

## **THE RELEVANCE OF PATRISTIC HERITAGE IN TODAY'S WORLD**

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Your Eminence,  
Honorable Fathers,  
Distinguished Members of the Academic Council,  
Professors and Students,  
Dear Friends,

I am grateful to the Theological Faculty of Catalonia (Barcelona), under the High Patronage of the Gregorian University (Rome), for the honor of addressing this lecture to you as Doctor *Honoris Causa* of this Academic Council. I accept the award with deep emotion. For me it is not a measure of my personal achievements but an acknowledgement of the importance of Orthodox theology and a sign of respect for the Russian Orthodox Church.

I have always had a reverent love for Spain and for Catalonia. When I was a schoolboy, I studied Spanish in order to read Federico García Lorca. It so happened that for many years I studied composition and whenever I had to compose a song, I chose a text by García Lorca. In 1994, I visited Catalonia for the first time and was fascinated by its countryside, its people and its cultural heritage. I visited Montserrat, your magnificent monastery founded as far back as before the schism of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Today it is not only an historic site and a destination for pilgrims from around Christian Europe, but also a vivid symbol of your Catalonian culture. When I was in the monastery, a terrible fire took place. The entire mountain caught fire and all the tourists were evacuated. Only the monks stayed behind and myself with them. This summer I was reminded of my experience in Catalonia in a special way, when we had terrible wildfires in Russia...

Today I would like to devote my lecture to the relevance of the patristic heritage in the modern world. I often revisit this theme in my books and public pronouncements as well as my talks with the faithful, my sermons and so on.

From my youth, my spiritual development has been influenced by the Holy Fathers, and my first academic studies and later translations and works were associated with the names of such great teachers of spiritual life as St Gregory the Theologian, St Isaac the Syrian and St Symeon the New Theologian. These great saints, Fathers of the Church, were not only subjects of my academic research but also true spiritual guides.

As was rightly stated by one of the main protagonists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century patristic revival, Father Henri de Lubac, “Chaque fois qu’un renouveau chrétien a fleuri, dans l’ordre de la pensée comme dans celui de la vie (et les deux ordres sont toujours liés), il a fleuri sous *le signe* des Pères. Tous les siècles en témoignent”.<sup>1</sup>

In the theology of the Holy Fathers we find *a unified vision of Christianity*. It is at one and the same time a Trinitarian, Christological, pneumatological, ecclesiological, eschatological and anthropological theology. To put it schematically, while medieval scholastic theology was dominated by the vertical theocentric dimension, to be replaced later by the horizontal anthropocentric dimension, the Holy Fathers have both dimensions intertwined, complementing each other. In the patristic era, there was no dividing line between contemplative dogmatic theology and spiritual devotional and liturgical life—the dividing line so characteristic, unfortunately, of modern day Christians.

We are dealing here with a rich and living heritage, which is not just a reminiscence of the past but a reference point for both the present and the future. Each era will re-discover it for itself. Each generation of Christians can find in this treasury of wisdom the very message it needs. Henri de Lubac, whom I mentioned earlier, has a very apt definition of the patristic Tradition, describing it as an «*actualité de fécondation*».

1. Henri DE LUBAC, *Mémoire sur l’occasion de mes écrits*, Namur 1989, 381

## 1. COMMITMENT TO THE FATHERS AND "PROTECTIVE ORTHODOXY"

The patristic heritage has always played a special role in the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches. Along with the Holy Scriptures, the works of the Holy Fathers are for us a primary source for all that we mean by the Tradition of the Church including doctrine, moral teaching, sacraments, liturgy, church order and basic canon law.

The very etymology of the term "tradition" indicates that it is primarily the transmission and acceptance of an experience of *living faith* handed down from teacher to pupil, from father to son. St Paul's words addressed to the Christians in Corinth take on a new aspect in this light, "Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel" (1Cor 4:15). In other passages too, the apostle appeals directly to tradition, admonishing his listeners to preserve it faithfully without change: "Brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter" (2Thess 2:15), and "I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the teachings, just as I passed them on to you" (1Cor 11:2).

