



Georges Florovsky
precursor of neo-patristic Theology

Adrian IONIȚĂ*

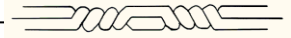
Abstract: *The works of the Holy Fathers have always been a source of inspiration for all theologians due of the depth of patristic thinking that has debated and clarified the dogmatic problems the Church has faced over the centuries. The Holy Fathers have meet into the Ecumenical Councils and illuminated by the Holy Spirit have cleared and established the right teaching of the Orthodox Church. In fact, their writings are part of the sources of Holy Tradition which, along with the Holy Scriptures, are preserving the Revelation of God. But the Holy Fathers were not only people with good intellectual training but they were also spiritual men. For them theology was not a talk about God but a living of the living experience in the mysterious encounter with God in prayer. The influence of scholastic theology on Eastern theology has made necessar for some Eastern theologians to overcome the rigid frameworks of scholastic notions that tried to explain the teachings of the Church and rediscover the existential values of the Holy Fathers, that mean living in Christ. This approach was called the neopatristic current.*

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Introduction

The Church is always the Church of Christ, its Head and Founder, but also the Church of the Ecumenical Councils and

* PhD, Lecturer, Faculty of Orthodox Theology “Dumitru Stăniloae” at “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iassy, Romania.



Fathers, for the doctrines and teachings of the Church have been formulated in the Ecumenical Councils where the Holy Fathers guided by the Holy Spirit have exposed and defended the true faith. Although the ideals and values of the Primary Church were preserved permanently in Orthodoxy, yet the influence of scholasticism which was felt more and more in Eastern Orthodox space led to the necessity of rediscovering the patristic tradition, the only guardian of the dogmatic and spiritual essence of the Eastern Church. Reappraisal of the Theology of the Holy Fathers and its presentation to the contemporary man in a neo-Patriotic synthesis was done through the efforts of the 20th century theologians, many of whom lived in the Western Diaspora due to the improper economic and political factors from their own country.

Neo-Patristic Theology may constitute the paradigm of the positioning of any contemporary theologian both to the Tradition of the Church and to the problems and challenges of the contemporary epoch. Neopatristic current does not mean abandoning the spirit of the Fathers of the Church, but, on the contrary, recovering it. It is a renewed theology, but which does not change, than mean a "return" to the patristic spirit of Tradition, which is constant to the apostolic belief and in the same time dynamic in its contextual expressions. The church is indeed apostolic. But the Church is also patristic. It is the Church of the Fathers inherently. These two "notes" can not be separated.

Only being patristic the Church is truly apostolic. The teaching of the Fathers is a permanent category in the Christian Church, the constant measure and criterion of the true faith. Parents are not only witnesses to the old belief, but rather witnesses to the true faith

The teaching of the Holy Fathers is the living source of Orthodox faith. The inheritance of the Fathers is the essence of our Orthodox tradition, it is a theological heritage; When we talk about the doctrine of the Fathers, we do not refer to their personal

opinions, even though they should not be overlooked; "The teaching of the Fathers refers to that *consensus patrum*, to the consensus of the Fathers that was authoritative and obligatory. True and genuine consensus was that reflecting the view of the Universal Church."¹ Orthodoxy resides in faithfulness to the Church's doctrine, formulated dogmatically in the Ecumenical Councils by the Holy Fathers assisted by the Holy Spirit. Parents were true inspirers of the Councils.²

Returning to the Fathers does not mean a servile imitation or a repetition of them, but rather a "development of patristic doctrine, in a homogeneous and congenial manner. We must once again to ignite the creative fire of the Fathers, and restore in ourselves the patristic spirit [...] It is demanded to grow older and move forward, but in the same direction, or rather, in the same type and spirit."³

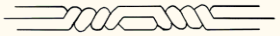
The Holy Fathers were first of all teachers. To teach was in fact an apostolic mission: teach all nations. And this empowerment included the fact that their authority was authentic. It was actually the authority of have been witnesses.

