

The Living Dimension of Tradition: Aspects of Orthodox Moral Theology in the Context of the Neo-Patristic Synthesis of the 20th Century

[Abstract]

The Orthodox Church is known as a Church of Tradition- and one of the best definitions of the Holy Tradition is given by Vladimir Lossky: it is the “life of the Holy Spirit in the Church”. First of all, there is an inextricable bond between the Church, Tradition and the Scripture: The Bible is the written tradition and The Tradition is the Bible lived in the Church, in the breath and the inspiration of the Spirit. One should also distinguish between Tradition and traditions. In the Church, the horizontal line of the “traditions” received from Lord and then transmitted through the Apostles and their successors intersects with the vertical line of the communication-tradition of the Holy Spirit. Since revelation is perfected in Jesus Christ, one must understand that- through the work of the Holy Spirit and through its teachings, worship and canonical discipline- the Church transmits its believers the same communion of life with Him.

Facing the multiple challenges posed by the cultural and social shock of modernity, by secularization, by the political utopias and the sentimental changes, the churches of Europe reacted in the first half of the 20th century through an appeal to the primary sources of their religious identity: Protestantism reiterated the biblical Word of God through the dialectical theology and Roman Catholicism not only revived the philosophy and theology of Thomas Aquinas in neo-Thomism, but also rediscovered and valued the Liturgy, the Scripture and the Fathers through the liturgical movement and the renaissance of the biblical and patristic studies of the Dominican school in Jerusalem and the Jesuit school in Lyon. The Orthodox in all the local Churches have responded too, through a similar movement of returning to the Fathers, the 20th century being marked by the theological work of the so-called «neo-patristic» direction, illustrated both in the Russian diaspora and in the main Orthodox churches through monumental figures such as priest Georges Florovsky (1893-1979) and Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958) in the Russian diaspora, Archimandrite Iustin Popovici (1894-1979) in the Serbian Orthodox Church, priest Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993) in the Romanian Orthodox Church or Panayotis Nellas (1936-1986) in the Greek Orthodox Church.

The present paper systematically highlights the scientific contributions of the author, after obtaining the doctorate in theology. In the first two sections we focused on the Orthodox understanding of Tradition, namely on how the Orthodox neo-patristic movement was formed. The basic idea is that this movement was a renewal of the Orthodox theology. The main contribution to the neo-patristic theology was its holistic perspective, the purpose being to achieve synthesis between liturgics, dogmatics and spirituality. This approach also had moral implications which were visible both at the personal and the community level.

Created “in the likeness” of God, having thus a Christological constitution, man is not just a “microcosm” but also a “macrocosm”; on the one hand, the entire seen and unseen universe is reflected in man, on the other hand, tending towards “likeness”, his mission is to reunite, synthesize all parts of the creation in order to bring them, in a sacrificial attitude, towards full communion with the Creator. Man's dignity is thus not related to a filial quality (such as the immortality of the soul), but to the possibility of achieving the union with God in His grace as exercise of personal freedom and consciousness. Orthodox soteriology focuses on the concepts of life and death, and not guilt and forgiveness. The redemption performed by the Incarnated Son (“the objective Salvation”) reclaims and requires its being freely assumed by man (“subjective Salvation”), therefore, Incarnation is the one which restores the

communion with God, it gives man the possibility to love Him and his kin. The Divine God (*agape*) descends in order to support the human love which ascends (*eros*) to God; the key term here is synergy and implies the following elements: joint-work between the two wills (a personal relation between two distinct subjects: the initiative which belongs to God, man being just the one who answers to the irresistible calling of the divine grace; the significance of man's freedom, which gives him the option of accepting or refusing communion with God; the dynamics of the Christian spirituality, for the union of man with God and his participation in the Trinitarian life appears as an endless process; the Christian (ascetic) and mystical dimension centered on the work and person of Christ, the performances of synergy revealed in sharing in the passions, death and Resurrection of Christ. To be more specific, the meaning of this process is even more apparent when presented in parallel with another concept central to the Eastern Soteriology (*theosis*). To the great majority of the Church Fathers, it represents the purpose of human existence. With no ontological transfer from the status of creature to the god-like one *theosis* refers to a personal encounter with God. The "likeness" (i.e. man's destiny since creation), the everlasting union in grace in subsequent stages (*epektasis*) is thus fulfilled, the sequence starting in this earthly life and continuing in the Heavenly Kingdom.

