

THE TOPICALITY AND THE UTILITY OF THE TEACHINGS OF THE HOLY FATHERS*

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Abstract: The Holy Fathers, “great scholars and teachers”, are considered as the normative representatives of the doctrinarian tradition of the Church, as especially authorized witnesses of faith. They led a holy life and also distinguished themselves through the fact that they preached the teachings received from the Saviour and the Holy Apostles. They are not only the representatives of the doctrinarian tradition of the Church, but also the witnesses and criteria of true faith, the judges of Orthodoxy – this feature has not only a historic value and dimension, but also atemporal and generally spiritual ones. The Holy Fathers are extremely “contemporary”, as they reach directly the Christians in our times and provide answers to the essential questions of mankind. By studying the patristic literature, we acquire the way of thinking of the saints, which is helpful at anytime and in any circumstance and allows us to show our faith and answer topical issues as they themselves would have done if they were still alive now. By a careful and pious reading of the works of the Holy Fathers, contemporary human beings may find the solutions to their problems and the answers to their questions, as they are models of Christian living, wisdom and simplicity, and their theological knowledge and the truths they preached were un-animously accepted and admired by the whole Church.

Keywords: teachings, Holy Fathers, topicality, utility, wisdom, contemporary

Fathers of the Church, Church Fathers or Holy Fathers

The Fathers of the Church (*Gr.* πατήρ, πατέρες, “father, fathers”)¹ are persons who through their life and activity proved worthy of and received

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¹ A. Bailly, *Dictionnaire Grec-Français*, written with the assistance of E. Egger, edited by L. Séchan and P. Chantraine, Paris, 1963, p. 1498.

from the Church the title of *Fathers of the Church*. They are also called *Holy Fathers* or *Church Fathers*.

Beginning with the early Christian centuries, those designated *Fathers of the Church*, or *Doctors and teachers of the Church* asserted supreme authority in matters of the correctness of the faith; they, the Fathers, *great doctors and teachers*, are considered the normative representatives of the doctrinal tradition of the Church, as particularly appointed attestors to the faith. They also had a prodigious spiritual experience and the purity of their faith and their holy lives exemplified the quintessence of their writings and their entire life. In addition to their holy lives, they also distinguished themselves by preaching the Holy Faith received from the Saviour and the Holy Apostles.

That we could refer to any one of them as a *Church Father*, we must undoubtedly be assured that the Church has expressly granted him this title. The body that expresses this aspect in the Church is the Ecumenical Council. Thus, *the Church Fathers* are those persons whom an Ecumenical Council has declared to be Church Fathers. By inference, we should call *Fathers of the Church* those whose life and work were not evaluated during the period of the Ecumenical Councils, but whom the Holy Fathers, designated as such by the Holy Councils, called *Fathers of the Church*.

From this it results that since the 8th century the title of *Church Father* or *Holy Father* has not been given to any other person since no Ecumenical Council has been held to bestow this designation. As a conclusion, *the Holy Fathers* or *the Church Fathers* are those who lived in the first eight centuries. As a result, the title of *Church Father* or *Father of the Church* can be given exclusively by the Church, even if we can call *father* any member of the clergy, *i.e.*, a Priest. However, St. John Damascene in the East and St. Isidore of Seville in the West should not be considered the last representatives of the patristic era as this would mean neglecting or ignoring their successors in theological writings as history does not stand still, but it evolves continuously, carrying on its waves the visible traces of the classic patristic era. Saint John Damascene completed a prolonged period of theological endeavours, and through this, at the same time, he established a post-patristic era, that, through its adherents, amply continued the patristic vividness of those things that characterise theology, as, for example, did the Stoudites from the Monastery of Stoudion in Constantinople.

In Antiquity, the ancients were giving this reverential title to their masters, as to the ones who contributed to the birth of their spiritual personality, this being a way to express their gratitude to those who had passed on their teachings to them.