The phrase "Fathers of the Church" has, in fact, a clear restrictive character; they worked not as individuals, but rather as *viri ecclesiastici* (Origen's favorite expression), for the benefit

¹ Georges Florovsky, *Collected Works, vol I, Chapter VI Bible, Church, Tradition, An Eastern Orthodox View*, (Vaduz, Europa: Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), p. 103.

² The true intellectual work, the vital approach to interpretation, was not made by the Ecumenical Councils who promulgated the dogmas, but by the theological Fathers who inspired and explained the formulas adopted by the Ecumenical Councils. Cf. G. L. Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics*, London 1940, p 8

³ George Florovsky, *Patristics and modern Theology*, in part translation by Ioan I. Ica, *Patristica and Modern Theology - The Significance and Current of a Theological Program (G. Florovsky)*", în rev. *Mitropolia Ardealului* 27, 1982, nr. 10-12, p. 708-709.



and on behalf of the Church. They were speakers in the name of Church, expositors of her faith, keepers of her Tradition, witnesses of truth and faith. And that was their authority.

Neo-Patriotic Theology is a theology of returning not only at the intellectual, but the existential values of the Fathers. In this theology, a central place occupies the Christology.

The neo-patristic Theology of Georges Florovsky

Father George Florovsky⁴ was one of the greatest Orthodox patrologist of the last century, being one of the greatest

⁴ Father Georges Vasilievich Florovsky (1893-1979) was a prominent figure of the twentieth century, Orthodox priest, theologian and writer active in the Ecumenical Movement. His work is recognized for clarity, deep style, dealing with subjects from almost all aspects of the Church life. Florovsky was born in Odessa, being the fourth child in the family of a priest. Inspired by the erudite environment in which he grew up, he learned English, German, French, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. At the age of 18 he began to study philosophy and history. In 1919 his family had to leave Russia, the young Georges realizing then that there would be no way for him to return, his visions being different from those of Marxism. He became part of the Russian emigrant intellectuality, including Nicolae Berdiaev, Sergei Bulgakov, Nicholas Lossky, Alexander Schmemmann and John Meyendorf. In 1925 Florovsky became a professor of patrology at the Saint Serge Institute in Paris. Patristic became for him a landmark for Orthodox theology and for exegesis, but also a source for his many contributions and critics to the Ecumenical Movement. Although he has not acquired any academic degree in theology except for a few honors with which he was later rewarded, he spent his entire teaching activity in theological institutions. In 1932 he was ordained a priest. In the 1930s he undertook extensive research in European libraries, writing his most important work, *The Ways of Russian Theology*. In his work he noticed the scholastic, pietistic and idealistic influences of Russian theology, demanding a re-evaluation of it in patristic light. The work was received by some with enthusiasm, by others with reservations and criticism. Among the latter were Boulgakov, the exponent of the traditional Russian theology of the 19th century and Berdiaev, the exponent of the 20th century religious

supporters of the return of theology to patristic springs. It is recognized as a basic exponent of the neo-Patriotic current that sought to rediscover the theological values of the Church's holy Fathers. His work consisted in witnessing the spiritual depth of Orthodox faith, and also in discovering the importance of the patristic Christian theology heritage for the three main branches of Christianity.

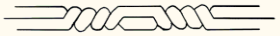
It was his destiny to live most of his life in the West, to master the different currents of Western thought, remaining in a profound way, a genuine Eastern Orthodox Christian theologian. Due to its balanced orientation between the East and the West and its universal recognition, Florovsky has earned his reputation as being the most ecumenical orthodox theologian of the twentieth century. His theological work has generated a new orientation and a fundamental criterion for contemporary theology, including Orthodox theology.

His work, *The Ways of Russian Theology*⁵ (Paris 1937), gave a new impetus to dogmatic research and marked the starting point of a school whose general characteristic was not only to discard the Roman Catholic or Protestant influences on the Orthodox thinking from the seventeenth century, but also to find the essence of a genuine Orthodox Christian vision, the ethos of the Orthodox Church, as Florovsky calls it in one of his articles.⁶

rebirth. In 1949 Florovsky moved to New York to accept the position of being dean at St. Vladimir's Seminary. Than he taught in Harvard and Princeton. He died alive in August 1979.

