnic group – or, if they were, of what precisely it was. As a result, they gave their identity to Christ.* This anonymity could be compared to the anonymity with which Christ was born in a cavern. It is divine in its humility. As such, it is a special gift given by God to this Carpatho-Rusyn people, which they, in turn, have given to the Church in America and to all the people of America who will be called into that Church.

It is a special gift because Father Alexis’s people – through this anonymity, but working also with other events of history through which the plan of God was effected – became the nucleus of an Orthodox Church in America which was for this land and did not have a strong sense of ties to a mother church. Where such ties result in love and charity towards the mother church, they are only to be commended. But in our land, in the case of every immigrant Orthodox group

<sup>6</sup> This has been well-documented by Robert Magocsi, a Protestant and founder of the Carpatho-Rusyn Research Center, whose life’s labour has been to give those whom he calls Carpatho-Rusyns a sense of ethnic identity through his scholarly research.



except the Carpatho-Rusyns of Father Toth, such ties became a hindrance because they were allowed to destroy Orthodox unity and have resulted in a wholly un-Orthodox *dividedness* among the Orthodox.

According to the Orthodox teaching on the *Church*, it is the local *Church* that is the basic unit of the *universal*, or *Catholic* Church. And it is an indisputable truth that to this day, of all the Orthodox groups that have immigrated to America, only Father Toth's Carpatho-Rusyns (or rather their descendants) have fully taken the step of identifying with this land as their ecclesiastical home, to the extent of forsaking all *canonical* ties to the homeland. This is an identification which is really mandated by the spirit of Orthodox ecclesiology, gospel, and canon law; for the only alternative to this is the multiplicity of 'jurisdictions' which is as uncanonical as it is un-Orthodox.

What is needed in every place where Orthodox Christians find themselves is not a *nationalistic* consciousness centred on that land (this, too, would be contrary to a true Orthodox church-consciousness – though too often it prevails, the result of the rise of nationalism, combined with resultant distortions in the modern idea of autocephaly). The proper attitude is, as the early Christians used to say: "Every fatherland (native land) is a foreign land, and every foreign land is a fatherland." Our real home is in heaven; on earth, with respect to the world, we are only strangers and exiles, pilgrims and sojourners. But ecclesiastically we look to the *local* Church, as it is the place where heaven and earth are united. Why the *local* Church? Because it is the local eucharistic *assembly* (in Greek, *ecclesia*) of *all* the believers in any one place, not *defined* in terms of any identity other than common humanity (thus racial, ethnic, or national identification are excluded). It is not a *part* of the Church, but possesses *the fullness* of the Church. Thus it is said to be *catholic*. (Nor is any congregationalist

aberration meant by this focus: the local community maintains its connection with the *universal* – that is, Catholic – Church, not only through mysteries but also through the legitimate primatial structures of the Church: archbishoprics, metropolitanates, patriarchates, and the synods that are held at these various levels.)

The Carpatho-Rusyns of Father Toth were the first (and, regrettably, remain the first) immigrant Orthodox people in this land to put these principles into practice fully. Yet, while the glorification of Father Alexis is a natural time to call attention to his people's contributions, as noted earlier, his greatness and his significance to all Orthodox Americans exalt him beyond his immediate cultural milieu.

### **Catholicity and the Unia**

Besides the fact that his people alone have fully identified with the reality of the local Church just described and the *unity* it makes possible (one bishop per city), there is something else that makes these things pertinent to the canonisation of Father Alexis Toth. Despite the confusion of the Union (Unia) into which Father Alexis was born – the confusion of Roman Catholic theology, ecclesiology, and spirituality grafted onto Orthodox liturgy – he, by the grace of God, was given the spiritual vision to see with the eye of his spiritual heart the utter bankruptcy of this unholy 'union', and the falsehood of its terms of agreement, having himself experienced that falsehood and bankruptcy in his dealings with the Roman Church. Despite the latter's more imposing size in this land, and the influence of, no doubt, many good and kind and even holy people among the laity and clergy of the Latin Church that Father Alexis had known in his years in Europe as well as in America, he had the spiritual insight and wisdom to discern the fundamental flaw of the idea of the Unia.

The Unia was based on the theory that the Orthodox Churches needed to be

‘reunited’ with the ‘apostolic see’ – Rome – in order to be fully ‘Catholic’. But Father Alexis realised that they did not need to be so united with Rome. He saw that the Orthodox Churches together comprised the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ. Their catholicity was anchored in the local assembly of believers – the local church, with a bishop ordained in apostolic succession offering to the faithful to partake in a Eucharistic communion ‘under both kinds’, that is, both the Body and Blood of Christ, which together are the food of life and source of all good things. The catholicity of the Orthodox Churches was manifested and preserved chiefly in this spiritual, vertical communion. Horizontal structures – a system of primacies – had an important function in Orthodoxy. But in Latin Christianity, they had become distorted; the horizontal dimension had totally replaced the vertical, so that the criterion of ‘catholicity’ was whether a church was in communion with the see of Rome, and not whether its beliefs or practices were true and truly ‘catholic’ – wholesome, healthy, universal.

As a consequence of his realisation that Orthodoxy had preserved the Catholic faith, Father Alexis desired to reunite himself to the Church of his fathers, and so he did.

### **A Timely Canonisation**

The glorification of Father Alexis Toth is significant at this time for another reason: although it is not being done for this reason (or in the divine plan, perhaps it partly is): it is an answer to those who are ill-serving the truth by embracing the ‘rejected branch theory’. This hypothesis was originally proposed by Anglicans, who held that their church was one branch, Orthodoxy another, and Rome a third. The branch theory contradicts our belief that the Church is one and indivisible. A local church that succumbs to doctrinal errors can no longer be considered a branch of the Vine; if it corrects these errors it can be ‘regrafted’ in – in that

event that church’s priesthood, sacraments, or apostolic succession can once again be considered to have life, since they have once again been rejoined to the Vine from which they receive life (Jesus Christ; cf. John 15). In the interim, it belongs only to God, and is not given to the Orthodox Church, either to affirm or deny the presence of priesthood, sacraments, or apostolic succession in the separated church, though we may continue to discern some of the ‘fruits’ of faith among its adherents.

A meeting held in Balamand, Lebanon, in June 1993 between Orthodox and Roman Catholic delegates produced an agreement that contained the following points, among others: (1) The Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches recognise each other as “Sister Churches”. But this designation is properly used by the Orthodox only in referring to Orthodox Churches, that is Churches sharing the same (Orthodox) beliefs. (2) Each side recognises in the other “profession of apostolic faith.” This ambiguous statement, if understood as referring to the fullness of apostolic faith, can only be applied to the Orthodox Church, and therefore is obviously incorrect. If understood as meaning *portions* of the apostolic faith, it could be understood as true. Such ambiguity is not worthy of acceptance by the Orthodox, since it is open to misinterpretation. (3) Each side recognises in the other “participation in the same sacraments, above all the one priesthood celebrating the one sacrifice of Christ, the apostolic succession of bishops.” – but see previous paragraph. Apostolic succession may exist, but it is meaningful only where the (full) apostolic *faith is preached*, or is restored. (4) “...There is no question of conversion of people from one Church to the other in order to ensure their salvation...”. This statement, taken at face value, makes a mockery of the action of Father Alexis Toth and all his flock, and of the action of anyone who converts from Roman Catholicism to Orthodoxy”.

All in all, the agreement is a powerful endorsement of the 'branch theory'<sup>7</sup>. In contrast, the canonisation of Father Alexis Toth, implying esteem for his action in bringing himself and others into the Orthodox fold, is timely in that it implies a rejection of that theory. It should be stressed that Father Alexis's action, reflecting his conviction that all are called into unity in Christ, is an action of love for all men, even for his former co-religionists.

**A Gift to the Church in North America**

Father Alexis Toth had faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and had the honesty and courage to follow Christ where he led him. He was the seed that fell on fertile ground and bore fruit a hundred-fold. Like the Prophet Moses, he was a prophet who led his people out of the bondage of Egypt, through the Red Sea of persecutions and trials – led them through the desert to the Promised Land, where their fathers of old had dwelt.

As one who insisted on nothing less than the truth, Father Alexis is an example for all people. If he had been one to compromise easily on matters of faith, to say there was no need to trouble oneself to come to the Orthodox faith in order to find salvation – that one could just as easily remain outside the fold and be saved – the Orthodox Church in America would be much poorer today. Let us ask him to intercede that all Americans will follow his example of zeal

in searching for the truth, and especially, that we may be inspired by his faith and zeal and determination; may the Lord grant these gifts to us through his prayers, and give spiritual enlightenment to all Christians, so that they may discern the difference between truth and untruth, between light and darkness.

The work begun by Father Alexis Toth is not ended; it is our work as well, and much remains. The fields are white with harvest. Labourers are needed to work in them. The task is immense, but God's help is infinite, and Archpriest Alexis will be a new heavenly intercessor to obtain it for us; in this is the greatest significance of his canonisation. He criss-crossed this land, labouring for the spread of Orthodoxy; the work that we do is near to his heart. He will be present with us, and his prayers will help us as we begin our third century faced with new and challenging problems that would have seemed strange to him. Soon we will venerate his holy relics with confidence that we will obtain, in return, his assistance as we continue the work that was his. God has chosen this time to honour, to glorify his servant, Father Alexis Toth, a leader and father in the faith; therefore, with great joy, and with one mind and heart, we will join in glorifying Father Alexis as he, by the grace of God, is joined to the ranks of the saints in heaven. ■

*Sourozh 56, May 1994*

---

<sup>7</sup> Pope John Paul II and, reports indicate, our own Ecumenical Patriarch, His All-Holiness Bartholomaios, have explicitly subscribed to this thinking, only swapping metaphors: instead of speaking of the two Churches, East and West, as two 'branches', they speak of them as 'two lung' of the Church.

Although the agreement declares that each side must have "a respect for the liturgical celebrations of the other Church", it contradicts this by asking each side to violate its church canons by "putting at their disposal... (their) own church for alternate celebration at different times in the same building."

# Saint Silouan: A Modern Athonite Saint

*Nun Magdalen*

*Sister Magdalen is a member of the Monastic Community of Saint John the Baptist at Tolleshunt Knights in Essex. This paper was given as a talk to the Friends of Mt Athos in May 2001.*

Friends are those who love the reality as it is. Friends of Mt Athos are therefore well advised to get to know its reality from its saints. When we read about Mt Athos, it seems to me that we find two approaches, very different in character. One I would characterise as ‘journalistic’. As soon as you see in the first line of an article or the blurb on a book’s back cover a reference to the banishment of women and hens, you know that you are in the ‘journalistic’ category. If there are photographs, there has to be one of a huge ancient refectory where a few monks are having a meal and listening to a reading, and the caption informs you that they are drinking wine while hearing sermons against gluttony.

The second approach is in my view both more faithful to the reality and more edifying: it tries to show Athos as a spiritual phenomenon. Thankfully such works are abundant, and even in the last decade a score of biographies of Athonite holy men has appeared in English. There are, too, books which start out as travelogues, whose authors became touched by a spark of the – often hidden – fire burning in the hearts of men of prayer, and in the places and sacred objects



Nun Magdalen

sanctified by this prayer over the centuries.

Saint Silouan is a man of our times in two senses: he lived recently and was ‘given’ to the Church by canonisation in 1987. The Patriarchal act of Canonisation gave him the title Saint Silouan the Athonite, bearing witness to the fact that he is a fruit of the Athonite Tradition. In him we can glimpse what

makes of Athos a spiritual power station for the world, and see its relevance for all of us, wherever we live. If we take the best examples of Athonite life, we are not being naive about any human weaknesses one could find there, or about any of the so-called ‘anachronisms’ that puzzle the journalistic authors. We do, though, put these phenomena in their rightful place in the scheme of things.

Archimandrite Sophrony’s biography of Saint Silouan<sup>1</sup> has the advantage of being written with the psychological insight that characterises 20th century writing. Furthermore, he avoids stressing the charisms of healing and prophecy that Saint Silouan was endowed with at the expense of presenting him as an authentic struggler for the Truth. Once, a child who heard that I would be telling about Saint Silouan that

<sup>1</sup> *Saint Silouan the Athonite* (Stavropegic Monastery of Saint John the Baptist 1988).

day asked me, “Isn’t he the one that used to drink two bottles of vodka and not get drunk? Didn’t he have a fight in the street?” “Yes.” “Oh good, I like the naughty saints best.” Do not misunderstand me: you do not have to be wicked in your youth to become a saint. Nor is it wickedness that proves you are a real human. But if you have seen the same person amusing himself as a village lad, and then spending nights weeping for the world, a bridge is built between ‘everyday’ life and holy life. Athos ceases to be quaint.

In 1866 Simeon Antonov was born in the village of Shovsk in the Tambov Province of Russia. There he lived as one of seven children in a rural family, working from a young age in the fields, and receiving little formal schooling – two winter terms at the village primary school. Archimandrite Sophrony often referred to him as “illiterate” or “semi-literate”. He was, though, very intelligent and quick to grasp ideas and information. Then, during his forty-six years on Mt Athos he would receive a rich formation from listening to and reading the Scriptures, the Church’s service books, and the writings of the Fathers. The notebooks he filled with writings at moments of inspiration in his later years are unique as a literary phenomenon because of all these ingredients.

From his childhood we notice an aspect of his character: his honesty to himself. At four years of age the words of a pedlar – “Where is this God of yours, then?” (p.10) – had troubled his previously undoubting faith in God. Though his father reassured him that the pedlar was just speaking as a fool, it took fifteen years before he again felt wholeheartedly that God exists and is alive. When he was nineteen and a carpenter, a pilgrim was telling the estate workers about Saint John Sezenov, whose tomb she had venerated. Hearing about the saint as a real person made Simeon reflect: “If he was a holy man, then it means that God is here with us, so there is no point in me going off to search for Him” (p.11). Simeon must have

spent those years wondering how to find God. This reassurance was needed; it ignited prayer in his soul, and he felt drawn towards monasticism. When this touch of grace waned, after about three months, Simeon drifted back to the life of a young village lad, who was popular with his contemporaries, and admired by many of the village girls. He fell into fornication, and into near-murder during a brawl. But a miraculous event occurred. He heard, during a dream, a voice reproaching him that his ways were ugly to look upon. He knew beyond doubt that the gentle voice belonged to the Mother of God, and he remained ever grateful to her for “appearing from the heavens to show a young man like me his sins” (p.15). The Queen of Athos drew him by the route that all monks take: repentance.

At his first ‘call’ he had spoken to his father about monasticism, but his father had asked him to do his military service first. The time for this came, but his second monastic call was so decisive that he did not drift into the life typical of recruits. His thoughts and intentions were already, as his comrades once teased him, “on Mt Athos and at the Last judgement” (p.18).

The eagerness of Simeon’s heart, and his straightforward character, together with the absence in him of any of the self-opinion typical of the well educated or the well off, made up soil ready for the seed of grace in a measure that exceeds the average. We see this grace at work in him as a result of Father John of Kronstadt’s prayers, for he had gone to take this great man’s blessing, and not managing to see him, had written a note asking for his prayers before he left for Athos (p.19). Simeon thereafter felt palpably the flames of hell roaring about him. To experience the touch of God in this ‘negative’ form requires a courageous soul. There are times when the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, visits us to convict us. Such painful states educate our depths, and also act as a safeguard, as in Simeon’s case. Nothing

on his route to the monastery could have tempted him to re-think – he was desperate to go where he knew relief and explanation were to be found. Athos is a place where God meets men’s real souls.

