

The Orthodox Church in the World

Part 2 - Russia

Personalism and Person Discussion after the Talk

For New Deacons and Priests

9. Question: First of all, Your Eminence, I want to thank you for your visit and your paper. After graduating from the Theological School we want to go on to become members of the clergy. My question is: What advice would you give to new deacons and priests, who are taking their first steps and have no spiritual experience at all? What should they try to do, and what should they avoid?

Answer: I think that someone who wants to join the clergy must have a spiritual father. The same applies in other fields. Whatever one is going to do, one must first be trained by a teacher who knows the subject. No one can become a psychoanalyst unless he has been psychoanalysed by another psychoanalyst. First he is psychoanalysed himself and then he helps other people through psychoanalysis. No one can be a spiritual father or a member of the clergy, unless he has a spiritual father himself.

Let me put it in more theologically. Christ, the Son of God, was obedient to His Father unto death, death on the Cross, and then He regenerated all of us and became our own Father. Thus, the better sons we are to God and the more obedient we are to our Heavenly Father, the better priests and spiritual fathers we shall be to others.

I remember that when I was just starting out on my life as a member of the clergy, I read the life and teachings of St John of Kronstadt. As you see, we have things in common. I have read many ascetic and Russian writers, and you have read Greeks,

Bulgarians and Romanians. St John of Kronstadt said there that in the beginning he had drawn up a programme with more hours in his cell praying and reading, and fewer hours helping people. As the years went by, he reduced the hours for prayer and reading, and devoted them to the people; he spent more time with people. He reached the point of being all day long with people, but he had grace within his heart because, when someone learns to pray, his heart can function and be in communion with God in every situation in his life, even when he is with others. St Silouan the Athonite says that, when he saw St John of Kronstadt from a distance surrounded by people, he saw that he possessed great blessing and grace.

So I think that a new member of the clergy should start off with obedience: obedience to his spiritual father, obedience to the bishop, obedience to the tradition of the Church. Not obedience solely to his spiritual father, while rejecting the bishop and the Church's tradition, because that becomes a personality cult. There has to be obedience to these three axes of ecclesiastical life. When we talk about obedience in the Church, we mean obedience to the bishop, to the tradition of the Church and to the spiritual father. When a member of the clergy understands what it means to be a good spiritual child, when he is obedient to the Church, prays and makes his confession, then he will become a good priest.

Once a member of the clergy came and told me: "In my parish people do not believe and know nothing. They do not make their confession." I asked: "Why are they all bad and ignorant? Tell me, when you were a layman, did you go to confession?" He replied: "No, never." "Now that you have become a priest", I asked, "do you make your confession?" He answered, "No." I told him: "In that case why do you protest and shout

about other people? Find yourself a spiritual father and make your confession, and other people will also come to confess.” We are ready to condemn everyone else except ourselves.

Then we must love prayer and the Church’s worship, particularly the Divine Eucharist. We must live frugally and simply, and love and sacrifice ourselves for the people whom God has entrusted to us.

Theology as Science and as Charisma

When I visited the Holy Mountain for the first time in 1966 as a second year student at the Theological School in Thessaloniki, together with some of my fellow students, we met the monk Father Theoklitos of Dionysiou, who asked us what we were studying. We replied that we were theologians. He immediately told us: “The Church recognises only three Theologians: St John the Theologian, St Gregory the Theologian and St Symeon the New Theologian. You are students at the Theological School.” This opinion expressed by Father Theoklitos made an impression on me and taught me to be precise when speaking about this issue, because according to the teaching of the Church, theology is empirical knowledge of God; it is a charisma. Since then I have frequently been concerned with this subject, and I have realised that, according to ecclesiastical terminology, a theologian is someone who speaks about God. In order to speak authoritatively about God and to have unerring knowledge of Him, however, one must first have personal experiences of God. So a theologian in the absolute sense of the term is someone who has arrived at the vision of God, the vision of

the uncreated Light; and a theologian in the relative sense is someone who speaks about the knowledge possessed by the deified. The same applies in science. Scientists par excellence are those who investigate various natural facts and contribute new knowledge, but those who pass on the researchers' knowledge are also scientists.