The Apostles themselves approved the use of the title of *father*, although our Saviour had forbidden them to do so (Mt. 23:9f), but they restricted its use to persons who teach and preach the Gospel of our Lord

Jesus Christ, who live according to its precepts and teach others to observe them. Therefore, the teaching they propagate in their writings and speeches must come from Christ, and not from heretical teachings. The Church acknowledges as a Church Father the person who preaches its unaltered teaching, without change or misinterpretation².

The Fathers of the Church – our “contemporaries”

Through their writings the Church Fathers addressed the needs of the Church during the time of their lives, but they are a source of inspiration for the words and the deeds of modern Christians who are willing to find in them positive influence.

The authority of the Church Fathers in the Church cannot be limited to the literary and historical significance of the patristic writings, but it refers especially to the ecclesiastical teachings they contain, based on the Holy Scripture, and Holy Tradition as sources of faith³. The Fathers of the Church “had the ability to approach some of the fundamental aspects of theology using terms that are still valid today”⁴. By thoroughly and humbly reading the writings of the Holy Fathers, contemporary man can find solutions to his or her own concerns and uncertainties because the saints are models of Christian living, wisdom and simplicity and their theological knowledge and the truths they preached were unanimously accepted and admired by the entire Church. Hence, the Fathers of the Church are highly “contemporary” because they address directly contemporary Christianity and provide answers to the essential questions of humankind. Through their writings they actuate the spiritual life of the faithful of all times and prompt them to perform concrete deeds that are instrumental in salvation.

Today, we are trying to learn lessons and benefit from the writings of the Church Fathers, with profound appreciation for the present with which we identify. Their unsurpassed greatness consists in the way they were able to communicate to Christians in their times the truths of the Gospel and of Christian living. Strictly speaking, the life and work of the Fathers of the Church will only stimulate and provide us with suggestions for our present Christian work. In their turn, these men in old times lived in perfect harmony with their contemporaries, for whose good they were instrumental. They succeeded in finding in Christian doctrine the absolute answer to enlighten and guide their contemporaries, addressing in the Orthodox spirit the prominent questions of their age. Exactly because they were so firmly

² C.Voicu, *Cu privire la Sfinții Părinți*, in “Telegraful Român”, 140, 45-48/1992, p. 4.

³ B.Altaner, *Précis de Patrologie*, adaptation by H. Chirat, Paris, 1961, p. 35.

⁴ M.Pellegrino, *Il cristianesi model II secolo di fronte alla cultura classica*, Torino, 1954, p. 86.

anchored in the worldly context, they still exercise today a profound and durable influence⁵. These bright morning stars of science and teaching, worthy of eternal recognition, although they are no longer among us, still live through their authority and faith and even if they are no longer in the body in the Church, their voice and teachings are as powerful as before⁶. The truths preached by these highly influential figures of Orthodox theology and their inspired words have not been buried in oblivion and have not faded since they were written. Patristic literature is timeless and it does not become obsolete or outdated. It is ageless because, as any masterpiece, it “is beyond the scope of Time. It is a balanced body. It is a crystallised moment, although ephemeral and it does not flow with the stream”⁷.

The patristic teachings represent real sources of light that spread rays of guiding light to the present and the prospective stage of theology. These aspects should not be comprehended and received as belonging to the past, as we should not return to the past and live isolated in it; we should not think about returning to the patristic age and approach it as a model, but we should select from the patristic literature “the eternal spirit of Orthodoxy and maintain it with reverence, as a guide for faith and for experiencing it, as a cure for our suffering, as a correction of its shortcomings, as a guarantee for its existence,”⁸ because our “aim is forward, not backward. And, yet, if the oak tree embeds its roots deeper into the ground, it does not do this because it wants to grow upside down, but because the soil provides it the strength to reach the sky and to excel the grass and the herbs that sip the strength of their lives only from the surface”⁹. Thus, our mission consists not only in studying and bringing to light the works of the Fathers, but we also have to interpret them “in the light of our present day experience, or even more, to understand our contemporary experience in the light of the Church Fathers’ teaching”¹⁰. From a theological Christian point of view, living in the present implies knowing the religious issues of our times, responding adequately to the longing for salvation of the faithful, in the light of the Gospel of the Saviour and the writings of the Fathers of the Church.