⁵ The book was first published in Paris in 1937 under the title *Les voies de la théologie russe*. The second edition of the book was published in 1979 in the US, being considered as a reference, the author making annotations and additions to the text of the first edition.

⁶ Georges Florovsky, *The Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, article presented at the "Faith and Order" congress held between August 16-18, 1959 in Kifissia (Greece), first published in *The Ecumenical Review* 12 (1960) p 183-198.



The Russian theologian brings to our attention that Orthodox theology itself, throughout history, experienced a kind of "pseudomorphosis" that had taken place because of its expression in the form of Western thinking and was in a long "Babylonian captivity" under both Catholic influence, as well as Protestant influence, influences that began as early as the fall of the Roman Empire under the Turks in 1453 and which intensified in the coming centuries. He refers to the incapacity of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth-century theologians to break out of the pattern of Western thinking, the inability to regain the Fathers thinking, the way they use Protestant arguments to fight Catholics and Catholic arguments to combat the Protestants. Orthodox Christianity has gone through a period of spiritual and intellectual impotence that has lasted for several centuries.

In the conclusions of his work published in 1937, "Florovsky asked for a return to the theological tradition of the Greek Fathers, not because this it was familiar for him, but because he believed it to be true in that it was a more accurate representation of divine Revelation than that transmitted by the Western Churches he had come to know. "⁷

Georges Florovsky mediated for a theological revival that would have brought back in attention the truth of Holy Scripture and of the Holy Tradition of the Church. His call "go to the Fathers line" and the realization of a "neo-Patriotic synthesis" were the landmarks after which he guided his life and theological work. In his opinion, contemporary theology needed a new synthesis, similar to that made by the Greek Fathers who expressed the wisdom of the evangelical message in Hellenistic

⁷ Jonathan Sutton and Wil van den Bercken, *Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Europe* (Eastern Christian Studies 3), Peeters, Leuven-Paris-Dudley, MA 2003, p. 14.

terms, while at the same time maintaining fundamentally the original character.

Patristic literature is not only a static treasure of Tradition. Fathers work is a creative source of inspiration, an example of Christian wisdom, a true school of thought and Christian philosophy⁸.

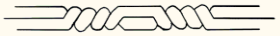
To follow Fathers in a neo-Patristic synthesis, always means to advance, not to stagnate; means acquiring the minds of the Fathers, fidelity to their spirit of thought, not just to their writings. To have the mind of the Fathers means "to enter into communion not with the texts of the Fathers, but with the Fathers as persons. This communion is not an abstract fact, but the living experience of God due to the mind of the Fathers."⁹

Referring to the ignorance of some regarding the Church's Tradition and the teachings of the Holy Fathers, Father Georges Florovsky asks, "It is a step forward that today we are no longer moved or impressed by the teachings of those great men who have dedicated their whole life for strengthening the true faith, of Orthodoxy? We pray to the Three Hierarchs who were greater than all the teachers, teachers of the true faith, but we are indifferent to their essential contribution to the life of the Church. As a priority issue, do we not need that our mind to be enlightened by the "Light of Wisdom" in these days of intellectual confusion?" And himself says, "Without careful guidance, without the safety of sound teaching, our feelings will be wrong and our hearts will become blind."¹⁰ The Russian

⁸ See: Fr Georges FLOROVSKY, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, Paris, 1937, p. 6.

⁹ Willem B. DREES, Hubert MEISINGER, Zbigniew LIANA, *Wisdom Or Knowledge?: Science, Theology and Cultural Dynamics*, T&T CLARK INTERNATIONAL, A Continuum imprint, London-New York, 2006, p. 74.