Simeon entered the Russian Monastery of Saint Panteleimon in autumn 1892. He came as he was. While he fitted in with all the details of Athonite life, he never played the role of an ideal monk. There is nothing artificial or constrained about his piety. As Father Sophrony puts it (p.63), he “always remained true to himself”. He had a simplicity which most of us need to acquire. It was not naïveté; he had a lot of experience of life, and he already had a mature and wise moral judgement, as we can see from advice he gave his fellows in the battalion. His simplicity was partly due to his lack of training in critical analysis. It is also a matter of keeping one’s attention on concrete reality rather than weighing up the whole world in our minds theoretically or imaginatively.

Simeon’s simplicity was also bound up with his acceptance of authority. This is not in a merely juridical sense. He was sometimes confused by advice he was given by elders. But he was able to obey because he did not feel superior to anyone, let alone his administrative and spiritual superiors in the monastery. Furthermore, though his experiences of receiving mistaken counsel were of a serious character, he never stopped advocating and practising obedience to the clergy. The Holy Spirit gives good counsel to the soul when we hearken to the advice of our pastors (p.406). Saint Silouan remained submissive and obedient all his life. Obedience is what keeps Athonite life flowing as a living Tradition rather than simply a museum of Byzantine monasticism.

It was not long after his arrival before a violent inner storm, lasting about six months, assailed him. After one dreadful experience when demons became visible to him as he tried to pray in his cell, and he felt as if God were cruel – and told him so – he went,

according to the programme, to Vespers at the mill chapel. There, in front of the Lord’s icon, he pronounced the Jesus prayer: “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.” And how did the Lord “have mercy” on him? By appearing alive before him and filling all his being with grace that he could know as divine. Simeon’s vision did not last long: it was a matter of seconds rather than minutes. “From his words and from his writings we know that a great Divine light shone about him, that he was lifted out of this world and in spirit transported to heaven, where he heard ineffable words” (p.26). Indeed, earthly “words cannot encompass such things” (p.27). The divine light that shone then had still to be assimilated in order to become Saint Silouan’s eternal possession. Such a measure of grace is usually only bestowed at the end of an ascetic’s life, or he must wait for it to be given in the next life. It cannot be maintained if the body is to survive. Saint Paul was blinded, the Apostles on Tabor fell to the ground. And Brother Simeon carried on with his life ...

For a certain time Simeon lived in Paschal joy. Then the action of grace began to diminish, and a long period of bewilderment ensued. He not only suffered from the fading away of the intensity of the grace, he again passed through torments caused by the activity of demons. A Staretz who expressed his admiration of Simeon activated a struggle with pride. Or let us say, he could have been wiser and cultivated Simeon’s natural self-abasement. As it was, fifteen years went by until Simeon – who in the meantime (in 1896) had been professed and given the name of the Apostle Silouan – even clearly understood why, after he had been granted such grace, God would seemingly forsake him and leave him to perish in hellish torment.

He was not simply looking for relief from suffering. He was seeking the Lord as a lost child seeks its mother, only more intensely. He was grieving over his loss like a widower,



St Silouan the Athonite. Kiev-Pecherskaya Lavra Church of the Nativity of the Virgin. 2007

only more intensely. He was not looking for explanations, he was looking for Christ. And he felt demons keeping him away. He avoided sin and he prayed unceasingly – what more could he do? Ask God, and ask God, and ask God. And finally, this time in words rather than a vision, God answered him. “Lord, thou seest that I desire to pray to thee with a pure mind but devils will not let me. Instruct me,

what must I do to stop them hindering me?” And in his soul he heard, “The proud always suffer from devils.” “Lord,” said Silouan, “teach me what I must do that my soul may become humble.” Once more, his heart heard God’s answer, “Keep thy mind in hell, and despair not” (p.42). Christ’s answer gave him a principle on which all the rest of his life would be founded. And gave to the world a

saving spiritual formula in an epoch where both pride and despair reign supreme. We must remember that Saint Silouan received this word with gratitude. He was in a state of condemnation; and he was reassured that God not only had not left him forgotten in hell, but was recommending him to hold fast to this position; therefore there was no need to lose hope – only to keep selfabasement.

Father Sophrony considered that this exhortation of Christ can be compared to Einstein's formula  $E = mc^2$  in its importance for the world. It can assist even those who have not had Father Silouan's depth of experience. On one level, it can help us when we are in any difficult and unavoidable situation, to trust in God's providence, and to be steadfast in prayer. On another level, it can teach us how to remain humble in our self-awareness. But we must note that Saint Silouan was commanded to *keep* his mind in hell. That is, the consciousness that he was experiencing hell was already a reality, not something on the level of imagination. Even parallel texts in the Church's tradition, which speak of self-condemnation and the remembrance of hell, do not all evince such a depth of experience. So we must not ape him artificially. If we did so our mental energy would be focused in the unreal world of the imagination, and there would not be enough room for faith and hope to be at work in our soul's reality. We learn from Saint Silouan to face our own reality: our created state first of all; to have an attitude towards God of a dependent being. If we take it a stage further: we must not allow anything, from within or without, to smother gratitude towards God's providence. And then: we must not be puffed up with self-admiration. As well as this, sometimes during the Church year – not least through the Gospel itself – we are reminded of the fact that we shall be judged, of the fact that eternity can be lived out either in dark torment or in unwaning light. Our conscience, too, can awaken us to these realities. And then we will know the

power of the second half of God's word to Saint Silouan: whatever happens, do not despair. Everything is possible to God, who is "with us always", even in hell. Athos plumbs the depths.

After this experience, Saint Silouan, over the years, learned to keep grace by burning up any thoughts of pride, or indeed any state of diminished grace, in the fire of humility. Grace, and loss of grace, and regaining of grace: this is the pattern of Christian asceticism through all the centuries and in every situation. This is what Athonite monks are busy at twenty-four hours out of twenty-four. And Saint Silouan is witness to the fact that there is no higher charism than humble love for all humanity. After writing about the wonderworking power given to the saints he adds: "But all my desire is to learn humility and the love of Christ, that I may offend no man but pray for all as I pray for myself" (p.350). Were I to be asked what I would have from God – what gifts – I should answer: "The spirit of humility" (p.432).

Saint Silouan's monastic life progressed in an organic way. His ups and downs were real, and he did not pretend them away. He prayed through them. We have seen how the routine of Athonite life was a stabilising factor in the background of his spiritual 'adventures'; it never caused him to lapse into deadness of spirit, repeating prayers simply verbally, doing prostrations mechanically, confessing without repenting. In spite of nights of spiritual torment, he did not excuse himself from the long monastic services or his duties of obedience, which were demanding. He worked hard at the mill and later as steward at the monastery depot. He remained cordial in all his contacts with his fellow monks and with lay people. His distress was given expression, outlet, in confession and above all in prayer, and thus he kept from self-pity; he was not trying to gain sympathy by a display of psychological sorrow. Exterior discretion is a marked feature of Athonite monasticism.



As far as Saint Silouan's daily life is concerned, several incidents are recorded by Father Sophrony and by Father Silouan himself, especially in the chapters called 'Portrait of the Staretz' in Part 1, and 'Reminiscences and Conversations' in Part 2. I want to mention here an incident not recorded in the book. Father Sophrony used to cite Saint Silouan as an example of someone who was "never difficult", that is, he never rebutted an approach by coldness, he listened to those who spoke, he was not touchy or sulky, he co-operated readily with the requests of others. He was calm and gentle, with a warmth of expression that photographs have not preserved. But this does not mean that he was a 'man-pleaser'. He never compromised his integrity before God. There was only one occasion when Father Sophrony contradicted him. During a procession which was part of a vigil service, Father Sophrony, who was of a sickly constitution, remarked to the Elder, "It takes physical strength to be a monk." Saint Silouan replied, "It takes spiritual strength to be a monk." A little later Father Sophrony repeated his comment and likewise, though a little more emphatically, Saint Silouan repeated the same reply. When Father Sophrony went so far as to sigh a third time and say, "Even so, you need physical strength to be a monk," Father Silouan quietly moved away to a different position in the procession.

As he matured spiritually, we see two elements emerging in his life: his ability to teach others, and his prayer for all Adam. This latter is the heart of what Athonite life gives to the world. A robust peasant could end up spending entire nights for decades, seated upon a stool, and often weeping copious tears. It was the vision of Christ's love, the taste of divine compassion, that stirred up in him the compassion he felt for his fellowman. And he expressed his love above all in prayer. He lived like that because he loved; you pray fervently for those you love, and you care for their salvation as much

as your own. If, when you retire to your room at night, your prayer rule is perfunctory, you will not notice whether you are far from God. In other words, his extraordinary feat of prayer grew organically out of his experience, his sincerity, and his longing for God's love to reign in his own heart and that of every human being. This is a theological reality. When God reveals himself, he is not simply imparting information; he is making known that life which those who would be in his likeness can live. The Holy Spirit teaches us to love God, and love keeps the commandments (p.498). In most cases, this process of education is gradual, but in Silouan the final state possible to man on earth was given to him at the beginning of his ascetic struggle. All his life was a struggle to conform to Christ. This conformity was given in the form of love for all mankind from Adam to those in the future. When the soul learns love of the Lord she is filled with compassion for the whole universe (p.443). The love in the Holy Trinity is hypostatic: each Person embraces all the fullness of divinity. Communicated to a man, this love embraces *all* a man's fellow humans, and their lives and destinies become inseparable from his own. Saint Silouan's desire was "to pray for all as for himself". Saint Silouan had known all the dimensions of human experience: heaven, hell, and earth, and his compassion resulted from experience rather than imagination. "I know from experience what it means to be in the Holy Spirit and what it means to be without him" (p.435). Elsewhere he is even more explicit: "We know of this [the darkness of those in hell], because the Holy Spirit in the Church reveals to the saints what is in heaven and what is in hell" (p.289). The Lord gives the monk the love of the Holy Spirit, and by virtue of this love the monk's heart sorrows over people because not all men are working out their salvation (p.407). *Adam's Lament* (Chapter XVIII) is Silouan's lament and humanity's *cri de coeur*. God communicates his love via hearts



**The forge in the Monastery of St Panteleimon on Mount Athos. Late 19th century**

ready to bear it. They are not mere channels, because the heart cannot be constrained to love; divine love has become their own, and is brought to earth in them.

We reach 24 September 1938, when, fully conscious to the end, Father Silouan fell asleep peacefully in the Lord. Even when ill, he was more concerned for his prayer than for any medical succour he could get in the infirmary – he only agreed to go when Father Sophrony arranged for him to be in a semi-private compartment, away from the noisily ticking clock. Facing death, his concern was that he “had not attained humility”. His peaceful departure, according to Father Sophrony’s interpretation, is a sign that on his deathbed he regained the humility of Christ as his own state (p.243).

Father Silouan himself said that any other contribution than prayer for the world

is secondary to the essence of monastic life. Serving pilgrims (and perhaps also giving talks ...) is “pleasing to God. But rest assured that it is not monastic life by a long way” (p.408). Perhaps because they have renounced other vocations and do not set out to be teachers, monks who live as true monks often serve also by their example and their teaching. In Father Silouan we have a supreme example of what effect love – the key to human fulfilment – can do. He also left a legacy of teaching on the theological and practical levels, which, as he showed, are inseparable. In the Patriarchal Decree of Canonisation, Saint Silouan is described as “an apostolic and prophetic teacher of the Church”. In one of the hymns in his honour he is called “most comforting among theologians”.

A real theologian is someone who knows the Truth of God by meeting the living God. His teaching and writing are a consequence, not simply of his own reading, but of his

experience of God. When a theologian is uneducated, the language he uses can deceive us by its simplicity. Orthodox theologians in Paris who first read Saint Silouan's notes thought that there was nothing particularly significant about them. That is the only reason why Father Sophrony set out to write a more erudite introduction. Saint Silouan is not a public defender of the faith against heresy, a polemicist. He theologises for another motive: "How shall I be silent concerning God when my spirit is consumed day and night with love for Him? [...] What shall I tell my soul? Hide within thyself what the Lord said? But all heaven knows about this. And I should be asked, 'Wherefore did you conceal the Lord's mercies, and not declare them to men, that all might love God and find rest in Him?'" (p.482).

We cannot dismiss what he says because it is simply, sometimes even childishly, expressed. First of all this is not the entire truth. We notice that he uses concepts that

instructed the prophets of old, and after them the Apostles and then our holy Fathers and Bishops, and in this wise the true faith came down to us" (p.358). And what does "in this wise" mean? Not "if we read what they say", for he goes on to add: "And we knew the Lord by the Holy Spirit, and when we knew Him our souls were confirmed in Him" (*ibid.*). Even if it were true that he wrote nothing original – and it is not – this 'confirmation' in itself is infinitely precious. It prevents Tradition from becoming dead letter. If Apostolic and Patristic theology is confirmed by the experience of a contemporary in an age where even to remain Christian is a constant struggle against the flood of apostasy and despair, we have already been given a great gift in Saint Silouan. We have another John reassuring us that indeed God is Love, in a world which makes us ask, as Father Sophrony's foreword brings to light, "Where is this Providence that is attentive to the last detail? We are all of us crushed by the spectacle of evil walking unrestrained up and down the world" (p.vii).

Saint Silouan was brought up in the Christian faith, and when he came to the monastery he was familiar with the Church and its teachings and services. Yet when he saw the living Lord, he ever afterwards described this event as the moment when "the Holy Spirit gave me to know the Lord". It is quite astonishing, that someone who all his conscious life had heard and repeated the phrase "Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit" should write that until then "I did not know about the Holy Spirit" (p.320). The knowledge of God which he claimed to have received, and which he shared in his spoken counsel and in his writings, came as a direct fruit of his vision at the mill when he was a novice. He says that it is "incomprehensible" how the Holy Spirit shows himself. His theology was first of all a state of being that he was given to share with the Lord. It was many years later that he became a teacher, and only in his old age



The mill where St Silouan worked.  
Monastery of St Panteleimon, Athos

great philosophers grope to comprehend. Nor let us dismiss what he says because he is a son of the Church and follows the stream of its theological tradition – because 'there isn't anything original'. For how does Tradition work? "Even the souls of the heathen sensed that God is, though they were ignorant how to worship the true God. But the Holy Spirit

did he write his message “for the people of the earth”.

We can feel the authority of experience behind his words. Saint Silouan writes with assurance because “my thoughts are the fruit of long years of living” (p.491). When he answered Father Sophrony’s theological enquiries or wrote notes about God, he was describing what he had seen and tasted and handled of the Word of God. The saints speak of that which they have actually seen, of that which they know. They do not speak of something they have not seen. They do not tell us, for instance, that “they have seen a horse a mile long, or a steamer ten miles long, which do not exist” (p.358). As a philosophical concept, a gnoseology, this sentence is worth at least one Ph.D.’s research. Saint Silouan’s visitation gave him the immediate direct knowledge of Truth without him needing preparation by an intellectual, conceptual, study of Truth or how man becomes cognisant of it. From him we learn that Truth is known by *revelation to the humble-minded*. “Pride is at the root of unbelief. The proud man would acquire knowledge through his mind and his studying, but it is not given to him to learn to know God, in that the Lord reveals Himself only to the lowly in heart.” The educated, and especially those with theological education, will not know God until they believe in their own ignorance. “Both in heaven and on earth the Lord is made known only by the Holy Spirit, and *not through ordinary learning*” (p.357). Athos is a theological academy *par excellence*.