⁵ G.Bardy, *Lectures spirituelles dans les écrits des Pères*, in “La vie spirituelle”, XLVII, 200 / May 1936, p. 199-200.

⁶ Sf. Ioan Casian, *Despre Întruparea Domnului*, VI, XXVIII, translation by David Popescu, in PSB, vol. 57, IBMBOR, București, 1990, p. 879.

⁷ Z.Sângeorzan, *Monahul de la Rohia - Nicolae Steinhardt răspunde la 365 de întrebări incomode*, București, 1992, p. 54.

⁸ T. M.Popescu, *Biserica și cultura*, IBMBOR, București, 1996, p. 211-212.

⁹ T.Zielinski, *Lumea antică și noi*, translation by Anghel Marinescu, București, 1923, p. 99-100.

¹⁰ Nicolae (Metropolitan), *Farmecul scrierilor patristice*, București, 2002, p. 18.

The Great Love for Christ

Saints were freed from passions by abstaining from temptations through moderation and trying to live according to the Divine commandments. They avoided any shameful manifestation and improper word so that their heart could stay pure and unaltered. By approaching such matters in this way, they were not afraid to die for God, being convinced that they were what they were by God's mercy and because of this they endured everything so that they would not die in disgrace¹¹. They did not fear death because "only the incautious fear death as if it were the sum of all misdeeds, but the wise wish for it as a state of rest after hard work and as an end of all evils"¹². For them nothing was more worthy than eternal life which is the immortality of the soul that has lived properly in this earthly life¹³. Being great lovers of Christ, Whom they continuously felt present in their minds, hearts and all their being, freed from the pleasures of this world, rich in words and deeds, they refrained their senses and their own will in order to reach perfection, not without His help for which they did not hesitate to ask during their life. The Fathers aimed at filling everyone's hearts with the revealed truth. Holy fathers, accomplished teachers, they considered preaching the Gospel of Christ an essential activity, their main mission in life. They all were profoundly convinced of the greatness and importance of their teaching mission in the Church. The sincere eagerness of these true doctors of the Christian science was oriented toward seeing Christians applying through deeds their words and advice, bringing forth fruit in the field of our souls and adorning them with high virtues, because otherwise "what is the benefit of faith unless our life is righteous?"¹⁴ The Fathers of the Church were protected by the Orthodox faith and reached through virtues and prayers the peaks of Union with God and stood undefeated by vices, thus sowing in the souls of Christians the flowers of virtue. From the movement of their body one could tell they were people whose example was to be followed without expecting any particular response.

Thus, for all of us, it is instructive and beneficial to draw from and partake of Orthodox teaching directly from the source of the patristic literature, because the Fathers of the Church lived in conditions that are

¹¹ R. Knopf, G.Krüger, *Ausgewählte Martyreakten*, no. 3, 26-27, 3-e Aufl., Tübingen, 1929, p. 33.

¹² St. Ambrosius, *De bono mortis*, 47, in "Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina", XXXII-XXXIII, Paris, col. 306.

¹³ R. Knopf, G.Krüger, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁴ St. John Chrysostom, *Adversus oppugnatores eorum qui ad monasticam vitam ducunt*, 1, 6, in "Patrologiae Cursus Completus", Series Graeca (P.G.), XLVII, Paris, 1863, col. 327.

similar to those in our times and, still, they endeavoured to keep unaltered the teachings of Orthodoxy that will last until the end of the world.