The Fathers have *preserved* the Holy Tradition for us. But have they preserved it for it eventually to wither away, like a talent buried in the ground to be occasionally unearthed to see if it has corroded from disuse? Have the Fathers written books for us to keep them on shelves, dusting them occasionally and ever so rarely searching through them for that obligatory quote?

Might this commitment to the Tradition suggest that we as Orthodox must fashion Orthodoxy after the "patriarchal days of old"? Or are we as Christians to look always to the past instead of living in the present and working for the future? Should some "golden age" in which the great Church Fathers lived, say, the 4<sup>th</sup> century, be the ideal to serve as our guide? Or could it imply that our theological and ecclesial Tradition was finalized in the "patristic era", with nothing new to be brought today to Orthodox theology and Orthodox Church life?

If this were so, as many believe it to be, then we as Orthodox Christians would have as our primary task to watch over what remains of the Byzantine and Russian heritage, standing guard against infectious modern trends. Some do precisely that, fearful of every challenge of modernity and careful to observe whatever they see as the traditional teaching of the Orthodox Church. The present time of "universal apostasy", they say, does not need any creative understanding of Tradition since the Fathers already understood and demonstrated it centuries ago. These proponents of "protective Orthodoxy" habitu-

ally refer to the “teachings of the Holy Fathers”, yet in actual fact they are ignorant of patristic doctrine. Indeed, they only make use of odd patristic notions to justify their own theories and ideas without studying patristic theology in all its totality and manifold nature.

If we focus only on efforts to preserve and conserve what was accumulated by our Fathers before us, then our task is quite simple. But if we are to *invest* the gift of the patristic heritage, we come face to face with an enormous task indeed. We will have not only to study the Fathers’ works, but also interpret them in the light of today’s experience. Similarly, we will have to interpret our own experience today in the light of their teaching. Moreover, we will have not only to study and interpret the Fathers but also to think patristically and to live patristically. Otherwise, in the absence of shared experience, at least to a certain degree, we will not be able to understand them.

This task is enormous and inspiring, as well as quite risky. Just as no one who is going to invest his “talent” has a guarantee against bankruptcy, no theologian who seeks to appropriate the patristic heritage in a creative way is free from error. The distance in time, culture and spirituality between the Fathers and us is too great for us to penetrate their minds. Yet if we fail to close this gap, we fail our present-day mission as members of the Orthodox Church, not only to make our faith truly “patristic”, but also to express it in a language accessible to 21<sup>st</sup> century people.

The Fathers’ works are not mere museum exhibits, nor should the “patristic faith” be understood as only a heritage of the past, as popular opinion has it. This viewpoint must be rejected. In the opinion of Fr Georges Florovsky, “The church is still as fully authoritative as she has been in the ages past, since the Spirit of Truth quickens her now no less effectively than in the ancient times”. Therefore, it is not possible to limit the “patristic age” to a particular era in history.<sup>2</sup> A well-known contemporary theologian, Bishop Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia states, “An Orthodox must not simply know and quote the Fathers, he must enter into the spirit of the Fathers and acquire a patristic mind”. He must treat the Fathers not merely as relics from the past, but as living witnesses and contemporaries” where does this quotation begin? Bishop Kallistos does not consider the patristic age to have ended in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> centuries; the patristic era of the Church continues to this day. It is dangerous indeed to look at “the Fathers” as a closed cycle of writings belonging to the past, for might not our own age produce a new Basil or Athanasius? To

2. Cf. Fr George FLOROVSKY, “St Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers”, in *The Collected Works*, Vol. I, Vaduz 1987, 105-20.

say there can be no more Fathers is to suggest that the Holy Spirit has deserted the Church.<sup>3</sup>

Commitment to the Tradition not only involves a study of patristic writings and an attempt to bring the legacy of the Fathers to life, but also implies the belief that our era is no less "patristic" than any other. The "golden age" inaugurated by Christ, the apostles and the early Fathers has continued in the works of the Church Fathers of our day to last as long as the Church of Christ stands on this earth and the Holy Spirit animates it.