At the community level, one has to identify three complementary levels: the ecclesial, the social and the ecumenical one. Firstly, the Church is a Messianic and Apostolic community, as it was founded by Christ Himself and consolidated by the twelve Apostles (Lk 6,13; Mk 3,15, Mt 10,1; Acts 2,42); the ecclesial community has a unifying force expressed through fraternal love (in 13.35), which has Christ in its center and its source is the Holy Spirit (see Charismas). This unity is achieved according to the model provided by the Sacraments, not solely by the unique redeeming message (the formula *sermentum-sacramentum* uncovers this aspect proper). The Neo-patristic theologians insisted on the image of the Church as "Living Body of Christ", as the most adequate expression of its nature. The sacramental structure is enough evidence for this: more than a corporation or a living body, the Church is truly an organism, a body, the Body of Christ.

Secondly, the organization of the Christian community, which tends towards the interpersonal harmony of the Trinity should be reflected in the whole cosmos. Involved here is the social ideal of the Orthodox Church, characterized by a few basic principles: 1) equality between people: there is no room for social or racial discrimination inside the Body of the Eastern Church 2) emphasis on „the humble Christ” i.e. the care for those in need; the universal compassion of the Church makes it a „hospital” rather than a dwelling for the perfect ones. The ethics of the Church is strictly connected to the dogmas, for these are more than mere schemes developed in order to build an ideal society. Their role is a practical one, i.e. the support for those in need; 3) finally, “the traditionalism” of the Orthodox Church is not conservatism. On the contrary, its meaning is dynamic, it implies continuity and is equivalent to the meaning of the following statement: the ethos of the Eastern Church is the same as that of the first centuries.

Thirdly, notions such as “ecumenism in time” or “open sobornicity” revealed the ecumenical dimension of the Orthodox theology. The tragic situation of the Christians today - a “schismatic” situation - is real; in the same time, from an Orthodox point of view, this situation is in contrast with the image of the Church as *unique* Body of Christ. As the follower of the Apostolic Church of Christ, the Orthodox Church has the task to witness the fullness of the truth of the Gospel. Without following St. Justin Popovici (for whom ecumenism was the “pan-heresy” of the 20th century) the other neo-patristic theologians have pointed out that the teaching of faith cannot be relativized or removed in order to facilitate the “Eucharistic inter-communion”, because this act will remain exterior, without interior consequences. The common search for the Truth, for Jesus Christ who offers Himself in the Eucharist, is decisive for the plenary unity. However, the ecumenical way is not easy, it is full of obstacles

that cannot be overcome only through social activities, through compromises or spectacular gestures. Ecumenism does not only depend on human will, but on the “sure and infallible guide” - the Comforter, the Spirit of the Truth.

The last part of the thesis both presents the potential ways forward opened by the neo-patristic theology and some its “limits”. On the one hand, the neo-patristic movement has rediscovered some of the Gospel and patristic values which have an existential relevance for the man today: focus of ecclesiology on Christology and the emphasis on the symbol of the Church as the Body of Christ; salvation of believers in the Church (deification, *theosis*) is not only an ideal abstract, but transpires with poignancy through the example of the saints, especially the Virgin Mary; the being of the Church is reflected in its four attributes: one, holy, sobornical and apostolic church and is achieved especially through the Sacraments (the Eucharist being the Sacrament of the Church par excellence, the maximum of union with Christ in this world); the try to “de-clericalize” the Church, i.e. to reconsider and reassess the function and the role of the laity within it; the Church must be active, socially engaged, advocating the promotion of the Christian values (not as a charitable human society, but as the opening of the kingdom of heaven here and now). Finally, ecumenism is also included in the missionary category and for the neo-patristic Orthodox theologians the only way that Christian can unite is through the reintegration in the tradition of the Fathers, retrieving their ethos. On the other hand, there are also some limits or insufficient theological development of the neo-patristic theology, such as a certain dissociation between dogmatic and exegesis in the patristic and systematic studies on the one hand and the Bible ones on the other hand; some nationalist, idealized excesses or an anti-ecumenical exclusivism; the insufficient development of the Orthodox social thinking, adapted to the needs of the contemporary man.

In the section concerning evolution and development plans of my professional, scientific and academic career (research/teaching directions), I highlighted the contributions and the teaching methods I have used and the development plans of my own professional, teaching and scientific career. In the scientific field, I highlighted my desire to continue to take part in some research projects, to organize national and international symposia on theological themes, as well as to write and publish other new studies and works. I also provided the title and the brief description of the latter.