Patristic literature is a monument of spiritually oriented artistry because it is characterised and presented as an example of sublime beauty that is imbedded in the souls of those who value it and it guides their lives toward the ineffable splendour of Divinity. This beauty “fascinates man, overwhelms and gladdens the heart of any man who, loving truly, can allow himself or herself to surrender to the smile of beauty. It is permanent beauty that does not fade nor does it age. Man who is capable of offering and accepting such love and beauty is in the Image of God, Who pours in his or her heart this tremendous strength”¹⁵.

Patristic Literature – the Guarantee of an Accurate Theology and the Cornerstone of the Spiritual Edification of Christians

The interest of the early Church in the Holy Fathers was manifested in a two-fold manner. Above all “they are referred to as such for a doctrinal reason: they are testifiers to the true teaching of the Church. However, at the same time, the more they were referred to as such from a dogmatic point of view, the greater was the interest in the historic aspect, meaning that their life and works were drawing more attention”¹⁶.

Analyzing patristic works, we discover with gladness the like-mindedness between the Holy Fathers and the harmony of their collective writings. They all acknowledge a Divine teaching that is unanimously accepted by the Church. The universal character of patristic literature guarantees the universality of Holy Scripture because this literature is a component part of the Holy Tradition. The patristic testimony is consistent with Scripture and Scripture confirms the orthodoxy of this testimony that is inspired and rooted in Scripture and it expounds Scripture in an unequalled manner. “Thus, if Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition have a universal character, a universal validity for the Church, then, implicitly, patristic teachings that are a part of Holy Tradition are universal”¹⁷. Therefore, the teachings of the Holy Fathers provide the guarantee of an accurate theology and constitute the cornerstone of the spiritual edification of Christians everywhere and in any century. The Orthodox Church has “a great holy army, who will never feel either weak or humiliated”¹⁸.

The exemplary lives of the Holy Fathers are a model to be followed by Christians of all times and their writings have been sources of inspiration

¹⁵ I.G. Coman, *Frumusețile iubirii de oameni în spiritualitatea patristică*, Mitropolia Banatului, Timișoara, 1988, p. 5.

¹⁶ Nicolae (Metropolitan), *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁷ N. Chifăr, *Teologie și spiritualitate patristică*, Trinitas, Iași, 2002, p. 8.

¹⁸ T.M. Popescu, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

for most contemporary theologians and this is why they are cited on many occasions. The patristic thinking has had a particular influence on theology and it is promulgated by a number of contemporary theologians, loyal followers of the teachings of the Church Fathers. At present, theology must assent to the patristic theological principles that should constitute the future as well as be a guide for our theologians. The information conveyed by the Holy Fathers is today “of a particular profuseness, variety and utility under the aspect of the circulation of the biblical text, of the Christian and universal history, of the dogmatic and moral doctrine, of philosophy, of certain sciences, of shaping the European spirituality, of literature, of art, of the pagan mentality during the period of decline of the Roman Empire”¹⁹. Modern theology must not deviate from the foundations laid by the Fathers of the Church and must not wander on extraneous paths, other than those they have established, but it should replenish over and over again from the wellspring of their teachings, because these remain true throughout time and they keep eternally their universal character, utility and topicality as they are divinely endorsed and inspired by the omnipresent and ever-living God Himself.

Intensive Reading of Patristic Literature and Its Benefits

By intensely reading the Holy Fathers, by addressing prayers to them and adopting their example of Christian living, communion is maintained with the saints of Christ, Who, through the Holy Spirit, teaches each of us “to live according to his or her options and to the circumstances of his or her life that He allows”²⁰. By studying the patristic literature, we acquire the thinking of saints that helps us at any time and in any situation to express our faith and address any present matters as they would have done if they had lived in our time. In this respect they also strengthen us with their prayers.