## 2. THE "NEO-PATRISTIC SYNTHESIS" OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AND THE CONTEXTUAL READING OF THE FATHERS

20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian theology has paid much attention to the patristic heritage. A systematic study of the Holy Fathers' works, which began in Russia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to reach its climax in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was continued after the 1917 Revolution by Russian émigré theologians. At the St Sergius Theological Institute in Paris, the works of such teachers as Archimandrite Cyprian (Kern) and Fathers Sergei Bulgakov, Georges Florovsky, John Meyendorff and Nicholas Lossky paved the way for further study of the Holy Fathers. Florovsky was to be the primary impetus behind the "patristic renaissance" in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian theology. He provided key concepts for interpreting the patristic heritage, especially the idea of "neo-patristic synthesis".

A study of theology, Florovsky writes, led quite early to what I am calling now the neo-patristic synthesis. It should be more than just a collection of patristic sayings or statements. It must truly be a *synthesis*, a creative reassessment of those insights which were granted to the holy men of old. It must be *patristic*, faithful to the spirit and vision of the Fathers, *ad mentem Patrum*. Yet it also must be *neo-patristic*, since it is to be addressed to the new age with its own problems and enquiries.<sup>4</sup>

Florovsky's idea, which was "floating in the air" throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, inspired many outstanding patristic scholars not only in the Russian diaspora but also among Western scholars. I would like here to pay tribute to those theologians who, though not belonging to the Eastern theological traditions, have succeeded in discovering the heritage of the great Eastern Church

3. Bishop KALLISTOS WARE, *The Orthodox Church*, London 1992, 212.

4. Andrew BLANE (ed.), *Georges Florovsky: Russian Intellectual and Orthodox Churchman*, Crestwood – NY 1993, 154.

Fathers, both for themselves and for the West. The first to be mentioned are Irénée Hausherr, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, Walther Volker, Werner Jaeger, Johannes Quasten, John Kelly and Gilles Prestige, as well as those who are still with us, Jaroslav Pelikan,<sup>5</sup> Cardinal Cristoph Schoenborn, Hieromonk Gabriel Bunge and Sebastian Brock. The “patristic renaissance” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would have been impossible without these personalities who were able to reach across confessional barriers separating them from the Orthodox tradition.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century made a great contribution to patristic studies by publishing new critical editions of the works of the Holy Fathers thanks to the above-mentioned Western and Eastern scholars. But was the longed-for “neo-patristic synthesis” achieved? I think not, for an objective reason, namely that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the time for such a synthesis did not yet come. It may yet be achieved in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, if we do not give up the way outlined by theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They made a mighty qualitative leap forward and succeeded in breaking down the wall between the Christian East and West, laying foundations for a truly “catholic” theology as a theology which, following Fr John Meyendorff, organically assimilates the theological heritage of East and West in all its diversity.<sup>6</sup> But another qualitative leap forward is needed in order to build a neo-patristic synthesis on this foundation, a leap that we who have entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century must make.

A new approach has to the Fathers to be found to enable us to see the patristic heritage more comprehensively. I am deeply convinced that a fundamental and indispensable element of such a new approach lies in the logically consistent use of a *contextual* method of patristic reading.

The contextual method takes as its point of departure the fact that the Church Fathers lived and wrote in different ecclesial, theological, cultural, historical, temporal and linguistic contexts. The patristic tradition has many extremes and many historical, linguistic and cultural layers. As far as doctrine

5. The American patristic scholar who recently converted to Orthodoxy at an advanced age, thus changing from “the best Lutheran specialist on Orthodoxy” to “the best Orthodox specialist on Lutheranism”.
6. As Fr John wrote in his article “Orthodox Theology in the Contemporary World”, in *Messenger of the Western-European Patriarchal Exarchate*, no. 67 b., Paris 1969, 175 (in Russian): “All Christians face the challenge of a unified and deeply secularized world. We must look this challenge in the face... as an issue that requires a theological and spiritual answer. For younger generations, wherever they may find themselves, it is not essential from which spiritual genealogy —Western or Eastern, Byzantine or Latin, this answer depends, as long as will have a truthful and living resonance to it. Therefore Orthodox theology will be either truly ‘catholic’ or it will be no theology at all”.