¹⁰ Georges FLOROVSKY, *Collected Works*, ed. Richard S. Haugh, vol. XIII, *Ecumenism I: A Doctrinal Approach* (Belmont, MA: Nordland), p. 170.



theologian had no doubt that the Eastern Church essentially preserved the faith and practice of the Primary Church. The general direction taken by the Western Church was wrong. The reasons for this have not always been easy to understand, although partial responsibility may be associated with the special importance given to Augustine's theology, the development of a Western distinctive style of theological language as a result of Islam influence on Aristotelian thinking¹¹, the domination of the Franks on development of Western Europe, the ecclesial claims of the Bishop of Rome. Whatever the causes were, the situation remained the same: the Eastern Church preserved a precious thing that the Western Church has lost.

Theology and dogma, which for Georges Florovsky have only an intellectual contour of revealed character, should not be limited to this aspect. At these the man must add his faith. Only through an act of faith the contour is filled with content. "The Christological formulas only have content for those who have met with life in Christ, who have acquired and accepted Him as the Savior, living through faith in Him in His Body the Church."¹² The True Image of Our Lord can be distinguished

¹¹ In Platonism, the perceptible world is the reflection of another world, imperceptible through the senses, the world of forms, of Ideas. The world we see is a kind of shadow of reality. These ideas are accessible to the soul. Unlike Plato who asserted that only ideas were really real, Aristotle stated that the form exists only expressed in matter, in individual objects. The basis of any wisdom is the rational analysis of the perceptible world, and this leads to the idea that in the mind is just what was previously perceived by the senses. These two concepts were considered in the ancient world as being in full opposition, and the Parents manifested themselves against the Aristotelian philosophy, which ultimately would have led to a form of materialism.

¹² Georges Florovsky, *Collected Works, vol I*, Chapter VI Bible, Church..., p. 109.

only by a supra-historical vision, by an act of faith. Christology must therefore be a Christian living way.

The Incarnation of Christ is a new beginning for creation. Christ, the Master, takes the form of man to bring men into the unity of love to God. In Christ and through Christ the unity of mankind was indeed accomplished, and those who believed on His behalf became the Body of Christ. And through this unity with Christ, they come to unity with the other people in the most sincere sense of love. In this great unity, all empirical differences and barriers are removed: the differences caused by the bodily birth are erased in the unity of spiritual birth.

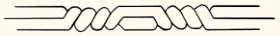
Christ conquered the world through love, humility and obedience. The Incarnation "was a new beginning in the destiny of man, the beginning of a new humanity. Through the Incarnation "the new man," "the last Adam" was born; He was truly a man, but more than a man, the God from the heaven."¹³

All creation has Christ as the Master. Through His Incarnation, the Son of God, after the wonderful expression of Saint Irineu de Lyon, has once again opened the path of a long number of human beings. The church is the spiritual posterity of the Second Adam. The church is a fulfillment of Christ and of His Body.

Through the Incarnation God appeared to men. The icon of Christ "is the perpetual testimony of the Church regarding the mystery of the Holy Incarnation, which is the foundation and essence of our hope and faith. Jesus Christ, our Lord, is God Incarnate, which means that from the Incarnation God is visible."¹⁴

¹³ Georges FLOROVSKY, *Collected Works, vol III, Creation and Redemption, Chapter VI „Dimensions of Redemption”*, Nordland Publishing Company, Belmont, Mass., 1976, p. 176.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 210.



The faith in Christ is the foundation of our faith in one God in three Persons. No one can truly believe in God the Father if he does not believe in the Savior Christ, the Son of the Heavenly Father. Christ said, "I and the Father one We are." Christians must take this word very seriously, as the Church has done for centuries, because "the Father can not be imagined without the Incarnate Logos. It is unimaginable in the sense that it would remain as a vague affirmation without a real substance. The Trinitarian teaching about God, historically, is the result of Christological dogma. Only solid Christology can overcome the chasm of the subject-object relationship between man and God, and in the last sense, the chasm of atheism. In the uniqueness of Christ there are God and man. That is why the Church believes that He is consubstantial with the Father and consubstantial with man. Without believing in Christ, there is no reason to believe in God.¹⁵