By reading patristic texts, we can induce that, in theology, the main point of interest is represented by the special attention directed to practical aspects and less to theoretical matters. In other words, the Church Fathers teach us that theology is called upon to attend Christian life, because it originates in the Christian life and it attends it; theology fulfills its purpose to the extent that it stimulates and prompts us to take action for salvation. True theology is not one that elevates to abstract climaxes and detaches from the reality of contemporary Christian life, but one that is anchored in the everyday life of Christians, that preaches and promotes the Saviour’s words: “but whoever shall do and teach *them*, he shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Mt. 5:19). Only by understanding and applying

¹⁹ I.G. Coman, *Patrologie*, vol. I, IBMBOR, București, 1984, p. 5.

²⁰ D. Stăniloae, explanatory note no. 1724 in Sf. Chirilidin Alexandria, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan*, in PSB, vol. 41, IBMBOR, București, 2000, p. 906.

exemplarily these words did the saints realize that at the center of theology enthrones the living Person of Jesus Christ, and from a perpetual connection with Christ results both what we should know and what we should accomplish to acquire salvation. As a matter of fact, *the saints guide and encourage us toward a theology that does not place unilaterally the accent of theory, but it is profoundly anchored in Christian life which it stimulates and guides to deeds in accordance with the needs and the aspirations of the times. The essential and the constituent value of theology is attending life through the fact that it stimulates and guides the faithful to follow the living example of our Saviour according to the needs and the aspiration of the respective age*²¹.

Patristic texts facilitate the comprehension of fundamental paradoxes: of the Mother of God and the Virgin, of the hypostatic union of Christ's humanity and divinity, of death as resurrection and they demand us to understand the paradox of writing about something that cannot be described²². The patristic texts invite us

to the spiritual approach to thinking, to that thinking about things in their pure determination, given by the Creator and not to that given by the creature – a return to primal thinking, freed from the distortions brought about by what St. Maximus the Confessor called: the soot of sins²³.

Bathed in the divine light, the Holy Fathers, these poets of the divine Word and “renowned men who became treasurers of the mysteries of our Saviour”²⁴ represent reliable guides to knowing and experiencing the Gospel of Jesus. There are no better guides to understanding the richness of the meaning of the words of Scripture, because they knew minutely every book in the Holy Scripture and the richness of the grace of the Holy Spirit dwelt in them. The teachings of the Church Fathers are not less important than the words of the Holy Scripture from which they never depart²⁵. The patristic writings are “advisors and advance for the truth”²⁶ as they were written under divine inspiration. The Holy Fathers are the most loyal keepers and interpreters of this truth that the Lord Jesus Christ delivered, that the apostles preached, the saints kept and the martyrs confirmed through their blood. The

²¹ C. Sârbu, *Sfinții Vasile, Grigorie și Ioan, îndrumători ai teologiei actuale*, in “Mitropolia Ardealului”, XVIII, 1-2/1973, p. 41.

²² R. Preda, *Mărturia patristică*, in “Studii Teologice”, 2nd series, XLV, 5-6/1993, p. 85.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 85-86.

²⁴ Sf. Chiril din Alexandria, *Despre Sfânta Treime*, speech II, translation, introduction and notes by Dumitru Stăniloae, in PSB, vol. 40, IBMBOR, București, 1994, p. 64.

²⁵ Șt. Alexe, *Sfinții Părinți în preocupările Prea Fericitului Patriarh Iustin*, in “Biserica Ortodoxă Română”, CIII, 3-4/1985, p. 266.

²⁶ Theofil din Antiohia, *Trei cărți către Autolic*, 3rd book, chapter XXX, translation, introduction and notes by Dumitru Fecioru, in PSB, vol. 2, IBMBOR, București, 1997, p. 465.

Holy Fathers “embody both the delicate and strong person in Christ, so that the advice we receive from them become commandments for us”²⁷.