is concerned, the Greek and Latin traditions, for instance, were already sharply contrasted in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. It is sufficient to compare Origen's and Tertullian's teachings on the Trinity to confirm this. Differences deepened in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries (compare the triadology of the Great Cappadocians and Blessed Augustine). Several centuries later, major differences in ascetic practices and mysticism became apparent (compare Symeon the New Theologian with Francis of Assisi, or Gregory Palamas with Ignatius Loyola). The impression is that the two traditions were originally predestined to develop along different lines! It does not mean that the 11<sup>th</sup> century division between East and West was entirely unavoidable. After all, throughout the entire millennium both traditions had lived side by side in the fold of one Church.

There were also different national traditions of patristic writing, such as Syriac, Ethiopian, Coptic, Arabic, Armenian and Georgian. When we compare the theological thinking and language of Ephrem the Syrian and Gregory of Nyssa, two personalities of the same faith sharing the same spirituality and near contemporaries, yet living in totally different cultural and linguistic contexts, we cannot but notice an enormous difference between them. Gregory's language and mode of thinking are addressed to the Greek culture, while Ephrem lives in the world of Semitic Christianity. Gregory expresses the richness and diversity of Christian Tradition in the figurative terms of Greek mythology, while Ephrem appeals to the characteristic imagery of the Palestinian-Aramaic tradition. As befits a Greek, Gregory is more rational and inclined to definitions, while Ephrem is more emotional and expressive.

It is essential to remember that in earlier times there were no strong links between different theological traditions. With some rare exceptions, theologians of one tradition neither knew nor understood the exponents of other. In the first millennium, Latin authors were virtually unknown to the Hellenic East. In the West, only select Greek authors, such as Dionysius the Areopagite, were known. Both the Hellenic East and the West were barely aware of the Syriac tradition, once again with the exception of one or two authors such as Ephrem the Syrian and St. Isaac the Syrian.

Until the very end of the Middle Ages the world was such that only few managed to break free from the limits of their own linguistic and cultural context. Comparative cultural studies were beyond the ancients. We must be aware that, with some extremely rare exceptions, the early Fathers had no possibility for going beyond the limits of their own theological, linguistic and cultural context. Things proper to other traditions were judged through the eyes of one's own tradition; there was no comprehensive vision.

A clear illustration of this is seen in the numerous examples of the anti-Latin polemics surviving in Byzantine church writings. Rarely did the East wonder about the reasons for which certain practices or dogmatic teachings emerged in the West. Rarely did anyone try to look at the Latin tradition through the eyes of the Latins themselves. Among the exceptions was St. Maximus the Confessor, who, in his *Letter to Marinus*, tried to discern the teaching on the *Filioque* from the Western context.<sup>7</sup> Although St Maximus gives a far from exhaustive answer to this issue, the very fact of a Byzantine saint attempting to see a Latin teaching through Latin eyes is remarkable.

I am deeply convinced that generally any phenomenon can be adequately judged only from within the context in which it originated and developed. Thus the theology of each Church Father should be studied as far as possible in relation to the historical, theological, cultural and linguistic situation in which he lived.

The consistent use of the principle of contextual reading presupposes the capacity of theologians to relativize their own context (though by no means breaking with it) and to examine another tradition from within, with a desire to understand rather than denounce or humiliate it.

We as Orthodox are still far from having completed our study of Western patristics. Without an adequate appreciation of it, a much-needed leap forward in relations between the Christian East and West will be impossible. The third millennium we have now entered will see a continued dialogue between Eastern and Western ecclesial and theological traditions. It has to be fostered one way or another in face of an increasing secularization. I believe the failure of the East and West to find a common language in the second millennium was due in no small degree, apart from ecclesio-political reasons, to the fact that the West knew little about the Eastern tradition and vice versa. This gap also needs to be filled.