The Declaration of the Holy Mountain, which was written by St Gregory Palamas, speaks about the confession of faith proclaimed by those accounted worthy in the Spirit. These are, on the one hand, "those who have been initiated by actual experience", who have followed the lawful path of asceticism by renouncing possessions, human glory and the base pleasures of the body, and who have made this renunciation sure by submitting themselves to those who preceded them in the Christian way of life, who have practised sacred hesychia and sincere prayer, and have been initiated into what surpasses the nous, having attained to mystical union with God beyond understanding. On the other hand, however, they are those who have learnt about these things "through their reverence, faith and love for such people". If, therefore, we do not have personal knowledge of God, we accept the witness of the Fathers of the Church, who acquired such personal knowledge through the action of the Holy Spirit.

Through my later studies and reading I perceived that it is possible to refer to two types of theology: scientific theology and charismatic or empirical theology.

1. Theology as Science

Christ became man at a given time in history. He assumed human nature that was absolutely pure, but mortal and subject to suffering. He lived in specific circumstances and He was personally familiar with all the tragedy of human beings after the

Fall.

In the same way, the Church, which is the risen Body of Christ, lives and works within history. It comes into contact with people living in a specific place and time, with particular nationalities and different religious perceptions, and various types of cultural expressions. Also, for the unity of the Church and its canonical structure, various administrative systems and organisational frameworks have been used.

It is important to know the historical and cultural details of the era of Christ, the Apostles and the Fathers. Theology as a science is interested in these issues, and professors of theological schools concern themselves with them. They investigate all the historical facts and identify significant points that may help their students, who will be the clergy and theological professors of the future.

In what follows, some of the areas in which scientific or academic theology is involved will be identified...

2. Theology as Charisma and Experience

The ecclesiastical interpretation of theology in the highest sense is that it is charisma and experience, which is given by God to those who have the appropriate prerequisites to attain to the revelation. In the course of this revelation they participate in the uncreated Light, the glory of God's uncreated energy, but they must also have the capacity of nous to express these spiritual experiences and put them into words. Professor John Romanides taught that those who reach theoria of God know from experience that there is no similarity at all between what is uncreated and what is created. Thus they can distinguish the energies of God from the energies of the demons and the energies of human reason, that is to say, thoughts. Those who can distinguish whether energies originate from God, the devil, the

senses or the imagination, are real theologians and can guide their spiritual children with precision.

The work of the theologian is therefore connected with the work of the spiritual father, and the spiritual father's work is connected with the theologian's, because man's basic problem as regards salvation is learning to distinguish between created energies and uncreated ones: how to differentiate God's will from the energies of the passions and temptation from the devil.

The same professor also taught that there are two kinds of theologians in the Church, from the empirical point of view. The first are those who theologise, who have reached illumination of the nous and have unceasing noetic prayer. The second are the real theologians who have attained to the vision of the glory of God in the human nature of the Word. They can speak about God without error and guide people unerringly towards deification.

The Church, which is the risen Body of Christ, lives in history. It takes people in their fallen condition and leads them to salvation and deification. This transformation of human beings from a fallen state into a deified one is the highest aim of the Church. Thus the Church, in accordance with many scriptural and patristic passages, is a spiritual therapeutic centre, a spiritual hospital that cures human beings and changes love of self into love for God and other people.

Just as in every hospital there are doctors, who know the method and means of treatment, but there are also sick and suffering patients who need to be cured, it is the same in the Church. The physician par excellence is Christ, and the people through whom Christ cures are the clergy, but particularly the saints, who know what it means to be healthy, what it means to be sick, and the way to cure every spiritual ailment. There are

also members in the Church who are unaware that they are sick or do not want to be cured, and they create all sorts of problems in the ecclesiastical world.

It was in this perspective that the Church gave the title ‘Theologian’ to three great saints, as was mentioned at the beginning: St John the Theologian, St Gregory the Theologian and St Symeon the New Theologian. Later on, in the fourteenth century, a fourth great Theologian was added, St Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki, whom the Ecumenical Patriarch Philotheos Kokkinos, who composed the service sung in his honour, describes as the fourth Theologian.