Saint Silouan was utterly without speculative theological curiosity. He could not discuss dogmas abstractly. He could use theological language articulately, but he never spoke about God as an abstract subject, remote and theoretical. Every time he makes a theological statement he soon adds something about the spiritual effort or state needed to understand or keep the reality he refers to. “Many philosophers and scholars

have arrived at a belief in the existence of God but they have not come to know God. And we monks apply ourselves day and night to the study of the Lord’s command but not all of us by a long way have come to know the Lord, although we believe in Him. To believe that God exists is one thing, to know God another” (pp.448-9). Here is a paragraph that covers the contents of a year’s lectures in the philosophy of religion.

Many theological themes are touched upon with a rare freshness and depth in his notes: Triadology, Divine Love, Prayer, Creation, the Church, the Bible, etc. As far as love for man is concerned, in Saint Silouan we reach the summits of love and of teaching about love. This monk with no theological or philosophical background answered Father Sophrony’s question about universal love like this: “To be one with all, as the Lord said, ‘that all may be one’, there is no need for us to cudgel our brains: we all have one and the same nature, and so it should be natural for us to love all men; but it is the Holy Spirit Who gives us the strength to love” (p.108). In this sentence, down to the word “but”, is contained Orthodox anthropology in its fullness.

Father Silouan wrote that pure, undistracted prayer is the fulfilment of the commandment to love God with all our mind (p.143). This is just one example of a powerful new expression in the ascetic Tradition of the Church. There are three features of Saint Silouan’s theology that Father Sophrony considered original. Originality does not mean a diversion from Tradition, but a new form of expression and/or one that goes deeper into the heart of the matter. In my opinion Saint Silouan is original in both these senses.

1. Saint Silouan describes *the humility of Christ as of another kind than “ascetic” humility*, that is, keeping a lowly estimation of oneself. There are many kinds of humility. One man is obedient, and has nothing but blame for himself; and this is humility. Another repents him of his sins and considers himself

loathsome in the sight of God – and that is humility. *But there is still another humility in the man who has known the Lord in the Holy Spirit* (p.310).

Christ-like humility cannot be the same as self-condemnation for sin, because Christ is sinless. But Saint Silouan was not basing his comparison on dogmas learned ‘from outside’. For one thing, he kept self-blame to a rare degree, so he knew ‘by the taste’ that it was not the same. Second, he knew that he had *lost* the Christ like humility given to him as a sight and as a state in his vision.

2. That love of our brethren is the test of how real and how deep is our love for God is taught directly by Christ<sup>2</sup> and the Apostles<sup>3</sup>. Saint Silouan shows us that *the test of our knowledge of Truth is our attitude towards those who offend us or persecute us, or are cruel to the Church*. “There are people who desire the destruction, the torment in hellfire of their enemies, or the enemies of the Church. They think like this because they *have not learned divine love*” (p.275).

3. Saint Silouan read the Holy Fathers, especially ascetic writers such as John Climacus, Isaac, Macarius, the Desert Fathers, and others, and quoted from them in conversation and in writing. He recommended reading: “O brethren, read more of the Holy Gospels, and the works of the Holy Fathers! Through such reading does the soul come to know God, and the mind becomes occupied with the Lord” (p.416). He could compare his experience with what the Fathers said. He made the observation that when he read the Holy Fathers, *he could tell what degree of inspiration lay behind the words*. He measured the words uncritically, preferring to read Orthodox sources just for that reason. But at the same time he shows that words are measured by criteria other than authorship. Even the saints did not always write with the same inspiration. And the higher the degree of inspiration in the reader, the more discerning he will be of variations.

No wonder Father Triphon said that Father Silouan had reached the measure of the Holy Fathers (p.251).

Saint Silouan’s writings touch upon life in all its aspects, because everything can be done either in accordance with the Holy Spirit or not. Man’s life is conditioned by his theology. Striving for virtue is a natural effect of the Holy Spirit’s touch. We must urge ourselves all our lives to do good. “Think that God sees you, though you do not see him” (p.490). Saint Silouan’s advice goes from prayer – the spiritual level – to the psychological level, to the physical level, and all the time these levels overlap, as they do in real life. “If you are irritable, or, as they say, “nervy”, that is a real calamity. Paroxysms or fits of mental anguish are diseases to be physicked with lowliness of spirit and repentance, and by loving one’s brother and one’s enemies” (p.447). (There, by the way, we have material for a few doctorates in psychology and manuals of psychotherapy.) Life cannot be separated from ‘spiritual life’. “How clear it is to me that the Lord guides us! Without Him we cannot even think a good thing. Therefore we must surrender ourselves humbly to the Divine will, *so that* the Lord may direct us” (p.341). If we put anything before the kingdom of God, the kingdom of God loses its place in our life. That is one of the key messages Athos gives the world.

We have time only to glance at a few of the areas of life covered by Saint Silouan’s notes.

In the world, seeking our path is often tied up with ambition. Once again, Saint Silouan shows us how to see reality. “Everyone in this world has his task to perform, be he king or patriarch, cook, blacksmith or teacher, but the Lord Whose love extends to everyone of us will give greater reward to the man whose love for God is greater” (p.296). “In love towards God and our fellowmen [...] lie both freedom

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Jn. 13:35.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. 1 Jn. 4:8, Eph. 4:15, Jas. 1:27.

and equality. With society as it is graded on this earth there can be no equality, though that is of no importance for the soul. Not everyone can be an emperor or a prince; not everyone can be a patriarch or an abbot, or a leader; but *in every walk of life we can love God and be pleasing to Him, and only this is important*" (p.343). (This time there is material for doctorates in sociology!)

His love and prayer for those who offended him was sown in him by the Lord, and cultivated in his life among the brethren. Many of [the monks] disliked him. Some inveighed against him face to face, saying that he was "bewitched". Others would say, "Ugh, damned saint!" Others misunderstood his praying for the persecutors of the Russian Church – and remember he had relatives in Russia. Athos reminds us of the adage that it is "not so much the geographical location as the way of life" that sanctifies. As a geographical reality, Athos is uniquely valuable precisely because its space is reserved for Orthodox monastic life, but this is not conferred automatically on its inhabitants.

I will quote another counsel which is both deeply theological and eminently practicable by everyone: "With all your might and main ask the Lord for humility and brotherly love, for to him who loves his brother the Lord giveth freely of His grace. Try yourself: one day ask God for brotherly love, and the next day live without love, and you will see the difference" (p.426). Love may be expressed in simple ways. "Often a single sympathetic greeting will work a happy change in the soul; while contrariwise, one unfriendly look – and grace and the love of God depart. When that happens, make haste to repent" (p.427). "I was walking along [...] when I saw a little four-year-old boy running towards me. [...] I had an egg on me, which I gave to the child. He was delighted, and ran off to show the present to his father. And for a little thing like that I received great joy from God, and took a love for every one of God's creatures, and my soul sensed the Divine

Spirit. Reaching home, seized with pity for the world, I prayed long to God, weeping many tears" (p.374). Every encounter is a training ground for universal love. By the way, the sacrifice was not so "little"; he was living in a monastery where the diet, as Father Sophrony used to say, varied between rice with cabbage and cabbage with rice. The monks usually got an egg only at Easter.

Saint Silouan lived without forgetting the dimension of heaven. But in his advice to people in the world, and advice to monks about their everyday life, he writes about everyday matters with wisdom. Father Sophrony said it was always as easy to talk to him about private and difficult matters "as if you were discussing a recipe for soup". As a monk he was asked about varied matters: what to study, how to pray for a missing daughter, whether a hieromonk living in the city should listen to music, and so on. His answers were not condescending – indeed, they did not always make comfortable listening, for he encouraged the keeping of the commandments. He spoke about freedom to a student in a manner that Father Sophrony considered "too profound for the youth to grasp", but the student grasped enough to be "deeply impressed" and had "food for thought" for the future (p.65).

To take another example: on the question of *food*, Saint Silouan is his own original self, combining a childlike honesty about his shortcomings with a depth of ascetic experience and understanding. A practical matter is dealt with in the light of the soul. "After meals we should feel like praying – that is the measure of moderation" (p.326).

Saint Silouan was taught *compassion for all the creation ...* The Spirit of God teaches the soul to love every living thing so that she would have no harm come to even a green leaf on a tree, or trample underfoot a flower of the field. "Once I needlessly killed a fly. The poor thing crawled on the ground, hurt and mangled, and for three whole days I wept over my cruelty to a living creature, and to this day

the incident remains in my memory.” Saint Silouan spoke and acted with deep sensitivity to the beauty of creation, but he was not sentimentally attached to God’s handiwork. He scythed grass, ate fish, ‘used’ creation. Also, he was aware that heavenly beauty is so great that earthly beauty fades in comparison. “The sweetness of the Holy Spirit surpasses all the delights [music, love, nature ... these are just some of the ‘delights’ he mentions he had known] of the world” (p.466). In many other places he speaks of rapture in God to the point that the world is quite forgotten.

Between December 1904 and October 1905 Silouan returned to his homeland, called up as a reservist at the time of Russia’s war with Japan. He visited some monasteries; and on one train journey a fellow passenger offered him a cigarette. Father Silouan thanked him but did not take a cigarette. The man said, “Probably, Father, you consider smoking a sin? But smoking helps in real life; it helps you to relax.” He continued trying to persuade Father Silouan of the benefits of smoking, and finally Silouan said, “Before you light up a cigarette, pray, repeat an ‘Our Father’.” The man answered, “It somehow doesn’t go, to pray before you smoke.” And Saint Silouan said, “*Well, if you feel embarrassed to pray before you do something, it is better not to do it*” (p.70).

In an age where we are swamped with information it is salutary to hear what Saint Silouan has to say about *knowledge* and about *information*. “Some there are who spend their whole lives trying to find out what there is on the sun or the moon, or in seeking like knowledge, yet this is of no profit to the soul. But if we take pains to explore the human heart [...]” (p.355). “With our minds we cannot come to know even how the sun is made; and if we beg God to tell us how He made the sun, the answer rings in our soul, ‘Humble thyself, and thou shalt know not only the sun but the Creator of the sun’” (p.103).

As far as ‘news’ is concerned, Saint Silouan said that he did not care for

newspapers. “Reading newspapers clouds the mind and hinders pure prayer” (p.73). One of the monks said that hearing the news encouraged his prayer for others – certainly an admirable reaction. But Saint Silouan said: “When the soul prays for the world she knows better without newspapers how the whole earth is afflicted.” When asked to explain, he said, “Newspapers don’t write about people but about events, and then not the truth. [...] You won’t get at the truth by reading them; whereas prayer cleanses the mind and gives it a *better vision of all things*” (p.73). Knowledge direct from God brings with it the strength for compassion. Information tires the brain and the spirit to no purpose. Words are allowed to float in and out of our mind without provoking effective compassion, edifying us, or even exercising our brains. We know that the news we hear at seven o’clock will be updated at eight o’clock. Athos absorbs all the pain of the world, but Athos and our culture are diametrically opposed means of picking up the world’s vibes.

Extraordinary gifts of grace do not mean that God’s chosen ones are preselected and everyone else is second-class. The saints who received grace beg God to dispense it to all without exception. Grace, even etymologically, means a *gift*, and it is always a personal gift. Even had we the ability to discern measures of grace correctly, there is no sense in envying another person a greater measure of grace. What we can do is treat our one talent as another has treated his five. We have seen today what a true monk did with his talents. “The monk prays constantly. Thanks to monks, prayer continues unceasing on earth, and the world profits, for through prayer the world continues to exist” (pp.407-8). Most of the prayer on Athos remains “in secret”. When it is revealed, as in the case of Saint Silouan, together with a portrait of one who practised it to its ultimate degree, then we really do visit Mt Athos. ■

# Method, Mysticism and Analogy: Father John Meyendorff and the *Areopagitica*

*Nun Seraphima (Konstantinovsky)*

*Sister Seraphima is a nun at the Monastery of Saint John the Baptist at Tolleshunt Knights, Maldon, Essex. Her talk was originally given to the Oxford branch of the Fellowship of Saint Alban and Saint Sergius on the evening of 14 June 2001.*

I shall be speaking this evening about certain aspects of what can be called ‘the Dionysian Problem’, that is, the writings of an ancient Christian author known under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite and the way these writings have been dealt with in modern scholarship.

Because the subject of Dionysian writings as seen through the prism of modern scholarship is so vast, my approach will be to examine the treatment of the Dionysian problem by a particular scholar, namely the well-known Russian Orthodox theologian Father John Meyendorff. It is therefore Meyendorff, and not directly Dionysius, who is, in a sense, my protagonist. This approach will enable me to raise questions of method in patristics, and, in particular, Orthodox patristics.

## **John Meyendorff (1926-1992)**

John Meyendorff is a well-known Orthodox writer in the area of Byzantine Church history and the theology of the Greek Fathers. His roots are in the famous Paris

School that grew out of what Nicholas Zernov called the “Russian Religious Renaissance”<sup>1</sup>. Together with Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, Nikolai Afanasiev, Alexander Schmemmann and Paul Evdokimov, Meyendorff has been seen as belonging to the tradition of the so-called “neo-patrologues”<sup>2</sup>. These men sought the fulfilment of the contemporary Church through the rediscovery of the message of both the early and the later Greek theologians.

Father Georges Florovsky termed this return “Christian Hellenism”<sup>3</sup>. The essence of the ‘Christian Hellenism’ can be seen as the reply by Orthodox theological scholarship to the Liberal Protestant approach to the mystical and ascetical tradition of the early Church, as epitomized by Adolf von Harnack<sup>4</sup>.

## **Adolf von Harnack**

The message of Harnack, in a cameo, is that the history of Christian dogma is a history of Christianity’s decline. By the 4th century, the living message of the Gospel – an

<sup>1</sup> See N. Zernov, *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century* (London 1963).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. L. Shaw, ‘John Meyendorff and the Heritage of the Russian Theological Tradition’, in B. Nassif (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff* (Grand Rapids, Michigan 1996), pp. 10-42, pp. 11, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. G. Florovsky, ‘Faith and Culture’, *Saint Vladimir’s Theological Seminary Quarterly*, 41,1-2 (1955-1956), p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> See in particular A. von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, transl. Mitchell E. Knox as *Outlines of the History of Dogma* (New York 1893).



essentially Hebraic and Biblical message – had been hopelessly tampered with under the influence of Greek philosophy. The ossification of faith into dogma, with the ensuing evils of mysticism, asceticism and a ‘Logos’ Christology – the “work of the Greek mind on the soil of the Gospel”<sup>5</sup> – resulted in a secularization of Christianity. The story has a happy ending, however, in that Martin Luther appeared on the scene and restored the “Pauline Christianity in the spirit of a new age”<sup>6</sup> by ridding the message of the Gospel of its Hellenic deviations.