7. On St Maximus as a “mediator” between East and West and in particular about his understanding of the filioque see Jean-Claude LARCHET, *Maxime le Confesseur, mediateur entre l’Orient et l’Occident*, Paris 1998, 11-75.

### 3. AN EXAMPLE OF THE USE OF THE CONTEXTUAL METHOD IN ACADEMIC PATRISTIC STUDIES OF THE FATHERS

Let me now share one example from my own experience of applying the contextual method in working with patristic writings. For a few years, I carried out research on St Symeon the New Theologian. The aim was to identify his place in the Orthodox tradition. I had to uncover his "spiritual roots", to find out the sources he used and the authors who might have influenced him, to study the historical situation in which he lived and to identify the spiritual lineage to which he belonged. Modern Western scholars have made numerous attempts to make a comparative analysis of various Church Fathers' theology, tending to limit it to a comparison of a given Father to the most famous preceding ones. For instance, the French scholar B. Fraigneau-Julien, author of *The Spiritual Senses and the Vision of God in Symeon the New Theologian*,<sup>8</sup> starts his study of St. Symeon's teaching with a description of the mystical doctrine of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, the author of the Dionysian corpus, the author of the Macarian corpus and Maximus the Confessor.

But St Symeon was in no way influenced by any of these particular authors. He could not have read their works at all. Rather, he repeatedly quotes St Gregory the Theologian whose influence on him is evident. Moreover, St Symeon's writings abound in scriptural quotes and references to liturgical texts and works by his spiritual father Symeon the Studite (the Pious). In studying the historical situation in which St Symeon lived, I found out that he was not at all one who learnt theology through books by ancient Fathers, since he spent nearly fifty years in a monastery where he prayed for hours daily in church, not reading patristic works. He knew mostly those Fathers' works which were read at services, especially Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom and Theodore the Studite.

As for the conflict Symeon had with the church authorities, I also made some discoveries that shed light on his theological system, as well as the overall state of the Byzantine Church of that period. The question posed to Symeon by his adversary, Stephen of Nicomedia, "How do you distinguish the Son from the Father, in thought or in reality?" was more than a mere rhetorical question aimed to demonstrate his lack of erudition and of a formal theological system. This matter had been disputed in Constantinople for centuries. Indeed, a century and a half after Symeon's death, a group of theologians

8. Bernard FRAIGNEAU-JULIEN, *Les sens spirituels et la vision de Dieu chez Syméon le Nouveau Théologien*, Paris 1986.

were condemned for teaching a distinction between the Father and the Son “in thought”.

After establishing these interesting facts, I examined Symeon’s understanding of the Bible and his exegetical method. Then I studied his attitude to worship and the influence of liturgical texts on his work —an issue completely ignored by most modern patristic scholars. I tried then to identify his place in the Studite monastic tradition and made a comparative analysis of his teaching and that of his spiritual father, Symeon the Pious. I also tried to identify the range of the sources, whether patristic, hagiographic or other, accessible to Symeon. Finally, I investigated his theology, anthropology, ecclesiology and mysticism in the context of the patristic tradition by comparing his teaching with that of the Fathers who had a direct or indirect influence on him. In other words, my research focused exclusively on the *real* channels through which Orthodox tradition influenced Symeon the New Theologian, while systematically dismissing all that was not directly related to him. In this way, it was possible to reconstruct the world in which St Symeon the New Theologian lived and worked with the maximum accuracy possible.

The work on reconstructing his context led to several important conclusions both about Symeon and the Orthodox tradition as a whole. Most importantly, it helped to revise entirely the popular Western view of Symeon as an inspired mystic who set his own mystical experience against traditional Orthodoxy, and to prove that he was rather a very traditional (in the best sense of the word) Church writer fully rooted in the Orthodox tradition. The reconstructed context also helped to dispel the myth of Symeon as an “amateurish” theologian with a poor command of dogmatic terminology.