Through His Sacrifice on the Cross the Christ founded the Church, His Body, which, in its entirety, has its personal center in Christ. It is not an embodiment of the Holy Spirit, but certainly the Body of Christ, the Incarnate Lord. Christ the Lord is the only Head and the only Master of the Church. That is why the essential note of the Church is unity. In fact, unity and catholicity are two aspects of the same reality. Christ is the revelation of the truth made in the Church and, through the Church, to humanity. The Revelation is the love of God as response to the continuous cries of humanity for help. These cries find their answer in Christ who is the Savior. Never earthly miracles or science can ever be able to stop these shouts of the human soul for salvation. The only miracle

¹⁵ Paul FRIES, Tiran NERSOYAN, *Christ in East and West*, following the article by Georges Florovsky titled *The Christological Dogma and Its Terminology*, Mercer University Press, Macon GA 31207, SUA, 1987, p. 54.

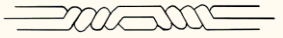
by which man can be saved from diving into the sins of the world is the sign of Jonah, the miracle of the change from the old Adam and from death, into the new Adam and the life, the miracle of lifting man from temporal to eternity. The purpose of the Church is to be an instrument of this change - metanoia - by preaching Christ, the Son of God, thru the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Florovsky's view, there is a profound and mysterious connection between ecclesiology and Christology, because Christ is the Head of the Church, and the Church is His Body. That is why the Russian theologian regards ecclesiology from the Christological point of view.

Referring to this, Father Georges Florovsky says: "The Church is the vital point of the mystery of salvation. It is a new creation of God, a living summary of Christ's ransoming work. It is the place and mode of His continued presence in the world until the end of the ages. The Church is Christ Himself, Christ whole, totus Christus, caput et corpus, to use a formula of St. Augustine. Theology about the Church is not just a chapter, but is an essential chapter of Christology. Without this chapter, Christology itself would not be complete. In this Christological context, the mystery of the Church was proclaimed in the New Testament, being presented in the same way by the Greek and Latin Fathers: The Word of God has become man, that we may become gods, said St. Athanasius. The Church of Christ is the mysterious place where this divinization or deification of all humanity is accomplished and perpetuated."¹⁶

The Augustinian notion of Christ Total was resumed by G. Florovsky in his classical study in 1958: *The Church, the Body of Christ*. Florovsky insists on Christ "Total", so "Head and Body".

¹⁶ Georges FLOROVSKY, *La Sainte Eglise Universelle*, Delachaux et Niestle SA, Neuchatel (Switzerland), Acheve d'imprimer a Besancon (Doubs), France, 1948, p. 12.



There is only one mystery, one reality. The interest on this Augustinian vision is due to the fact that it allows us to overcome the juxtaposition of chapters from school textbooks such as the Trinity, Anthropology, Christology, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology, the Holy Mysteries, etc. We must not and can not dissociate the ecclesiology from Christology. G. Florovsky restores ecclesiology in the mystery of Christ. Thus, he is faithful to the fundamental conception of St. Paul or Irineu, regarding the concept of recapitulation in Christ, "Head and Body"

The Church is the permanent witness of Christ, it is the recapitulation of all His work. The Church does not preach simple rules of Christian life; it shares the new life in itself brought by Christ, man's union with God, through grace and faith.

Christianity involves life in common. Christians have to look at each other as brothers, as members of a community, cultivating links between them. Being Christian really means to be part of the Church community. No one can be a Christian by himself, but only in solidarity and unity with the other people, being together members of the Church, the Body that has Christ Himself as the Head. Christians are not only united to each other; above all they are one in Christ. Only this communion with Christ leads people to true communion among them in Christ. The power through which this unity is accomplished is the Holy Spirit. The only source of unity is God Himself and the only perfect model of unity is the Holy Trinity. Christian unity must have trinitarian unity as model.