It would appear that in reply to this position Florovsky coined – and others used – the term ‘Christian Hellenism’.

### Meyendorff’s method

As a true neo-patrologue, Meyendorff wished to combine a return to the Fathers with objective, or critical, historicism. The historical-critical method is another important characteristic of the neo-patristic agenda. Yet Meyendorff’s choice of the historical-critical method is problematic. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the historical-critical method *itself* entails certain accompanying principles that raise questions regarding, on the one hand, its objectivity, and, on the other, its compatibility with Orthodox scholarship. The other reason is Meyendorff’s own *use* of the method. At this stage a brief note on the critical-historical method might be helpful.

### The historical-critical method

Although the discipline of modern critical history was born in the late 18th century, its beginnings are in the 15th century Renaissance. A number of principles of the Renaissance historical research were



Father John Meyendorff

carried into what can be termed properly ‘modern historiography’, the discipline within which Meyendorff wishes to work. Some of these are: a critical examination of different sources, involving their comparison and evaluation<sup>7</sup>; the analysis of history into particular periods, hence, the tri-partite division of all history into ancient, medieval<sup>8</sup> and modern. The so-called ‘medieval’ period was regarded as a period of benightedness and decline, and so initially there was a lack of interest in it. By contrast, the historiography of the Renaissance was marked by a keen interest in Classical antiquity. This provoked the collection of manuscripts and study of the original languages of the Classical and Biblical worlds<sup>9</sup>: Greek

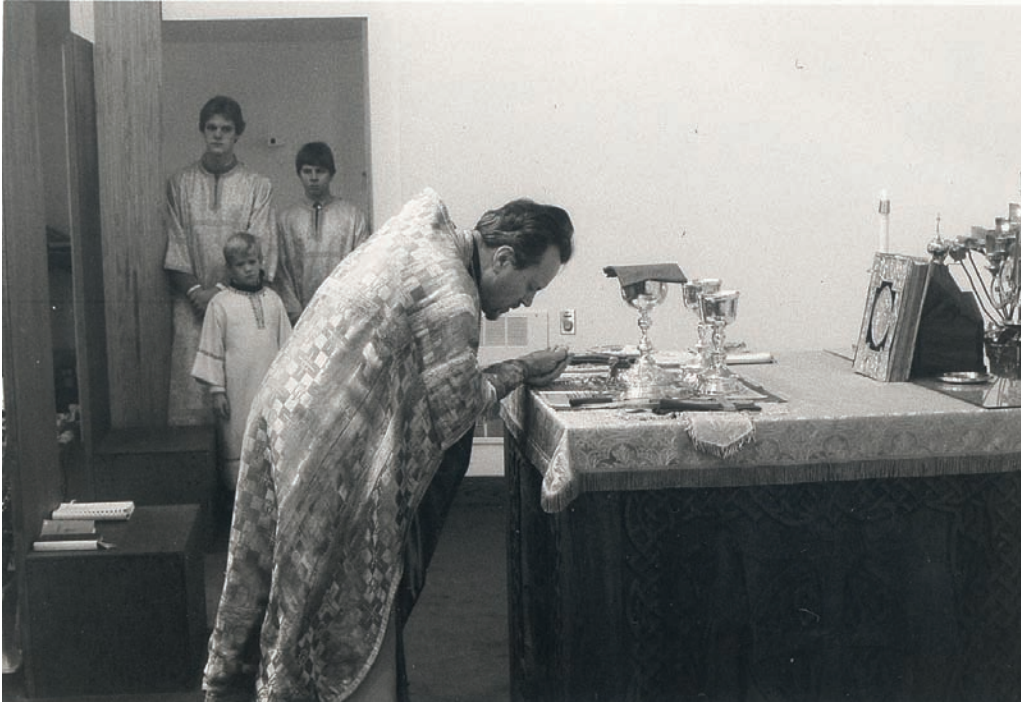
<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 541.

<sup>7</sup> For example, already in 1440 Lorenzo Valla, by using linguistic, legal, historical and political arguments, was able to demonstrate the falsity of the alleged donation of lands by Emperor Constantine to Pope Sylvester I. He is thus one of the founders of the historical-critical method.

<sup>8</sup> The ‘medieval’ era literally means ‘in between’ the ancient and the modern eras.

<sup>9</sup> I use these terms even though the distinction is somewhat artificial.



Father John Meyendorff during the Liturgy

and Hebrew<sup>10</sup>. This development was furthered by the Fall of Constantinople in 1453. Classical manuscripts were brought to the West (Venice), and Greek learning experienced a revival. At the same time the invention of the printing press<sup>11</sup> facilitated the dissemination of ancient texts and Classical learning. All these changes introduced new philosophic and cultural overtones into theological study as well. In Biblical studies, for example, they encouraged a new method based on a secular understanding of history<sup>12</sup>. The

humanist and Renaissance cry, “*ad fontes*”, was applied to the interpretation of the Bible and provided philological tools for study of it as a historical narrative<sup>13</sup>. The 17th century then saw a growth in the ‘objectification’ of knowledge. The important hallmarks in this respect were<sup>14</sup>:

(1) The formulation of first rules of critical evaluation of sources for the purpose of their dating<sup>15</sup>;

(2) The introduction of methodological doubt, first in philosophy (Rene Descartes)<sup>16</sup>, and thereafter in all branches of knowledge.

From these principles were derived two corollaries: (1) the progressive triumph of a

<sup>10</sup> The study of Greek flourished in Italy after 1453, under tutelage by learned Greek expatriates. The key figure for the promotion of Hebrew studies was Johannes Reuchlin. See M. Brod, *Johannes Reuchlin und sein Kampf* (Stuttgart: W Kohlhammer Verlag 1965).

<sup>11</sup> See J. E. Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship* (Cambridge 1903-1908).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. E. Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (London 1975), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Among the persons who gave a first impulse to the historical interpretation of the Bible are Erasmus, Cajetan and John Colet.

<sup>14</sup> See E. Krentz, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-22.

<sup>15</sup> A Benedictine monk, Jean Mabillon, in his *Acta Sanctorum* (1668) and *De Re Diplomatica* (1681), established the criticism of documents, which allowed him to establish the date and authenticity of ancient documents. See Sandys, *op. cit.*, p. 295; M. Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester 1954), p. 81.

<sup>16</sup> It was René Descartes who, in his *Discours de la methode* (1637), affirmed doubt to be a universally valid principle to arrive at new knowledge. See M. Bloch, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

certain kind of human reason over revelation, and (2) the restriction of biblical authority by science and history.

To a greater or lesser extent these principles have found their way into the work of any modern historical scholar, whether they be a theologian or not, and thus Father Meyendorff is an heir to all of this as well.

The Age of Enlightenment, *Aufklärung*, saw the invention of history in the modern sense. In the great centres of learning of Northern Europe<sup>17</sup> there arose, in the eighteenth century, a sense that there is a great gap between the present and the past – a gap that Tradition cannot bridge. The past, therefore, had to be critically rediscovered and reconstructed in such a way that it could be understood from the position of the present day. This perspective involved the postulation of a contrast between two kinds of humanity: the ‘pre-modern’ or ‘unenlightened’ man, and the ‘modern’ or ‘enlightened’ man, while historical

development was seen essentially as the transformation of the former into the latter. This is the ‘progress’ theory of history<sup>18</sup>. An opposing attitude likewise existed, according to which the story of mankind was the story of gradual decadence<sup>19</sup>. During this period the overriding concerns of historians – whether they were historians of the Church or of secular society – were the cultivation of sources as tools for the reconstruction of the past<sup>20</sup>; distinction between the fact

and the myth; and a preoccupation with the origins of things. Such were the concerns of the historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, an English view of gradual decadence. Gibbon is the precursor of the 19th century critical approach. In many ways he was a pioneer in his field, displaying an unprecedented breadth of vision. For example, he extended his account of the Roman Empire into what is termed the ‘Late Middle Ages’ and claimed that the Empire continued until the Fall of Constantinople in 1453. Thus he was one of the founders of what are now called ‘Byzantine studies’. Meyendorff, who in many ways was also a pioneer in the field of Byzantine studies, is an heir in this respect of the atheist Gibbon.

In the 19th century, Leopold von Ranke, of the University of Berlin, was widely celebrated as ‘the father of historical science’. In his *Fürsten und Völker*<sup>21</sup> he declared the purpose of his

historiography to be simply telling what really happened (*“wie es eigentlich gewesen”*)<sup>22</sup>. This saying became a proverbial summary of his idea of historiography and its limitations. He was convinced that proper examination of the sources would yield access to the purest truth about the events concerned. His use of archive documents, combined with elaborate critical safeguards, seemed to guarantee the objectivity of the historian’s work. And yet, for all his formidable methodology, von Ranke’s



Adolf von Harnack  
(1851 – 1930)

<sup>17</sup> Notably, the Universities of Jena, Strasburg, Helmstedt and Gottingen.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Marquis de Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1793-1794). This view was contested in the 19th century. Cardinal Newman criticized the “march of the mind mentality” whilst at the same time accepting that Christianity was, in the post-Enlightenment sense, in some way “historical”.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the conception of Jean Jacques Rousseau.

<sup>20</sup> August Ludwig von Schloyer, at the University of Gottingen, published and translated sources, including the Russian *Chronicle of Nestor*.

<sup>21</sup> L. Ranke, *Fürsten und Völker*, ed. W. Andreas (Wiesbaden 1957), p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> See K. Christ, *Yon Gibbon zu Restoffzeff* (Darmstadt 1972).

greatness is compromised by the fact that he failed to recognize the hermeneutical problem involved in the writing of history. Owing to his naive 'realism' – which he inherited from his predecessors – von Ranke failed to see that, by the sheer process of selecting and arranging, one 'constructs' facts rather than 'discovers' them. However 'scientific' the technique, the construction of a historical narrative requires a bias on the part of the historian. Adolf von Harnack's school of historiography represented the quintessence of the critical-historical method and dominated the scene of theological history for much of the first half of the 20th century.

### **Objectivity in historical scholarship**

We cannot avoid the question of objectivity in historical scholarship: to what extent – if at all – is it meaningful to speak of history being objective? From the point of view of a modern historian, the answer is that one can speak of two kinds of objectivity: an objectivity internal to the discipline, and one that is general or non-restricted. This latter kind of historical objectivity is clearly not possible, and von Ranke has become the proverbial example. It is, however, entirely legitimate to require objectivity in historiography in the sense that within the discipline itself there are accepted criteria according to which the objectivity or otherwise of particular historical sources may be evaluated. While excelling in the former kind of objectivity, von Ranke admittedly failed in that he naively considered the latter possible as well. John Meyendorff's difficulties, however, are in both these areas.

### **Meyendorff's flaws regarding the 'objectivity' issue**

Meyendorff lets himself fall prey to similar problems of hermeneutics, only taking place in theological history. On the one hand, he

stresses the need for a patristic scholar to be "impartial"<sup>23</sup>. On the other hand, however, he clearly wishes to write from the position of an Orthodox historian and theologian, with a clearly defined stance in patristic theology. The two principles are poorly matched, if by 'impartiality' one means freedom from bias.

Furthermore, not unlike von Harnack, Meyendorff considers it a fundamental guideline for a patristic scholar to reject *a priori* any indebtedness of Eastern Christian thought to the categories of Platonism<sup>24</sup>. In this he unconsciously adopts the fundamental Liberal Protestant point of view – advocated by von Harnack – that patristic doctrine is a Hellenizing corruption of the original revelation. Unfortunately, like many other historians, Meyendorff seems to be unaware of these issues and takes the Liberal Protestant attitudes for granted. One result of this naïvety, as his treatment of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* suggests, is that he shows a liberal Protestant bias rather than an Orthodox one.

Despite all this, Meyendorff's treatment of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* – as well as the whole of his monograph, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* – deserves attention. The monograph was one of the very few dealing with the period after Chalcedon that were available in the West. Moreover, Meyendorff seems to be one of few scholars writing in the West who extended the so called 'patristic' period as far as the 14th century and thereby included into the map of patristics Saint Gregory Palamas. This implicitly begs the question of whether there is a *terminus ad quem* for the patristic period, or indeed whether we can speak of the 'patristic period' at all. If patristics includes everything that is approached from the patristic point of view, then there is no point in calling it 'patristics', as distinguished, for example, from dogmatics<sup>25</sup>. If you speak of a 'patristic period', you thereby imply that there has

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (New York 1964), Introduction, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Cf., for example, Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, Conclusion, p. 240. This theme is, on the whole, the leitmotif of his books *A Study of Gregory Palamas* and *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*.

been – or will be – a time in the life of the Church that is not patristic, since every period comes to an end<sup>26</sup>.

In the second part of this article, I shall look at Meyendorff's treatment of the *Areopagitica* as a case in point.

### The Corpus Dionysiacum

The collection known as the *Corpus Dionysiacum* or the *Areopagitica* is a body of writings that were very influential both in the medieval West and in the Eastern Church. This was true despite its being a small collection, all of which is contained in the third volume of Migne's *Patrologia Graeca*. The *Corpus* contains four treatises: *The Divine Names*, *The Mystical Theology*, *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, to which are added ten *Letters*. The volume of these writings is slight in comparison with the amount of scholarly debate they have provoked up to the present day.

### The history of the collection

The events surrounding the collection's appearance on the scene may be briefly summed up as follows. The earliest known reference to the *Areopagitica* occurs in a report entitled *Epistle of innocent the Maronite Concerning a Conference Held with the Severians [Innocentii Maronitae epistula de codlatione cum Severianis habita]*. This is the record of a consultation held in 532 between a group of followers of the Council of Chalcedon and some followers of Severus of Antioch. The latter rejected the Council and were generally

known as the 'Monophysites'<sup>27</sup>. The disciples of Severus cited Dionysius as one of the great ancient authorities in favour of speaking of "one nature of the Incarnate Logos"<sup>28</sup>.

After that time the *Corpus Dionysiacum* was rapidly accepted in the East, by both the Chalcedonians and the non-Chalcedonians. (To be convinced of this, one need only read, on the Chalcedonian side, the formulations of the Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Ecumenical Councils, and the writings of Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas.) The *Corpus* also had a long and tortuous history in the West and was of great importance for medieval thought<sup>29</sup>.

### The Dionysian problem: authorship

The question of authorship constitutes an important part of what can be termed 'the Dionysian Problem', which is essentially a problem of hermeneutics<sup>30</sup>. For centuries it was thought that the author of the *Corpus* was the Dionysius who was converted by Saint Paul at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:34). The text of the collection itself implies a 1st century date: the author claims to be a disciple of Saint Paul and to be on intimate terms with New Testament figures such as Titus, Timothy, and the venerable apostle John exiled on Patmos. He also seems to claim that he was present at the death of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In his *Church History* (III.4.6) Eusebius says that Dionysius became the first bishop of Athens, while later tradition in France made him also the first bishop of Paris.

<sup>25</sup> These are the German "Patristik" and "Dogmatik", arising of the seventeenth-century Protestant world. See, for example, Johannes Quenstadt.