I shall now analyse the reasons why these four great figures have been characterised as Theologians. One feature that these four men have in common is that they lived in the Light of God and spoke about it. They were not just people who had strong powers of reasoning and were able to talk in a philosophical way about God, but they had beheld God as Light and “in the Light”, and they testified to this divine Light. In other words, they were God-seeing saints in the Light.

Part 3 - Romania

Interview – Therapy and Truth

Doubts about the Faith

8. Question: Why do we have doubts about the truth of Christ, just as the Apostle Thomas had about Christ’s Resurrection?

Answer: On every subject human beings seek to find the truth by experience. This is a scientific principle, and this is what demolished metaphysics, which relied on imagination and

speculation. We do not simply want to hear about Christ, but to know Him personally.

The Apostle Thomas sought to see and touch Christ for himself. St Theophylact of Bulgaria writes that Thomas had been instructed by the other Disciples: the Disciples had told him that Christ had risen, but he wanted to acquire his own personal experience. This shows that faith that comes from hearing is not the same as faith that comes from experience. We hear about Christ from the Disciples and saints who were eyewitnesses, and after that we strive to reach the point of beholding Christ spiritually. Starting from the 'historical Christ', we reach the 'Christ of faith', as our faith is enhypostatic. The whole ecclesiastical life, with the sacred Mysteries and the hesychastic tradition, helps in this.

It is significant that the Apostle Thomas sought to place his finger in the wounds of Christ's body, "into the print of the nails", and his hand "into His side". The Risen Christ complied with his request, because He wants to be "searched after and sought for". St Gregory of Nyssa says that Christ "thirsts to be thirsted for". St Gregory the Theologian writes that Christ is like that 'prey' that draws the hunter to catch it through many trials, and thus He attracts us towards Himself. From this we realise that the Church, the Body of Christ, is recognised by its wounds, which are martyrdom and asceticism. If we think that those who are baptised and established in their faith are members of the Body of Christ, the 'wounds' of this Body are those who have undergone martyrdom by blood or by intention, those who are "wounded for the divine Bridegroom", as St Nicholas Cabasilas says.

Anyone who wants to know Christ must search out those who are "wounded for the divine Bridegroom", and he will be

led by them to the vision and knowledge of the Risen Christ. Christ is touched, beheld and known empirically. Without experience there is the danger of doubt, speculation and atheism.

Part 5 - St. Paissy Velichkovsky – A Great Hesychast Father

The 'Philokalic' Movement in the Orthodox World

Without this being his aim, St Paissy Velichkovsky was linked with a very significant development observable in the Orthodox world in the eighteenth century, the so-called 'Philokalic Renaissance', which played an important role in the regeneration of the Orthodox tradition, as well as revealing new holy Fathers and new Martyrs.

As we know, in Europe in the eighteenth century an ideological trend called the Enlightenment evolved, which distanced itself from the worldview of Western Christianity and relied on the ancient Greek philosophers and writers. Enlightened views of this sort, though in more moderate form, were brought to Greece by Greeks influenced by the Enlightenment, such as Adamantios Korais, who was interested in publishing the works of the ancient Greek philosophers and writers.

At this period in the Greek-speaking world the so-called 'Kollyvades' or 'Philokalic Fathers' made their appearance. They included St Macarius Notaras, St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, St Athanasius of Paros and others, and they went in the opposite direction to the followers of the Enlightenment, searching for and publishing the writings of the Fathers of the Church and, above all, texts referring to Orthodox hesychia, which is the only method by which God is known.

St Macarius Notaras (1731-1805), former Metropolitan of Corinth, worked hard to find and collect together the writings of the neptic Fathers of the Church. He entitled this compilation *Philokalia of the Neptic Saints*. St Paisy refers to this great hesychast bishop who went to the Holy Mountain to search out and collect these neptic texts. It is striking that St Paisy writes, among other things, “When he [St Macarius] came to the Holy Mountain...” We know, however, that St Macarius was on the Holy Mountain in 1775, whereas St Paisy had left there in 1763. By using the word ‘came’, St Paisy shows that he felt and acted as a monk of the Holy Mountain, although he was living in Moldavia at that time.