Florovsky says that love and faith that must be the emblem of every Christian are of divine origin: "True love and true faith are not human feelings or emotions. Love and faith are a gift from God, a vital energy from Christ to us through the Holy

Spirit. The brotherly love of Christians is based only on this adoptive filiation that was given to us through Christ. ¹⁷

The Church is one, the Church of Christ, for the Church is His Body and Christ is never divided. The primary role of the Church in the world is to gather separate individuals and incorporate them into this organic and living unity. Through the Holy Spirit Christians are united with Christ, they are united in Him. Church "is the extension and fullness of the Incarnation, with all that has been done for our salvation: the Cross, the tomb, the third day resurrection, the Ascension and the sitting in the right part of the Father. Incarnation continues and is accomplished in the Church. ¹⁸

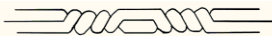
In Christ are united all generations of men, both those who have been called to communion and those who are called in the eleventh hour. This unity that exceeds time units is revealed and is already manifested in the liturgical experience of the Church in the Eucharistic Liturgy. The Eucharist is always a majestic revelation of the Whole Christ.

Conclusions

From the above, it can be seen that the perspective from which Florovsky treats ecclesiology remains, above all, Christological or more precisely, centered on the doctrine of the Body of Christ. It can be seen Hrisostom's and Augustine's influence on Christian's personal participation in the universality of the Church, an idea that has put its mark on the Russian theologian's thinking. As well noted, "the accentuated

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 21.



Christocentrism of ecclesiology whose champion was Florovsky unquestionably binds to the Patristic and Byzantine tradition. "¹⁹

The contribution of Father Georges Florovsky to the development of contemporary theology is invaluable. Due of Florovsky's work and his ecumenical influence, any discussion of Christianity with reference only to its typical Western manifestations, in Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, without reference to Eastern Orthodoxy, is no longer a historically and intellectually accepted position. Previously it was almost a routine to speak only of the Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity in the West, as if there would not have been other expressions of Christianity about which to be discussed and to be studied. This ignorant attitude has disregarded Orthodox Christianity from the East and enabled the West to move freely in its own way, forgetting that for the first millennium of Christianity, the West shared the common faith and the tradition with the East, where Christianity started and developed.

Florovsky was that one who has provoked Western theologians not only to restart seriously, the relations forgotten for a long period between the East and the West, but also to regain for themselves that treasure of all Christians, which in an extended sense was lost by the West during the history, but which was preserved by the Orthodox Churches in the East. It is the treasure which was left as legacy from the Holy Fathers. Its value lies in its actuality. As the Russian theologian notes, "The work of the Fathers of the Church is more relevant to contemporary worries and problems than the works of modern theologians. Parents were struggling with existential problems, with those discoveries of the eternal problems described and contained in Holy Scripture. Probably St. Athanasius and Blessed Augustine are more current

¹⁹ Emmanuel LANNE, *Tradition et communion des eglises*, recueil d'études, Leuven University Press, 1997, p. 424.

than many of the contemporary theologians. The reason is very simple: they were dealing with things rather than illusions, they were concerned not so much about why man can think, but what God did for man." ²⁰The return to the Fathers, as Georges Florovsky repeatedly asked for "does not mean abandoning the contemporary period, leaving history, or deserting the battlefield with contemporary issues. The patristic experience must be rediscovered, preserved, transposed into contemporary life." ²¹

For French-Russian theologians, the return to the Fathers was primarily a rediscovery of the Fathers theology in order to answer and solve the intellectual, philosophical and theological problems from the contemporary world. ²²

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²⁰ Georges FLOROVSKY, *Collected Works, vol I...*, p. 16.

²¹ Peter A. Chamberas, *Georges Vasilievich Florovsky (1893-1979): Russian intellectual historian and orthodox theologian*, in *Modern Age*. Wilmington: Winter 2003. Vol. 45, Iss. 1; pg. 49. See also: Battista Mondin, *Dizionario dei teologi*, Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 1992, p. 242: "In the careful analysis of the unchanged Orthodoxy of the Fathers, Florovsky also has looked for answers to some of the problems of the Western world and modern man".

²² Cf. Douglas H. KNIGHT, *The theology of John Zizioulas*, Ashgate, Hampshire, 2007, p. 36.



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