<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, here, too, Meyendorff at times falls victim to these Protestant categories. See his 'Un mauvais théologien de l'unité au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle: Barlaam le Calabrais', in *L'Église et les Églises: études et travaux offerts à Dom Lambert Beauduin* (Chevetogne 1954), pp. 48-64, p. 56, where, somewhat self-defeatingly, he speaks of the "post-patristic" period to which Saint Gregory Palamas belonged.

<sup>27</sup> The *collatio*, or conversation, was held as part of Justinian's attempt during the 530s to reconcile the Monophysites and the Chalcedonians.

<sup>28</sup> The Dionysian proof-text cited by the Monophysites was the passage in the *DN* 1.4; 113.6-12 which speaks of the inexpressible manner in which "the simple Jesus became composite, and he who was eternal received a temporal duration and he who super-substantially transcended every natural order entered into our nature while maintaining the unchanged and unconfused foundation of his own things".

<sup>29</sup> See the articles by P. Sherwood and A. Rayez, 'Influence de Ps-Denys en Orient', and by P. Chevalier and others, 'Influence de Ps-Denys en Occident', in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 3.286-318 and 3.318-378, respectively; Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, pp. 11 1-129; and Karlfried Froehlich, 'Pseudo-Dionysius and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century', in *Pseudo Dionysius: the Complete Works*, trans. and ed. Colm Liubheid, Paul Rorem (New York 1987), pp. 33-46.

<sup>30</sup> The term 'hermeneutics' comes from Hermes, the messenger of the Greek gods. *Hermeneuo* means 'to interpret'. The interpretation can be of texts, artifices, and of reality in general.



Hieromartyr Dionysius the Areopagite

The first awareness of the Dionysian hermeneutical problem dates back as far as the 6th century, when the collection made its appearance and its authorship was straightway questioned. This took place during the *collatio* of 532, when the *Areopagitica* were cited, for the first time, by the Monophysites. Their claim was that the venerable apostolic author was in favour of a ‘onenature’ Christology. The proponents of Chalcedon (among them, Hypatius of Ephesus), rather in tune with modern scholarship, expressed doubts concerning the authorship of the quotations cited by the Severians<sup>31</sup>. The incident is interesting in that, not unlike the situation out of which modern patristic scholarship arose, the questioning of Dionysian authorship in 532 was concerned essentially with the weight of evidence for or against the Chalcedonian

doctrine. After that time, however, the *Corpus* was rapidly accepted as genuinely Dionysian, and its authorship was not questioned for the next thousand years.

The first person to categorically deny that the *Corpus* was written in the 1st century was the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla (1457)<sup>32</sup>. His opinion only became widely known, however, via Erasmus’s biblical works (see Erasmus’s Greek New Testament, published in 1516). More modern research has proved beyond doubt that, far from dating back to the 1st century, the so-called Dionysian writings belong to the end of the 5th or beginning of the 6th century and come from a Syrian milieu<sup>33</sup>. Father Meyendorff’s interest in the *Corpus Dionysiaca*<sup>34</sup> is therefore quite legitimate because of the important place these writings have occupied in modern patristic study. In treating them he joins in with the modern Western patristic agenda. In what follows I shall take a look at this agenda and the problem it raises with respect to the questions of objectivity and subjectivity.

#### **An absence of consensus: the Dionysian problem unsolved**

The *Corpus Dionysiaca* has been the subject of continuous debate in modern scholarship since the end of the 19th century. The mysterious figure who wrote under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite, who was a convert from Greek culture to Christianity made by Saint Paul (Acts 17:34), has been much denigrated in modern scholarship, Western and Orthodox, both on account of his pseudonymity and for the content of the so-called *Corpus Dionysiaca*. As a summary of modern Western scholarship’s treatment of these writings I will cite a well-known text from Hans Urs von Balthasar, a Catholic

<sup>31</sup> Their comment was that “If they are from the Blessed Dionysius the Areopagite, why were they unknown to the blessed Cyril [of Alexandria]?”

<sup>32</sup> See Lorenzo Valla, *Encomium sancti Thomae Aquinatis*, and also his notes on Acts 17:34 in his *Annotations to the New Testament*.

<sup>33</sup> See works of Koch and Stiglmayr, in the 1890s.

<sup>34</sup> In his *Le Christ dans la théologie byzantine*, Meyendorff dedicates a whole chapter (Chapter 5) to the authorship and the content of the Dionysian writings.

scholar, deeply rooted in the Germanic 19th century critical approach, though he also manages to be highly critical of it<sup>35</sup>.

*With Denys we have a unique case in the history of theology, indeed in all intellectual history. A man of the foremost rank and of prodigious power hid his identity, not only from centuries of credulity but also from the critical acumen of the modern period, and precisely through that concealment exercised his influence. For our modern – and above all German – scholarly world this is unforgivable. After their tank-formations have laid waste his garden, there is not a blade of grass left: all that remains is PSEUDO-, written in bold letters, and underlined with many marks of contempt. Not only is he branded as a forger, but with a reference to his dependence on Plotinus and Proclus any originality of thought is stripped from him. Indeed, what is deemed relevant in the case of the Neoplatonists is with him unhinged and without any proper foundation, so that in the end he stands forth as a wretched mongrel: a corpse beneath the triumphal car of modern philology, by association with which his commentators, the greatest minds of declining antiquity, of the Middle Ages, of the Renaissance and even of the baroque period, are casually discredited.*

Much ink has been spilt on Dionysian studies, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox. However, to this day the state of the consensus can be characterized as ‘uncertain’: there is no unanimity with respect to the focal questions of the Dionysian problem: the ‘who’ and the ‘what’.

With respect to the ‘who’, no agreement exists as to the positive identity of the author. The list of candidates is kaleidoscopic. Among the candidates are pagans, Catholic Christians and Non-Chalcedonian Christians: for example, Ammonius Saccas,

Dionysius the Great of Alexandria, Severus of Antioch and Peter the Iberian.

As far as ‘what’ is concerned – a more burning issue nowadays – analyses have been produced presenting pictures that are diametrical opposites of one another. Some portray Dionysius as a Christian apologist disguised as a pagan, others see in him a pagan dressed up as a Christian.

### **The sources of Meyendorff’s view on the Corpus Dionysiacum**

Meyendorff was well versed in the late 19th and early 20th century Protestant and Catholic work on the subject and clearly admired its scholarly and critical character. In Chapter Five of his *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, where he discusses Dionysius, the scholars whom he cites with approval are Endre von Ivanka, Rene Roques and Jean Vanneste. These, in turn are rooted in late 19th century Protestant German scholarship, notably that of Hugo Koch and Josef Stiglmayr, and ultimately in the scholarship of the Reformation. Of the Orthodox scholars who wrote about PseudoDionysius, Meyendorff cites V. Lossky. However, as my analysis will show, he does not give Lossky his due.

Let us begin at the beginning. That present-day Dionysian scholarship is based on Protestant assumptions is suggested by the ‘scholarly’ remarks on the *Areopagitica* made by Martin Luther, the father of the Reformation: “Dionysius is most pernicious; he platonises more than he Christianises”<sup>36</sup>.

The tenor of contemporary Dionysian studies, however, was set at the end of the 19th century by the German scholars Hugo Koch and Josef Stiglmayr<sup>37</sup>, who, effectively, were working with the historical-critical method on the foundations laid down by Luther. Dionysius’s Platonism is seen as

<sup>35</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit: eine theologische Ästhetik*, II/1 (Einsiedeln 1969), pp. 147–148. Quoted by A. Louth in his ‘The influence of Denys the Areopagite on Eastern and Western spirituality in the fourteenth century’, *Sobornost*, 4:2 (1982), p. 185.

<sup>36</sup> M. Luther, *Disputation of 1537*. Quoted in A. Golitsin, “‘A Contemplative and a Liturgist’: Father Georges Florovsky on the *Corpus Dionysiacum*”, *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 43/2 (1999), pp. 131–161.

the key to the problem. In this respect, Meyendorff is more or less direct heir to these German scholars. Koch's conclusion is that no other Christian writer before or after the author of the *Corpus* took more from Late Platonism, especially from Proclus, than he did. Meyendorff subscribes to this opinion and considers the influence of Proclus on Dionysius as somehow axiomatic, without, however, attempting in any way to define the essence of the Proclean Neoplatonism. Dionysius's love of Neoplatonism is, indeed, undisputed. The crux of the problem, however, is the *nature* of Dionysius's indebtedness to Neoplatonism. Is it a matter of terminology or is it a question of content – or of both in varying degrees<sup>38</sup>?

Endre von Ivanka's<sup>39</sup> attitude towards Dionysius is rather more favourable: he thinks the author of the Dionysian writings is an apologist who seeks to Christianize the Neoplatonic cosmological framework. Thus von Ivanka persuasively notes that the meaning of the Dionysian triad, *monē-proodos epistrophe*, has been shorn of its Neoplatonic content: it has no demiurgic function and transmits knowledge and illumination rather than being<sup>40</sup>. Meyendorff follows von Ivanka in asserting<sup>41</sup> the absence of the demiurgic powers in the Dionysian procession, as well as in assuming a more moderate line than, for instance, J.P. Hornus<sup>42</sup>, who purported to discover in Dionysius the mysticism of Plotinus in its entirety<sup>43</sup>. Following von Ivanka,

Meyendorff also denies the hierarchies any constructive function in the acquisition of the knowledge of God. Meyendorff goes even further than Ivanka in one sense, however, in that he denies any direct knowledge of God in Dionysius.

Rene Roques<sup>44</sup> is an especially important influence upon Meyendorff. Roques has a slightly more sympathetic approach to Dionysius, but one which Meyendorff does not favour. At the same time, in line with the rest of the Liberal Protestant and Catholic scholarship on the subject, Roques concentrates upon the Neoplatonic dependence of the *Corpus* to an extent that makes him overlook its Christian reading. In this Meyendorff follows Roques very closely. According to A. Golitzin<sup>45</sup>, in a work of nearly four hundred pages, Roques makes about thirty patristic references in all. Furthermore, not unlike Hornus, Roques sees within the *Areopagitica* a fundamental problem: a division between the treatises *The Mystical Theology* and *The Divine Names* on the one hand and the two treatises on the hierarchies on the other. On this basis Roques introduces his contrast between the Dionysian *theologia* (discourse about God) and *orkanomía* (things to do with the creation), and treats the two in isolation from one another. Meyendorff's view of the *Areopagitica* is very much the same. He takes his idea of the yawning 'gap' within the *Corpus* from Roques and Vanneste.

Especially important for Meyendorff is the work of Jean Vanneste. In his *Le Mystère*

<sup>37</sup> H. Koch, "Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita in seinen Beziehungen zum Neoplatonismus und Mysterienwesen", in *Forsch. z. christl. Litter. Dogmengeschichte*, t. 86 (Mainz 1900); J. Stiglmayr, "Das Aufkommen der Pseudo-Dionysischen Schriften und ihr Eindringen in die christliche Literatur bis zum Lateranconcil 649. Ein zweiter Beitrag zur Dionysius Frage", in *IV Jahresbericht des öffentlichen Privatgymnasiums an der Stelle matutina zu Feldkirch* (Feldkirch 1895), and "Der Neuplatoniker Proklos als Vorlage des sog. Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom 'bel'", in *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 16 (1895), pp. 253-273 and 721-748.

<sup>38</sup> See in particular A. Golitsin, *Et Introibo ad Altare Dei. The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagita, with Special Reference to its Predecessors in the Eastern Christian Tradition* (Thessaloniki 1994).

<sup>39</sup> Endre von Ivanka, *Plato Christianus: La reception critique du platonisme chez les Peres de l'Eglise* (Paris 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Endre von Ivanka, *ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>41</sup> See this chapter below.

<sup>42</sup> J.P. Hornus, "Quelques réflexions à propos du Ps.-Denys l'Aréopagite et de la mystique chrétienne en général", *Revue de l'histoire et de la philosophie religieuse*, 27 (1947), pp. 37-63.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, p. 95.

<sup>44</sup> Rene Roques, *L'Univers Dionysien: structure hierarchique du monde selon le Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite* (Paris 1954).

<sup>45</sup> A. Golitsin, "A Contemplative and a Liturgist": Father Georges Florovsky on the *Corpus Dionysiacum*", *op. cit.*, p. 135, note 15.



*de Dieu*<sup>46</sup>, and in a number of articles, Vanneste goes even further than Roques and posits an unbridgeable gap between Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* and the *Divine Names* and the two treatises on the hierarchies. According to Vanneste, these two groups within the *Corpus* are incompatible and assume two different and irreconcilable paths to knowledge of the divine. While accepting the *Mystical Theology* and the *Divine Names*, Vanneste has no time for the hierarchies. In this way he removes the *Mystical Theology* from its liturgical context and then denies it any Christian context at all. Meyendorff does this as well. Vanneste's views are especially important as the background for Meyendorff's theories of the Areopagite's allegedly non-Christian mysticism and his defective liturgical theology. Vanneste considers the word 'mystical' in the title of the treatise to be utterly deceptive: there is nothing in the Dionysian text to suggest that the author himself had a genuine Christian mystical experience of the kind Saint Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians 12:2, or anything comparable to the experiences of Saint Theresa of Avila or Saint John of the Cross<sup>47</sup>. There is in Dionysius, complains Vanneste<sup>48</sup> "*pas un cri, pas une lueur de joie, mais une carence totale de témoignage*".

This is because, Vanneste continues: "*l'invasion mystique est toute autre qu'une préférence de doctrine*"<sup>49</sup>.

Thus Dionysian mysticism, in Vanneste's view, is neither that of Saint Paul's "I knew a man" (2 Cor. 12:2-4), nor that of the

Western mystics of the Middle Ages (e.g. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*). All this enables Vanneste to detect in the *Mystical Theology* something he calls "natural mysticism" (that is the Neoplatonic "return" of the soul to its divine origin) and not the Christian revelation<sup>50</sup>. Vanneste also contrasts *theologia* (found in the *Mystical Theology* and *Divine Names*) and *theourgia* (found in the *Celestial Hierarchy* and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*). He thus seriously misunderstands the way Dionysius uses *theourgia*. Finally, as the background to the *whole* of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* – a unity at last! – Vanneste discovers Plotinus's *theoria*, Iamblichus's *theourgia*, and Proclus's hierarchies.

Meyendorff follows Vanneste uncritically and thus perpetuates his mistakes.



Vladimir Lossky (1903 – 1958)

### Vladimir Lossky

One last name I wish to mention in connection with Meyendorff's chapter on Dionysius is Vladimir

Lossky. Father John cites Lossky's 'La notion des analogies chez Denys le Pseudo-Areopagite'<sup>51</sup> in connection with the subject of the creatures' return (*epistrophe*) to God. He mentions with approval Lossky's theory of the analogies, but evidently prefers to link it exclusively with his treatment of the *Divine Names*, the one treatise in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* he sees in a positive light. Yet Father John chooses to overlook the fact that Lossky's conception of the Dionysian *epistrophe* is found in his treatment of the Dionysian hierarchies. Moreover, Lossky

<sup>46</sup> J. Vanneste, *Le Mystère de Dieu* (Brussels 1959).

<sup>47</sup> See J. Vanneste, 'La théologie mystique du pseudo-Denys l'Areopagite', *Studia Patristica*, 5 (Berlin 1962), pp. 402-404.