Along with this, the study of Symeon led to a very significant conclusion about the nature of Orthodox tradition itself. His case clearly shows that the cornerstone of Tradition lies in nothing else than the personal mystical experience of an individual Christian. A tradition cannot be truly Orthodox if it is not based on a personal encounter with God. Those who try to set a formal and rationalized “tradition” held by a majority in the Church against the inspired “mysticism” of individual enthusiasts fall into error, misunderstanding the very essence of Tradition. A true mystic is not one who regards his own personal experience as superior to Church Tradition, but one whose experience is *in agreement with* the experience of the Church.

#### 4. SOME CONCLUSIONS ON THE HOLY FATHERS AND MODERNITY

At the end of my reflection on the "neo-patristic synthesis", I would like to state that this synthesis cannot be the work of a single person. It demands a team, a new generation of scholars, each specializing in one or several areas of patristic studies. They should have a knowledge of several ancient languages, including oriental ones. They should work with critical editions of patristic texts and be able to read and understand original manuscripts. They should be well-versed in the rich Orthodox theological heritage. They should have an adequate knowledge of both ancient and modern philosophy, philology and linguistics. They should be familiar with textual criticism, paleography and other auxiliary disciplines. It is only by covering this wide range of academic disciplines that one can master the contextual method, for without it no neo-patristic synthesis is possible.

What I said above about the various linguistic, cultural, historical and other contexts in which the Fathers lived does not deny that they certainly shared the *common context* of one universal Christian Tradition. They lived in the common context of "the apostolic faith of the gospel" and in the Tradition handed down by their predecessors. And they not only vigilantly preserved it but also creatively developed and passed it on to generations of Fathers to follow.

Whoever is engaged in patristic studies should be well aware of this common context in which one faith was shared by the entire patristic tradition. Those who view the Fathers outside their global context will find themselves in a blind alley.<sup>9</sup> This has already happened to some secular scholars who claim to be if not atheists then "agnostics", in accordance with the latest fashion. They undertook to interpret the theology of the Fathers, consciously distancing themselves from the core of their faith and spiritual experience. Even if the contextual method of reading the Fathers may not require of a scholar to be a Christian, it does require at least a profound *trust* in the experience of the Fathers and the Church of Christ within which the patristic theology developed.

In conclusion, I will attempt to answer a question which perhaps should have been answered at the very beginning: Why study the holy Fathers at all, what do patristics have to offer to contemporary Christians?

9. Cf. Fr George FLOROVSKY, "St Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers", in *The Collected Works*, 381

First of all, a study of both Eastern and Western holy Fathers gives us an opportunity to understand the specific tradition to which each of us belongs. It will help us to receive the very “patristic faith” that the spiritual writers of the Eastern or Western Church have preserved for us and to appropriate the treasure of our own tradition.

A knowledge of the Fathers enables a Christian not to lose his or her way amidst the multitude of trends in modern philosophy and worldviews, nor to get “carried away by *strange teachings*” (Heb. 13:9). It helps Christians to understand themselves, to build a sound relationship with God, to order their spiritual life. Contrary to the recipes of such modern teachings as psychoanalysis, the counsels of the Fathers emanate from a healthy spirit, based as they are on a sound understanding of the human mind, the need to combat one’s sinful tendencies and to do good works. The counsels of the Fathers, I believe, are far more universal than the fundamental postulates of Freudianism and are applicable to people living in the most diverse cultural and temporal contexts.

Their works are never irrelevant, for they are about questions the answers to which are decisive for the destiny of humanity. It is much in fashion today to speak of a “post-Christian” era in which young people are no longer interested in traditional Christianity. It is believed to be “a faith without a future”. Christianity is predicted to disappear from the religious world map in the third millennium and to be absorbed by Islam. I believe these predictions are wrong. I am sure Christians will hold out together and preserve their teaching, their Church and their Tradition. My country has shown that the Christian faith is by no means a “relic of the past” but a living faith drawing thousands and millions of people, including the youth, back to the “patristic faith”.

A Christian spring is sure to come. The 21<sup>st</sup> century will see the healing of divisions among Christians and the revival of the God-given faith as was preached by the apostles and preserved by the Fathers.