On almost every page, the Fathers praise moral good or virtue, recommending them not in a hegemonic way, but rationally, in a friendly and brotherly manner, using the force of correct arguments related to love. These values and principles impose themselves on us naturally, not because of the Church Fathers’ authority, but because of that divine authority that confers strength and perpetuity. Embodied in Christians dedicated to resembling Christ, these moral perennial values such as: righteousness, truth, humility, sacrifice for one’s neighbour, friendship, courage, moderation, honesty, love, etc., that every patristic text recommends, are not presented as mere abstract notions, but as living forces that originate from the Divine Logos and that adorn Christians with imperishable beauty. This way, Christians acquire through the brightness of their deeds the unwithered glory of God, and in this life, their beauty irradiates by virtues and they become filled with light.

Thorough knowledge of the patristic works is essential for priests and for the active faithful of the Church because it comprises the Tradition of the Church that is of the same divine origin as Holy Scripture. Theologians and the Ecumenical Councils resort to patristic works to demonstrate the truth of the faith, these texts being the most apodictic arguments, because these works represent the foundation of Christian theology elaborated on the basis of studying Holy Scripture and they constitute the apostolic succession or heritage, meaning the treasure of the Holy Tradition, of inestimable value for the life of the Church and every Christian²⁸. The teachings that were unanimously approved by the Fathers of the Church or certainly by most of them are of indisputable authority, representing, in fact the doctrine of the universal Church. Patristic authors had this privilege, a very rare one for those who follow them, to enjoy a very profound appreciation in the entire Christian world. Protestants of various orientations, the Orthodox and Catholics refer to them with great esteem and this characteristic places them in a special position²⁹.

For young theologians, the patristic works provide the ideal example of the priesthood that can be known by studying the activity of the Holy Fathers who were doctors, apologists, saints, in one word, priests in the real sense of the word³⁰. Studying the authentic and vivifying source of Christianity is compulsory for the initial education of future priests, teachers of religion, theology students as well as for good Christians because these

²⁷ D. Stăniloae, *Rugăciunea lui Iisus și experiența Duhului Sfânt*, Foreword by Gheorghios Kapsanis, Deisis, Sibiu, 1995, p. 47-48.

²⁸ Ioan G. Coman, *Patrologie*, vol. I, p. 14.

²⁹ F. Cayré, *Précis de Patrologie, Histoire et doctrine des Pères et Docteurs de l’Église*, Tome premier, Livres I et II, Paris-Tournai-Rome, 1927, p. 1.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. XVI.

sources lay the foundation of and enrich theological knowledge, representing true guiding lights for all of us. Therefore, the patristic writings

are of great interest to any educated person; for the clergy, for the priest, they should represent a daily reading, beside the Holy Scripture, and for the theologian they are compulsory. Because what the ancient classics are for philologists, the Holy Fathers are for theologians, the classics of the Church. This is why, one cannot be called theologian unless he is familiar, by thorough study, with the Church Fathers³¹.

The teachings of the Holy Fathers lead to eternal salvation those who follow their principles and these guidelines that have been transmitted uninterruptedly from Christ and His apostles until today and there has not been a period since the founding of the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ on earth when the patristic thinking ceased to guide the Church.

It is absolutely necessary to read and better understand patristic works by continuously analyzing and achieving new spiritual progress such as:

1. Adopting the Christian era, observed by the entire planet, a calendar elaborated by the Daco-Roman Dionysius the Humble.
2. A new perspective on world history, embodied by hope, work, prayer, creation and progress (ἐπέκτασις).
3. The Holy Fathers appreciated the so called barbarian peoples for whom they create culture by inventing alphabets and national literature (Wulfila, Mesrop, Pachomius, etc.).
4. The patristic literature encourages real ecumenism, promoting cooperation between Churches by the Ecumenical Councils, exchanges of visits, circulation of works and ideas, humility, honesty in relations between churches.
5. The Church Fathers regard peace so highly that they consider it the mother of all good. They are against violence of any kind and consider war an organized and multiplied killing.
6. Patristics created the literary genre of The Philokalia and the fervour to acquire spiritual beauty that leads to perfection.
7. The Church Fathers esteem man as being in God's Image but, at the same time, they reprehend his sins. Patristic humanism cultivates, among other things, two essential values: the logos-reason and love. The patristic authors lived and experienced their faith and conceptions³².