<sup>48</sup> J. Vanneste, *ibid.*, p. 404.

<sup>49</sup> J. Vanneste, *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> J. Vanneste, *Le mystère de Dieu*, pp. 216-217.

<sup>51</sup> V. Lossky, 'La notion des analogies chez Denys le Pseudo-Areopagite', *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen-âge*, 5 (1930), pp. 279-309, cited in *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, p. 95.

points out the *universality* of the concept of analogy, in that it is crucial to the system of the *whole* of the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. As a result, he quotes at least as frequently from the treatises on the hierarchies as from that on the divine names. In this way he brings into relief the unity and coherence of the *whole* of the *Areopagitica*. Father Meyendorff, however, prefers to follow Vanneste and not Lossky on the question of the *Corpus's* unity, and this prevents him from exploring justly and in depth both the concept of analogy and the hierarchies.

### Dionysian analogia in connection with the hierarchies

Dionysius uses the notion of *analogia* to explore the capacity of the created world to receive divine illumination in proportion to – on the analogy of – each creature's measure and capacity. It is the relation of analogy that determines each being's place in its respective hierarchy. The purpose of the hierarchies is therefore to procure a creature's union with God (*henosis*) and deification (*theosis*) – a traditional Christian concept that, first and foremost, means an unmediated experience of God. The concept of analogy thus helps to point out that the hierarchies are about creatures experiencing God and becoming deified.

From the concept of Dionysian analogy it follows that the hierarchies are both static and dynamic. They are static in the sense that, as Father Meyendorff himself observes<sup>52</sup>, they are not eventually superseded, but are part of God's plan with respect to creation. In the creaturely surge upwards toward the Creator, the hierarchies are not ladders that will finally be 'folded up', when all created beings have made their ascent and finally achieved an Origenistic type of *apokatastasis*. Instead, each being remains in its proper hierarchical order

(*taxis*). This order, however, is not static but dynamic, and therein lies the dynamic quality of the hierarchies. The task of each being is to discover its proper place in the cosmos, not to undo it. It is this property of hierarchical being that accounts for and directs the perpetual movement of all creatures. It also seems to allow for the idea of a creature's growth, and consequently for the existence of history and an *eschaton*. One can thus think of the creatures' perpetual ascent to God as an ever-moving repose, something unlike Origen's repose, which in some sense could be seen as finite and limited<sup>53</sup>.

If we are prepared to recognize the dynamic quality of the analogies, then we must also review the notion of a hierarchical 'determinism' that is an 'inevitable and fatal necessity' excluding the creatures' free will and synergy with God (two fundamental aspects of Eastern Christian teaching). This would increase the dissimilarity of the Dionysian hierarchies and those of the Neoplatonists. Third, the concept of analogy as Lossky presents it – and more specifically the notion of analogy as determining the ultimate limit of each created being in its advance in knowledge of the Creator – points strongly to the fact that the hierarchical system helps safeguard the apophatic quality of the knowledge of God (another Eastern patristic axiom). Fourth, the concept of analogy as understood by Lossky opens up space for an accommodation within the Dionysian hierarchical world of the linear history of salvation and the *eschaton* – the very concepts Father Meyendorff finds lacking in the *Areopagitica*. Father Meyendorff, however, is not prepared to include Lossky's insights in his thesis, and aligns himself with Western scholarship. The price for this refusal is a lack of coherence and depth in his treatment of the hierarchies.

<sup>52</sup> Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, p. 100.

<sup>53</sup> In Origen there does seem to be an end to the ascent, which will come about not with the cosmos becoming completely transparent to the action of the divine energies, a perfect theophany, but with the ultimate dissolution of the sensible (*aistheta*) and disincarnation. This dissolution of the 'second creation' (cf. *Peri Archon* 1.6.2) should perhaps be seen as an end to all progression. See A. Golitsin, op. cit., pp. 282-283.

### Dionysius's concept of God, or 'theology properly so-called'

Meyendorff's treatment of the Dionysian *theologia*, or 'theology properly so-called', amounts to an interpretation of the *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology*. Following Vanneste, he postulates an unbridgeable gap between these two treatises and the two treatises on the hierarchies, the *Celestial Hierarchy* and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

He is not alone in choosing this approach, nor can the unity of the *Corpus* be seen as totally unproblematic. Yet this divisive method, when applied rigorously, fails to account fully for important features of the *Areopagitica* as a whole, and therefore raises doubts as to its applicability. This method of considering the *Divine Names* and the *Mystical Theology* to be totally incompatible with the rest of the *Corpus* results in a separation of the theme of mystical union with God and deification from its liturgical context<sup>54</sup>. A host of problems ensue, for this ultimately severs the *Corpus's* link with the patristic continuum and places it among the late Neoplatonic writings. Thus the ominous conclusions Father Meyendorff reaches towards the middle of his Chapter Five are completely predictable. In the end he is the victim of his implicit method.

### The *ousia/dunameis* distinction

The *ousia/dunameis* distinction in Patristic thought points to the antinomy that God is at once both wholly unknowable and yet known and shared in. To begin with, Meyendorff seems convincingly to present Dionysius's *ousia/dunameis* (essence/powers) distinction as a continuation of the essence/energy distinction inaugurated by the Cappadocians. (Cf. Saint Basil: "We know what is knowable of God [to *gnoston tou theou*], but to know that which escapes our understanding is impossible"), Ep. 235. This unknowable is "the essence, which is not open to

examination of any kind [*aperiaptou panti*]", *Against Eunomius*, I.14. This was developed by Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius, On the Making of Man*.) At the same time, however, it is striking that nowhere in his *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* does Father Meyendorff mention the importance of this Dionysian concept in Palamism.

Meyendorff further indicates that on a number of crucial points Dionysius separates himself radically from the Neoplatonists. The *ousia/dunameis* distinction allows Dionysius to hold both the absolute transcendence and absolute immanence of God. This in turn enables him to account for both God's unity and multiplicity.

Father Meyendorff speaks of "distinctions" in Dionysius's God as conceivable on two levels: on that of the three divine Persons and on that of the energies. In the realm of creation, one can speak of the divine multiplicity, referring to the divine operations shining through the created universe. The absolute immanence and the absolute transcendence of God, as Meyendorff shows convincingly, rescue the Dionysian system from the dangers of emanationism and pantheism, and radically transform the Neoplatonic cosmos so that the world is not a continuation of the Absolute. It is utterly different from God, and at the same time – or in virtue of this – is capable of being a manifestation of God and coming into union with him in his powers and his virtues. The latter, as Father Meyendorff points out, are not diminutions of deity as they are in Plotinus, but are fully God in his operations. The divine virtues are "fully and entirely participable by all the participants", though the Deity also transcends these participations. I would argue that Meyendorff is likewise correct in connecting the transcendence and unknowability of God with the fact that knowledge of God by angelic

<sup>54</sup> This is another Protestant anti-liturgical assumption.

minds is presented by Dionysius as a perpetual progress.

When dealing with rational beings' participation in God through the divine energies, Meyendorff points out the importance of the Dionysian concept of abandonment of self (*ekstasis*). He then concludes the whole section on *theologia* by saying that all these points point to a re-working of the Platonic universe. The reason is that in Dionysius there is no trace of the 'natural divinity' of the intellect (*nous*) and the knowability of the Divine essence. Dionysius's God remains "the transcendent and Creator God of the Bible, and not the One of Plotinus". He then goes on to credit Dionysius with successfully demonstrating in the *Divine Names* "that the knowledge of God cannot be identified with natural processes of the mind, but transcends them and represents a mode of knowledge *sui generis*, supra-intellectual or mystical."

### Meyendorff's account of Dionysian mysticism

Just a few pages further on, however, Father Meyendorff quite unexpectedly seems to be taking back what he has just given us. Citing Jules Lebreton and J. Vanneste, he declares what might seem to be the opposite of his previous conclusions. He accuses Dionysius of fostering nothing more than "natural theology" – as opposed, presumably, to the theology of revelation – and of always remaining a philosopher, i.e. a Neoplatonic philosopher, rather than "a mystic in the modern sense of the word".

The assertion that Dionysius is not a mystic "in the modern sense of the word" is based on Vanneste's notion that a mystical theology properly speaking ought to be based on and reveal the mystic's personal experience, perhaps in the form of a spiritual autobiography. In response to this one might argue that while the Greek patristic writers

do not exclude the description of one's own spiritual experience, it may not be exclusively with such experience that they are concerned. In his article entitled "'Mysticism" and "Mysterion": an essay on the history of a word', Louis Bouyer discusses the meaning of the word *mustikos* in the Greek Fathers. He argues that while the basic meaning of the word is 'hidden', the word has three patristic connotations: (1) the hidden meaning of the Scriptures; (2) the hidden meaning of the Divine Liturgy; and (3) the hidden, inner life in Christ of the individual baptized Christian. While the third meaning is subjective, the first two are objective and amount really to one and the same thing. Moreover, the third meaning is subordinate to the first two. Thus in patristic usage, while 'mystical theology' may be about an experience, it does not have to be reduced exclusively to it. The reduction of the notion is a feature of liberal Protestantism, which accepts experience only, with no dogma and no Church. In modern usage, moreover, the word has also lost the first two objective connotations and retains only the third, subjective meaning. It has thereby lost its rootedness in the Christian revelation, in the Liturgy, the Bible, and the Christian community, and has come to refer only to an individual's experience of the divine, with possible loss of normal awareness. Having undergone this change in meaning, the term also came to be understood as referring to mystical experience *in opposition* to any body of dogmatic formulations. It is this third situation that Father Jean Vanneste seems to have in mind in *La Mystère de Dieu*<sup>55</sup>.

The reasoning behind Vanneste's – and Father Meyendorff's – view that mysticism is absent in Dionysius and that he belongs to the ranks of pagan philosophers seems to run as follows. When he presents his view on the union (*henosis*) beyond the intellect with the divine as outlined in the *Mystical Theology*, Vanneste speaks of it as resulting

<sup>55</sup> Father Jean Vanneste is a Catholic, and from this we may conclude that the Protestant assumptions dominant in Post-Enlightenment scholarship have found their way into Catholicism.

from the soul's natural capacity (*dynamis*) to achieve this. The path to such a union is through the soul's stripping itself (*aphairesis*) of all knowing and forcing itself to enter into unknowing (*agnosia*). Thereupon the union of the unknowing intellect with the unknowable and transcendent Absolute is bound to ensue. One can easily see that the basis for such a union is the 'like to like' principle that suggests some kind of ontological connection, and that there is a 'mechanical' quality to such a union. The effort of the soul to push itself to the attainment of likeness with the divine and the absence of any operation of God's grace is also stressed. Vanneste finds all this in Dionysius and consequently considers him to be a metaphysician and not a genuine mystic. This is a false opposition. One can see that Father Vanneste has missed the point here by the fact that in describing the intellect's final leap into the *henosis* Dionysius employs a markedly *passive* terminology, thereby stressing the ultimate importance of God's acting in the soul. Father Vanneste's conclusion seems to reflect his own Roman Catholic background: the mystics he has in mind are Western medieval mystics. While he is right in denying that Dionysius is a mystic in the modern, 'psychological', sense, he is wrong in the positive conclusion that he draws, from this, i.e. that Dionysius is essentially nothing more than a philosopher and that what we have in his works is simply "natural theology".

While Meyendorff may have been familiar with Bouyer's article – hence, perhaps, his emphasis upon the 'modern sense' of the word 'mysticism' – he chooses to take no notice of it and follows the thesis of Vanneste. As a result he takes on Vanneste's errors and ends up being inconsistent with his own previous conclusions. Meyendorff's claim that Dionysius is not a mystic "in the modern sense" is easily granted, for Dionysius indeed does not seem to be primarily concerned with a direct description of his personal meeting with God. Rather,



St Gregory Palamas. 14th century icon

what Dionysius is simply presenting is his vision of God's self-revelation to the created world in various theophanic divine acts (*theourgiai*) and the created world's response to these in praise and glorification, with the result that the world becomes a sacrament of divine presence. In all this there is nothing that contradicts the Christian dogmatic, Biblical and liturgical tradition, because the divine acts are revealed through the symbols found in the Scripture and the Liturgy. In this Dionysius fits in well with the tradition of the Eastern spiritual writers, in whose writings there is no antithesis between the theologian and the contemplative, and among whom writers like Saint Symeon the New Theologian are not very common.

One could also reformulate the argument against Dionysius's belonging with the

mystics ‘in the modern sense of the word’ and for his being a true mystic in the Eastern Orthodox sense. If a sign of a true mystic is divine visions, then these do indeed find a place in the Dionysian writings. There are references in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* to visions that, in a manner not unlike that of Saint Paul (2 Cor.12:2-4), are ascribed to third parties: to the monk Carpus, to Dionysius’s guide Hierotheus, and to Moses. Moreover, the description of Carpus’s vision in Epistle 8 can be understood as having a liturgical context. The same is true with respect to Hierotheus’s vision (DN 3) and Moses’s vision (MT 1). As A. Louth has remarked, at least in some Christian circles, notably in the Macarian ones, people were expected to see visions. Not only would this exonerate Dionysius from the charge of being a mere theoretician with no experience of God, but it could also be seen as a link between the author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and the Macarian *Homilies* (e.g. Homily 10.4) – a link that Meyendorff denies. Furthermore, the idea of a vision of the divine light as a prerequisite for celebrating the Liturgy is a theme found in Saint Symeon the New Theologian. On this basis could one not establish a parallel between Dionysius and Symeon after all? The discussion might even be taken further. One could argue that a similar view regarding visions was common in the hesychastic circles, and that this is what Gregory Palamas is speaking about in his *Triads* (which Father Meyendorff helpfully translated and annotated).

Thus behind Father Meyendorff’s remark on the lack of mysticism in Dionysius there is his – and Vanneste’s – misunderstanding of the whole complex and nuanced issue of the different kinds of mysticism. Furthermore, out of this misunderstanding a puzzling situation seems to arise: Meyendorff is here accusing Dionysius of *not* encouraging individualism, and yet he blames Dionysius for his individualism in the section on the hierarchies. And at the same time

Meyendorff uses Vanneste in order to draw the conclusion that, because Dionysius is not a genuine Christian mystic but a philosopher, his vision is devoid of any specifically Christian elements and that therefore grave problems are to be found with his cosmology and ecclesiology – which are the subjects of Dionysius’s two treatises on the hierarchies.

### **Meyendorff on Proclus and the Dionysian hierarchies**

I shall briefly touch on these two treatises, because the concept of analogy spoken of earlier is important to them.

Meyendorff is convincing when he points out that in Dionysius neither the Neoplatonic concepts of being, life, wisdom and intelligence, nor the angelic powers represent quasi-divine beings halfway between the created and the uncreated. Instead, *life*, *wisdom* and *intelligence* are divine names devoid of any hypostatic existence distinguishable from that of God himself, while the angelic powers, although intelligible, are nevertheless *created*. Yet while these observations are correct, by not drawing the proper conclusions from them Father Meyendorff renders them dysfunctional. What is more, he contradicts himself by saying that “the parallelism with Proclus remains complete in the very principle of a system of intermediaries ...” Here Meyendorff again follows Roques and Vanneste, and neglects Lossky’s concept of analogy.