St Paisy speaks in glowing terms of St Macarius, former Bishop of Corinth, as they shared the same desire and the same quest. He writes:

“His Eminence Macarius, former Metropolitan of Corinth, with God’s co-operation, possessed from his youth indescribable love for the patristic writings referring to spiritual vigilance, the attention of the nous, hesychia and noetic prayer, which takes place in the heart of those who practise it. For this reason he devoted his whole life to searching for such writings. With his hard work and his experience in secular learning, he ordered copies of them, sparing no expense.”

He goes on to relate how Bishop Macarius searched all the libraries of the monasteries on the Holy Mountain, and how he found the “inestimable treasure” in the Monastery of Vatopedi, “namely, a book about uniting the nous with God, an anthology from all the saints, which had been made in earlier times by people with great zeal”, as well as other writings that were previously unknown. Bishop Macarius copied them out, with the help of experienced copyists, read them carefully from the origi-

nal, and corrected them authoritatively. He also wrote a brief biography of the saints who composed the texts. “He then left the Holy Mountain with unspeakable joy, as though he had found a heavenly treasure on earth, and, once he had arrived in the glorious city of Smyrna in Asia Minor, he sent them to Venice, with a large sum of money that he had collected from charitable contributions made by Christians,” to be published. St Paissy praises St Macarius for this important work that he accomplished, because he understood the worth of these writings “and he spent almost the whole of his life searching diligently everywhere for these writings, but especially on the Holy Mountain of Athos”. In fact, as St Paissy writes, for athletes of the monastic life in their struggle with the unseen spirits, these writings are actually “more essential than breathing”.

St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain (1749-1809) also helped in the publication of the *Philokalia*, at the prompting of St Macarius, former Bishop of Corinth, when he visited the Holy Mountain in 1777 and met him. Hieromonk Euthymios, a spiritual brother of St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, refers to this event:

“In 1777 Bishop Macarius of Corinth came, and, after venerating the holy monasteries, he came to Karyes and was welcomed as a guest at ‘St Antony’ by a monk from the same place as him, Elder David. While there, he also summoned Nicodemus and besought him to look at the *Philokalia*. This is how the blessed man began – but what did he begin? I am at a loss for words. Should I say spiritual struggles or excessive mental and physical labours? It was not just these things, but others as well, which my mind is inadequate to grasp. What I am saying is that he began the *Philokalia*. And we can see his very fine Preface and his brief, eloquent lives of the inspired Fathers.”

This authoritative biographer of St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain also provides us with important evidence that St Nicodemus had heard of St Paissy Velichkovsky and wanted to visit him.

“While he was there (in the Monastery of Dionysiou), he heard good reports of Paissy the Russian, the head of a monastic community in Moldavia who had over a thousand brethren under his supervision, and who taught noetic prayer. Because he too loved this sacred work, he embarked on a ship in order to go in search of the divine prayer that he loved. As they were sailing outside Athens they were caught in a storm and were in danger until they reached the harbour of Panagia in Thasos. There he disembarked and changed his plans, ostensibly on account of the storm, but the truth is that a sign from God brought him back, so that he would undertake this great good work for Christ’s Church.”

This obviously refers to the preparation of various patristic texts for publication.

What is particularly impressive here is the communication between these three great figures of that era: St Paissy Velichkovsky, St Macarius, former Bishop of Corinth, and St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain. All three loved the hesychastic tradition and life, and regarded it as the essence of Orthodox ecclesiastical life. They struggled to track down and discover the neptic writings of the hesychast Fathers, and did everything possible to publish and distribute them. Above all, they loved noetic hesychia and noetic prayer of the heart, and they understood how important these were for uniting man’s nous with God. This is what made them saints in the consciousness of the people and the life of the Church.

St Paissy Velichkovsky also writes about the contribution of

the Greek Orthodox Church to the Russian Church:

“By God’s inexpressible love for humankind, our Russian Church was counted worthy in the last times to receive the holy Orthodox faith and Orthodox baptism from the Greek Orthodox Church. Together with the holy faith we also received the Holy Scripture and all the sacred books translated from Greek: ecclesiastical books, the writings of the holy teachers and the Fathers.

These are the sources of the Slavic books; otherwise no Slavic books would have come into existence.”