What the hierarchies pass on to the lower levels is not being but union with the divine energies and, in effect, deification. Now, since all levels of being have been created directly by God and there is therefore no emanation of being, only *direct* communion with the Creator can deify. Thus in Dionysian cosmology, the ‘higher’ beings do not uplift the ‘lower’ ones to a union with themselves, but rather to a direct union with *their Creator*. Far from being opaque to the penetration of the divine rays, the hierarchical orders are vehicles of its transmission.

### Conclusion

The impression one gets from John Meyendorff's discussion of Dionysius is one of complexity and confusion. This is due to a number of factors. First, there is the *general* problem an Orthodox Church historian encounters when attempting to do research in patristic theology while using the so-called critical historical method. The reason for this is that this method, while undoubtedly an indispensable tool in any properly modern research, contains pitfalls in the form of inherent Protestant presuppositions, some of which are hard to reconcile with Orthodox theology. One of these presuppositions concerns the patristic status of Dionysius the Areopagite; another concerns the status of patristics itself; yet another concerns the assumption of the corruption of Christianity via its Hellenization. Confusion also arises due to the *particular* difficulty Father Meyendorff has in clarifying for himself the issues he is facing. In this sense, Meyendorff's requirement of 'an objective study of documents' is not fulfilled. One can argue that, although it is impossible to be unbiased, one cannot afford to be unaware of the nature of one's assumptions. Meyendorff is unsuccessful in his interpretation of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* because he neither takes into account the author's thought-world and presuppositions, nor clarifies his own. Had he done so, he would not have accused the author of the *Areopagitica* of both false mysticism and individualism at the same time.

I strongly believe that Meyendorff's opinion that the issue of Platonism is at the heart of the Dionysian problem is born out by the evidence. However, there is no nuanced discussion of the issue of Platonism in Christianity in Chapter Five of *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*. Meyendorff leaves the problem of Platonism in Christian theology – and that of 'Christian

Hellenism' – largely undiscussed. This is an aspect of Meyendorff's general imprecision in the handling of concepts in the history of philosophy, a skill that is essential for a historian of ideas. As a historian of theology, Meyendorff is also a historian of ideas. It is therefore legitimate to criticize him for a lack of knowledge concerning the precise history of concepts directly relevant to his chosen field of study.

Because of these deficiencies, Meyendorff leaves a crucial question unanswered: How is it possible, given the serious theological problems Meyendorff discovers in the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, that it was rapidly accepted by subsequent writers such as John of Scythopolis and Maximus the Confessor, whom everyone accepts as Orthodox? Was it only on account of its pseudonymity, or was it because, behind the almost apostolic authority of the pseudonym, they recognized in the *Corpus* themes and approaches that were their own? If they themselves were well versed in and – in a certain sense – imbued with the spirit of Neoplatonic philosophy, the answer may well be the latter.

Meyendorff's discussion of the Dionysian writings becomes complicated because as a historian of ideas he fails to see the overall coherence and, in a certain sense, simplicity of what he is describing. He therefore discovers conflicts and contrasts where there are none, and similarities between phenomena that are dissimilar. In doing so he removes Saint Dionysius from the Eastern patristic continuum.

To conclude, it seems to me that Meyendorff's *general* problem as an Orthodox historian and patristic scholar would have been close to a solution had he solved his *particular* problem – by becoming properly critical. ■

*Sourozh* 87, February 2002

# Symbolising the Holy: The Divine Liturgy as it is Today

*Priest Gregory Woolfenden*

*Father Gregory Woolfenden was a priest of the Diocese of Sourozh, and taught Liturgy and Church History at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, an Anglican theological college. In 2004 he moved to the USA and took monastic vows. Father Gregory writes here a reply to Father Pavlos Koumarios, Rector of the Church of Saint Irene Chrysovalantou in Toronto and teacher of theology at Sherbrooke University, Quebec, whose article 'Symbol and Reality in the Divine Liturgy' appeared in 'Sourozh', No. 80, May 2000.*

**I**n his recent article in Sourozh Father Pavlos Koumarios raised some very interesting points about the history of the Orthodox Liturgy. Though some of the things Father Koumarios says are unexceptionable, he does appear to espouse a 'reforming' view of the Liturgy. It is therefore wise to examine carefully what is being proposed and evaluate any claims to authenticity.



Hieromonk Gregory (Woolfenden)

liturgical life of the Church, and the Holy Mysteries in particular, are truly symbolic celebrations: they evoke and truly realize the reality of that which is signified.

The semantic problem would seem to be a failure to distinguish, as modern English-speaking scholars largely do, between true symbolism and allegorical use of symbolism. In the latter case, as Father

## **SYMBOL AND ALLEGORY**

Father Koumarios appears to be unaware of modern writing on symbolism and the meaning of the word 'symbol'. Many modern scholars, philosophers such as Suzanne Langer<sup>1</sup>, as well as numerous theologians, are distinguishing between sign and symbol. The former is a purely conventional indication of fact, conveying one simple unambiguous message: a halt sign on a public road, for example. The second, the symbol, building upon its etymology as something connecting two objects or realities, is to be seen as conveying meaning rather than factual information. In such an understanding, the

Koumarios rightly points out, the Liturgy can have an arbitrary allegorical meaning assigned to its various parts that has no intrinsic connection with the natural meaning. For example, the so-called 'Little Entrance' was once the entry procession into church and its natural meaning was that the clergy and people together entered into the holy place, led by the Gospel of Christ, to hear his saving words. Here, I would suggest, the action and the interpretation are in harmony with one another, whereas to say that the entrance represents the beginning of the teaching ministry of Christ is clearly allegory. I would however stress that such an allegory might be very helpful in inculcating a devout and reverent attention to the

<sup>1</sup> See especially *Philosophy in a New Key* (Harvard University Press 1957).





readings that are soon to follow. This cannot be a wholly bad thing!

One of the features of the true symbol that has made the concept such a fruitful one is its polyvalence, its many layers of meaning. There can be, and probably is, more than one way in which the symbols of the Holy Mysteries may engage the praying community as a whole and as individuals. My own favourite example from personal experience was gained when attending a Capitular High Mass in Westminster RC Cathedral some twenty-five years ago. At the time of the censuring of the gifts and the altar, as the celebrating priest turned to the altar, a fine, clear column of white smoke arose under the white marble baldachino, against the dark background of the almost invisible brick ceiling beyond. As well as conventional interpretations such as the ‘pure sacrifice’ of Malachi, or the prayers of the saints rising to God, I was instantly put in mind of the pillar of cloud leading the Hebrews out of

**Archbishop Elisey of Sourozh performing the Divine Liturgy in the Cathedral of the Dormition and All Saints in London, in concelebration with Archbishop Anatoly of Kerch and the diocesan clergy**

Egyptian slavery (Ex. 13:22). Of course this is fanciful on one level, but on another it might be seen as leading to a greater and more fruitful prayer. This is a relatively minor example, but hopefully a reminder that we cannot tie down the meanings of symbols.

#### **BEFORE AND AFTER ICONOCLASM**

Father Koumarios suggests that the major shift in the interpretation of the Divine Liturgy, from the Eucharist as communion to being a dramatic representation of historic events, took place as a result of the Iconoclast crisis. I would agree that this period is extremely influential, but I would question whether the disjunction between the pre- and post-Iconoclast periods is as stark as Father Koumarios maintains.

The pre-Iconoclast period is characterized by Father Koumarios as devoid of symbolism, although he then goes on to say that the word ‘symbol’ is used extensively (p.16). Quite clearly he sees ‘symbol’ as referring primarily to ‘allegory’, and this leads to a somewhat confusing description of pre-Iconoclast liturgical commentary. Who are the characteristic authors of this period? Father Koumarios mentions early Christian texts such as the *Didache*, unhelpful for commentary on the developed Byzantine liturgy, which it predates. He also mentions the Fathers of the 4th and 5th centuries; and Saint Maximus the Confessor, who flourished immediately prior to the onset of the Iconoclast crisis, which began some sixty years after his death. Saint Maximus took up the Dionysian corpus and re-presented it in an unimpeachably orthodox way<sup>2</sup>. This is important because Pseudo-Dionysius is frequently seen to be the starting point of the allegorical interpretation of the Liturgy.

In his *Mystagogy* Saint Maximus certainly uses allegory to interpret the actions of the Liturgy. Father Koumarios quotes the description in Chapter 8 of the bishop ascending the synthronon as signifying the Lord’s Ascension to the right hand of God<sup>3</sup>. This is clearly allegorical. At the beginning of Chapter 9 Maximus says that one interpretation of the entrance into church is that it represents the conversion of the unfaithful to faithfulness<sup>4</sup>, and he then goes on to expand that interpretation allegorically. Bearing in mind the stationary Liturgy of Constantinople at the time of Maximus and the way in which the procession might gather people into the

celebration as it wended its way through the city (if Dom Kavanagh’s interpretation is correct<sup>5</sup>), this interpretation is hardly far-fetched. There is a real, natural connection between the body of believers entering the church and the change of mind and attitude that the entrance may well have engendered. Here we have an interpretation that could be called symbolic in the strict sense outlined above; but other parts of Saint Maximus’ commentary are clearly allegorical – which is not to say that they are the worse for that. It is only when the allegory becomes fanciful or overly elaborate that we may find it obscuring the true and communitarian meaning of the Eucharistic celebration.

Father Koumarios characterizes the second, post-Iconoclast period as one of ‘theatrical symbolism’ (p.19). He particularly mentions the interpretation of the Little Entrance and the readings as allegories of the Lord’s public preaching ministry, an interpretation that is no more allegorical or theatrical than Maximus’ interpretation of the closing of the doors after the Gospel as passing from material things at the Last Judgement<sup>6</sup>. I agree that Maximus’ allegory is more eschatologically focussed, but it remains allegory.

The interpretation of the Liturgy as a dramatic representation of the life of Christ is seen as particularly characteristic of the later period, and a good example of this would appear to be the commentary of Saint Nicholas Cabasilas of the 14th century. It is perfectly true that Cabasilas interprets the liturgy as representing the work and preaching of Christ, but that is not all. In Chapter 16 we read:

<sup>2</sup> See Introduction to *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, tr. & ed. George C. Berthold (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press 1985), pp.6-7.

<sup>3</sup> A puzzling feature of Father Koumarios’ treatment is his using the Migne text when a far better critical text by Soteropoulos (published in Athens in 1978) is available, has been translated in *Irenikon* and is the basis for the Berthold English edition (see fn. 2). There are some striking differences between Berthold’s translation of Soteropoulos’ edition and Koumarios’ of Migne’s which I have not had the leisure to check; but this underscores the importance of using a reliable modern critical text.

<sup>4</sup> Maximus Confessor op. cit., p.198.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 9 of *On Liturgical Theology* (New York Pueblo 1984).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 15, p.201.

*For example, we have the bringing of the Gospel to the altar, then the bringing of the offerings. Each is done for a practical reason – the one that the Gospel may be read, the other that the sacrifice may be performed; besides this, however, one represents the appearance, the other the manifestation of the Saviour; the first, obscure and imperfect, at the beginning of his life, the second the perfect and supreme manifestation*<sup>7</sup>.

I would emphasize two features of this interpretation: (a) the clear recognition of the original practical purpose of these ceremonies, and (b) the absence at this point of Cabasilas' interpretation in Chapter 24 of the Great Entrance as representing the Entry into Jerusalem. I would suggest that Cabasilas' interpretation is much wider and richer than Koumarios would suggest.

Although I would agree that Cabasilas does not stress the eschatological as much as Maximus, it is clear that he is often addressing a very different set of questions, many of them arising from controversy with the Latins. However Cabasilas is quite clear at one point at least that the saving work of Christ "...had but one purpose – that men might be raised from earth to heaven, that they might inherit the kingdom"<sup>8</sup>. It is simplistic to make too great a contrast between the commentaries on these grounds. It is also simplistic to imply that the later form of commentary had a direct effect on promoting passivity by the faithful. There are many other reasons for the increasing lack of vocal participation by the congregation as a whole, but at the time of Cabasilas such participation could still be taken for granted. In the anaphora, for example, we find that in response to "Let us lift up our hearts" he says:

"The faithful give their consent, and say that their hearts are where our treasure is – there where Christ is, who sits on the right hand of the Father"<sup>9</sup>. Again, at the Lord's Prayer, the whole congregation is said to pray with the priest<sup>10</sup>.

Father Koumarios is right to point to the unhappy effects of the allegorizing commentaries when carried to an extreme. An interpretation of the Liturgy that rarely goes beyond picturing events of the past is an impoverishment. As will be clear from the above, I do not feel that this is an entirely fair interpretation of the liturgical commentators, least of all of Saint Nicholas Cabasilas. There is much more that can be said of these commentaries that shows real concern to convey the dynamism of liturgical celebration. H.-J. Schulz made a great deal of the commentators in his important work on the Liturgy<sup>11</sup>, but it is still questionable as to just how far his hypothesis can be supported, that changes were the result of interpretation rather than interpretation catching up with what was actually done. This point may be made clearer when we turn to Father Koumarios' instances of the dominance of allegorical interpretation.

### THE PREPARATION OF THE GIFTS

While I have no personal difficulty about calling the *Proskomide* a simple preparation, I would content myself with saying that it might take a long time for common nomenclature to change. More importantly I would like to express my entire agreement with Father Koumarios' insistence that the cutting out of the particles came about so as to make use of all the loaves and not just that required for the Lamb. What is

<sup>7</sup> *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, tr. J.M. Hussey and P.A. Nulty (London: SPCK 1960), Chapter 16, p.53 (emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, Chapter 49, p.112.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 26, p.69. The commentary reflects the Greek exactly: "We have them with the Lord", as in *The Divine Liturgy...* (Oxford University Press 1995), p.31.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 35, p.87.

<sup>11</sup> *The Byzantine Liturgy* (New York: Pueblo 1986). L'Euclologio Barberini, gr. 336, eds. S. Parenti and L. Velkovska (Rome: Edizione Liturgiche 1995), p.1.

surprising here is that Father Koumarios appears to be unaware that the authorized Greek liturgical books expect there to be more than one loaf, and that the Russian Church and others following the same customs have never ceased to use more than one loaf, usually five.

However, if the Russian Church uses several loaves, it has to be admitted that they are usually produced by one person or even commercially, and then purchased at the church. The Greeks still often offer large loaves made at home, which means that antidoron is usually more plentiful – it seems a pity however, that all the rubricated commemorations are still done from only one loaf, and that often in a minimalistic way. Does this matter, since what is done is invisible to most people? I would suggest that the various formulae that accompany the preparation of the bread and the veiling of the gifts arose precisely to increase the devotion of the celebrant, and put him in mind of the great mystery for which he was preparing, a mystery in which he recalls that he is at the same time a member and a servant of the Church, both in heaven and upon the earth, not a freelance guru!

### **THE LITTLE ENTRANCE AND THE SYNTHRONON**

Whilst it is perfectly true that the early sources do appear to indicate that the so-called Little Entrance was once the entry into the church, something of which remains when a bishop celebrates, we cannot simply ignore the fact that for several hundred years the procession with the Gospel book has been preceded by the antiphons and prayers that now form an entirely appropriate ‘gathering rite’ before we hear the reading of the Holy Scriptures. It should be noted that I cautiously say only that the sources ‘appear to indicate’ for we cannot be certain – scholars have established good working hypotheses, but they are hypotheses, not concrete facts.

All ancient Typika are either monastic or cathedral, the latter usually for the Great Church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople. To the best of my knowledge nobody has actually proved that anything that might be called a ‘Parish typikon’ ever existed. As in Western Christianity, the elaborate liturgy of a major Patriarchal Cathedral appears to have been abridged and simplified for parish use. This abridgement is exactly why presbyteral and hierarchical liturgies differ today – the latter is closer to cathedral usage. The custom of serving Matins immediately before the liturgy may have grown up earlier than the current Greek typikon, but is not found in Greek monastic typika, nor in any Russian typika. If there were any thought of promoting a ‘restoration’ of a supposed ancient practice, it must be borne in mind that what might result could in fact be something entirely new that might endanger the balance of that which has been established over a very long period of time.

The whole progress of the Entrance is not in fact completed until the clergy go up to the Synthronon, usually during the singing of “Holy God”. Once again Father Koumarios should be aware that in Russian churches there is usually a synthronon, even if it is only a central chair, and that the clergy do still obey the rubrics and go to their places behind the altar for the readings. Equally, a Russian bishop or priest blesses the ‘high place’ – the Synthronon, not the Proskomede. If Father Koumarios is making a case for the better observance of the more authentic rubrics then one can only wish him well. At the same time we should point out that while some Orthodox priests do already observe the more traditional practices, many of the Greek clergy are very attached to what they see as their particular tradition.

### **THE GREAT ENTRANCE**

The Great Entrance has undoubtedly attracted to itself a great number of formulae with allegorical intent. Since they are all said

in an inaudible voice and are again really to serve the devotion of the celebrant, it is difficult to see what great problems they pose. The dialogue between the priest and the deacon is obviously dislocated, but it is comparatively simple to recover its probable original form, as has been done in the interim text used in the diocese of Sourouz.

It is another matter to argue from this that all interdependence and complementarity has been forgotten. This is a rather sweeping generalisation. It is certainly probable that the deacons were responsible for preparing the gifts before the Liturgy in the *skeuophylakion*. However, the oldest part of the present rite of the Proskomide, the prayer “O God, our God, who didst send the Heavenly Bread”, a presbyteral prayer, is found in the earliest surviving manuscript Euchologion, the Barberini codex<sup>12</sup>. Clearly at least one priest was involved from a very early stage, and we have no exact account of what happened before that date, only what we can reconstruct from commentaries.

On a somewhat different level it is clear that at an early stage there were often more priests than deacons available, so they helped with the Great Entrance. As Father Taft put it “one man can carry only so much”<sup>13</sup>. It is interesting to note that even today, a deacon carries the diskos with the bread that has so far been the focus of almost all the formulae and prayers, while a priest carries the chalice that has not as yet figured very highly at all. A bishop still does not walk in the procession but remains at the altar to receive the gifts.

As to whether the concelebrating priests all prayed the anaphora, I fear that Father Koumarios may be reading more into Leo Tuscan than is actually warranted. Jacob’s article on concelebration is very cautious in its interpretation of “unusquisque dicit orationes mysteriorum in

silentio introeuntes ad sanctam mensam”<sup>14</sup>. What appears to be quite clear is that concelebrating priests prayed silently – there is no evidence to show that there was ever a chorally spoken participation of the kind that now characterizes Roman Catholic concelebrations. Nor is there any indication that concelebrants made hand gestures with the chief celebrant, as one may see in some Uniate concelebrations.

### “OFFERING THEE THINE OWN ... WE HYMN THEE”

One area where I am again in complete agreement with Father Koumarios is in the rendering of the oblationary phrase of the anamnesis in the anaphora as “offering” rather than as “we offer”. One would only want to point out that not only do the older Greek texts read thus, so does the Slavonic. Several modern translations into English have rectified this phrase<sup>15</sup>. This is unlikely to be very controversial, but must have an entirely beneficial effect when taken up seriously by liturgical catechesis.

Rather more likely to raise hackles is the question of praying the epiklesis aloud and what is regarded as ‘restoring’ the triple Amen to the people. The surviving early manuscript Euchologia do not in fact attribute the diaconal Amens to the people. The earliest mention of these acclamations assumes the prayer to be said inaudibly (to the congregation) and expects only the deacon to respond Amen, often only twice after the whole formula, rather than the present five spread through the whole passage. The people’s acclamation of “Amen” was and remains that which concludes the whole prayer and not just part of it, the “Amen” that follows the *ecphonesis* “And grant that with one voice and one heart...”. This conclusion is highlighted by

<sup>12</sup> L’Eucologio Barberini, gr. 336, eds. S. Parenti and E. Velkovska (Rome: Edizione Liturgiche 1995), p.1.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Taft, *The Great Entrance* (Rome: Orientalia Christiana Analecta 200 1975), p.204.

<sup>14</sup> A. Jacob, ‘La concelebration...’, in OCP 35 (Rome 1969), pp.249-256, 235-236; cited by Father Koumarios in fn. 26, p.26.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. *The Divine Liturgy... (OUP)*, op. cit., p.33. This edition has also revised the Greek text.

Cabasilas in Chapter 34<sup>16</sup>. I am inclined to agree with Archimandrite Ephrem (Lash) that the *Amens* inserted into the epiklesis had more to do with anti-Latin polemic than congregational participation<sup>17</sup>.

With regard to the praying of the anaphora aloud, it appears to be clear that it once was, but it is not entirely clear when or why it ceased to be. To assume this silent praying to be some kind of clericalization of the Liturgy may well be to import an explanation that is entirely anachronistic, and perhaps even reflecting Western controversies. The well known text of the Emperor Justinian ordering the prayers of the Liturgy to be prayed aloud is thought by some to be aimed at ignorant clerics who did not know or recite the prayers, and so a *new* practice of reading them aloud is legislated<sup>18</sup>. It is in fact impossible to be absolutely certain about this question. Rather than relying on historical material that might be open to legitimate disagreement, it would be better to establish clear principles for and against the anaphora being prayed aloud. In the process of establishing such principles, if it were to be seen as good to pray the anaphora aloud then we must also reflect on how best to accomplish this. For example, a lengthy and operative “Holy, Holy” or *zadostoinik* might distort the flow and meaning of the anaphora to an unacceptable extent. As it is, the later insertion into the epiklesis of the words “And make this bread...”, etc. has already taken attention away from the ancient formula asking that the Holy Spirit come down “...upon us and upon these gifts here set forth.” The question is not a simple one, and the answer may have unforeseen consequences.

### SOME FINAL REMARKS

Father Koumariansos also slates repeated litanies – one man’s repetition is another’s

emphasis! He is critical of the inclusion of devotional prayers for communion within the liturgical books, and while one would certainly agree that the rule of prayer for communion should be read at home and the Liturgy is itself sufficient preparation, it might prove psychologically unwise to remove altogether prayers which, in the Russian Church, are said aloud on behalf of the people, or by them. In this field we venture on to tendentious ground. More important would seem to be encouraging frequent reception of communion in those parts of the Orthodox Church where this is still not common.

It is good to raise these points, but the Orthodox Divine liturgy has reached its present form as a result of a gradual process of development. There appears to be no reason why it should not continue to develop in as organic a way as it has in the past. It may well be mistaken to short-circuit the process of development by legislating wholesale changes that will inevitably fail to command universal support. Change has indeed been decreed in the past: for example, the adding of the Creed to the Liturgy by Patriarch Timothy I in the early 6th century, or the changes decreed in Russia by the 17th century Patriarch Nikon. The story of the latter is instructive. The form and basic text of the liturgy was unchanged – there was little more than a tidying up of rubrics and grammar – but the way in which it was carried out provoked a schism that still endures. On the other hand much of modern Greek liturgical practice is the result of a development that does not appear to have been legislated, but is common in Churches following Greek usage. By contrast, the usages of the older Greek books have been retained by the Russians in many cases, without endangering the communion between these Churches.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, p.86.

<sup>17</sup> Private communication.

<sup>18</sup> Cyril Quatrone, ‘The Celebrant: Priest or Pastor’, *Orthodox Life* 4 (1996).

In a recent article<sup>19</sup>, I suggested ways of interpreting the Liturgy that remain true to its nature as a celebration of the mysteries of salvation, and do not portray it as “a pictorial development of the sacramental eucharist”<sup>20</sup>. With regard to the Proskomide I suggested that what was once a simple, functional ceremony has become not only complex, but also a ritual pattern in which participants offer both prayer and gifts of themselves to God. This gift that we and others may truly live can be seen as a model for life. I maintained that the Great Entrance can be seen, even today, as our being ever more taken up into the ritual realization of the coming Kingdom. I also tried to show that those parts of the anaphora that are always taken aloud, and which are usually sung in a way appropriate to their meaning and function, allow the body of the faithful to be raised on high, called to give thanks and join in angelic songs. They hear the words that sum up Christ’s gift of himself, they offer the pure sacrifice of praise and prayer as the Holy Spirit is invoked, and communion with the saints and all the Church is proclaimed as a reality in which all share.

In my conclusions to this earlier article I pointed out that, in line with modern anthropological studies<sup>21</sup>, taking the Liturgy seriously as a ritual act means that we must attend to the form that the Liturgy has now, and not to some supposed ideal form. This also means that more attention must be paid to the ritual reality of *all* that is done in church and not just to the texts and what the clergy do with them. Most of the highly allegorical formulae that characterize the Preparation of the Gifts and the Great Entrance are said silently, and were only ever intended to be said silently. We priests may or may not find them helpful, but we should perhaps be more aware that were they to

be said aloud, we really would be in great danger of turning the Liturgy into a pictorial representation of certain aspects of Christ’s life and his saving work upon the cross.

In the past, and to some extent today, there has been the danger that over-enthusiastic liturgical scholars privilege the liturgy of a particular period. In the times before Gregory Dix, Josef Jungmann and Alexander Schmemmann, many Anglicans and Roman Catholics tended to idealize the medieval Roman liturgy, forgetting what an immense period the term ‘Middle Ages’ covers. Since then, western thinking and also much of that in Orthodoxy has privileged the so-called ‘classical’ liturgy of the Patristic age – forgetting that all our detailed knowledge of that liturgy comes from well after the period of the great Fathers of East and West. Nowadays there are many who privilege the document known as *The Apostolic Tradition*, which may well be a composite document of several dates. On the other hand there are those in Orthodoxy who would like to return to the supposed pristine purity of 17th century, pre-Nikonian Russia, as well as those who feel that Russian Church music reached its apogee with Bortniansky. I do not pretend that all is well with Orthodox liturgical worship; there is much ignorance and much formalism, as well as much beauty and holiness. But to overcome the ignorance and formalism we must begin with the Liturgy as it is now experienced and not as we think it was experienced at some time in the past. Historical research and theological reflection will lead us a long way, but we also need an openness to understanding and appreciating the whole ritual experience of the Orthodox Church as it is found today in all its people, laity as well as clergy. ■

*Sourozh 81, August 2000*

<sup>19</sup> Gregory Woolfenden, ‘How Ritual Forms Holiness: A Case Study from the Byzantine Tradition’, *Studia Liturgica* XXX.2 (2000).

<sup>20</sup> Schutz, *op. cit.*, p.135.

<sup>21</sup> There are many of these: most helpful would be Catherine Bell’s *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press 1997); and as an introduction, Nathan Mitchell’s *Liturgy and the Social Sciences* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press 1999).

## The Pentecostarion of the Orthodox Church – Complete and Unabridged.

Translated from the Church Slavonic  
by Reader Isaac E. Lambertsen.  
Liberty, TN: St John of Kronstadt Press, 2010. 416 pages.

This is a very welcome addition to our growing library of Orthodox Liturgical books in the English language. It is not the first attempt to produce a complete Pentecostarion, this was done in 1990 by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Boston, but it is certainly the better of the two. The HTM version, though made from the original Greek, suffered from an awkwardness of style made worse by an attempt to adapt the words to fit modern Byzantine chant. Then there was the use of such monstrosities as theandric, enhypostatic and co-beginingless. The volume under review is not faultless in its vocabulary but it certainly avoids words like these.

In passing, it should be noted that the Holy Transfiguration Monastery were pioneers in much liturgical translation and should be saluted for this, though it is not to be regretted that their versions are gradually being superseded by superior ones. The Pentecostarion is one example of this, and recently the Centre for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies at Etna, California has produced a version of the liturgical Psalter (from the Septuagint Greek) greatly surpassing the widely used Boston Psalms.

Reader Isaac, a member of the Russian Orthodox Church in the United States, has worked for many years in the field not only of liturgical translation but of composition as well. With ecclesiastical approval he has produced service after service for early Western saints, including Anglo-Saxon ones. Many who use these are unaware of the immense labour and prayer that must have gone into their writing. He is also engaged in revising his own translation of the complete Menaion, of which nine beautifully bound volumes (out of twelve) are now available from the Saint John of Kronstadt Press. So we can be quite certain of the care that he has lavished on his Pentecostarion.

The book is a fine production. It is clearly printed in red and black and bound in a beautiful Paschal red. It is also fuller than its predecessor. As well as containing the texts of all the services from

the Holy night of Pascha to the Sunday of All Saints, it also adds the Sundays of All Saints of Russia, All Saints of Mount Athos and the New-Martyrs of the Turkish Yoke. Finally it includes the 'Triodia of the Venerable Joseph' – appointed to be sung at Compline from the second week after Pascha. Some of this material is not even found in all Slavonic and Greek editions.

On Saturdays, Sundays and during Bright Week (and some other weekdays) the Apostle and Gospel are printed in full so that no other books are necessary, which is a great boon. Some of the material included – the longer entries of the Synaxaria and references to Patristic readings, concern things nearly always omitted these days, but it is good to be reminded of their existence and they will certainly enhance our private spiritual reading.

The translation itself generally follows the Jordanville tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad and it is only when it departs from this that problems arise. There is a great attachment to the obscure word 'noetic' which in English can usually be avoided altogether, as it is usually clear, for example, that the [noetic] eyes of the heart contains a metaphor. In other cases, 'immaterial' or 'spiritual' would surely do better. And then there is the vexed use of Hades, so beloved by some Greek Orthodox translators and which I suspect is a hangover from the days when Holy Transfiguration Monastery Boston versions were influential. The only major jarring note I found was the version of the long verse so frequently sung in the Paschal season – "Having beheld the Resurrection of Christ, let us worship the holy Lord Jesus..." This is provided with a new translation quite different from that given in the Jordanville Prayer Books which in turn are close to the versions familiar in the Anglophone Orthodox world. This is a pity but it is not typical of the Pentecostarion as a whole.

In keeping the Paschal troparion – "Christ is Risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and on those in the tombs bestowing life" – in the version used almost everywhere, by Russians, Antiochians and the Orthodox Church of America, Reader Isaac is to be applauded. Boston had tried to popularise a translation clearly only made because it fitted the Greek music better.

It is not necessary to add more. This Pentecostarion is strongly recommended. Every Orthodox parish should possess at least one copy. ■