Through their writings, the Saints call us to the authentic light of Orthodoxy, attracting us to the clear sources of eastern spirituality that are resonant with the living presence of the Holy Trinity. Their works were

³¹Nirschl, Josef, *Lehrbuch der Patrologie und Patristik*, vol. I, Mainz, 1881, p. 23 at M. Pîslaru, *Valoarea scrierilor patristice și folosul ce rezultă din studiul și lectura lor*, Râmnicu-Vâlcea, 1933, p. 50.

³²Ioan G. Coman, *Patrologie*, vol. I, pp. 5-6.

transmitted, together with Holy Scripture, to enlighten us and delineate the right path to God, to elevate our soul to Heaven and to protect us against the confusing quagmire of modern thinking which emerged from the departure from the patristic teachings. The Fathers established and transmitted pious doctrine and taught us the righteous life. Their goal is deliverance from passions, enlightenment and our deification, as there is nothing more appealing in life than the soul that finds comfort and tranquility in God. The Church Fathers put into practical effect their advice and this is how they talked and wrote about the continual spiritual struggle that they experienced and won. They enriched their virtues, they were enlightened and they achieved perfection and this is why they teach us how to be cleansed from sin, how to become illuminated and achieve perfection. "Admitting that we must be cleansed from vices – says St. Gregory of Nyssa – is already a premise and a preparation of the victory against the enemy, because we must struggle in our lives against evil spirits that are there around us"³³. Every person needs a guide on the road of the spiritual life because otherwise he or she cannot reach its end which is deification. The fairness of the Church Fathers' thinking and living attracts the soul of the reader that is thirsty for spiritual growth in love, intellectual progress in truth and in good deeds. The appropriateness of their spiritual thinking, the strong arguments accompanied by the force of the Church Fathers' humble and sacrificial love and their realism invite us and even those who ignore their own salvation to meditate profoundly. Thus, we can assert that the value of the Fathers of the Church is truly indisputable.

Re-establishing Vivid Contact with the Church Fathers' Writings in the Romanian Church

Hierarchs and scholarly monks in this country, lovers of imperishable beauty who were attracted by the Christ-filled essence of the patristic writings, took, along the centuries, a continuous interest in this literature and endeavoured tirelessly to translate the works of the Fathers of the Church, so that their flocks could have access to the Fathers' thinking and living, knowing very well that: "those who have access to Christian books shall benefit from this. Just seeing or looking at these books enables us to better prepare to fight sin and to aspire toward righteousness"³⁴. Saint Paisius of Neamț, the greatest advocate of patristic philosophy during the 18th century who translated *The Philokalia* from Greek into Slavonic (*Dobrotoliubie*) in

³³ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *In Psalmos*, 13, in *P.G.* XLIV, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1858, col. 561A.

³⁴ St. Epiphanius (Bishop of Cyprus) in *Patericul ce cuprinde în sine cuvinte folositoare ale Sfinților Bătrâni*, edited by Petru Pleșa, Alba Iulia, 1999, p. 69.

1793, initiated a substantial movement of spiritual rebirth based on a return to the Philokalic Fathers and the Jesus prayer. When writing about the benefit of reading patristic works, he answered as follows to Starets Athanasios, who had condemned him for some things:

You should not say, Father Athanasios, that one or two books are enough for the salvation of the soul. Bees do not gather honey from one single flower, but from many. The same is true for one who reads the works of the Holy Fathers. One book teaches man about the true faith, another one about silence and prayer, another one about obedience, humility and patience and another one guides him or her toward love for God and the neighbor. Thus, man learns from more patristic books to live according to the Gospel³⁵.

Thus, the patristic writings did not circulate exclusively among the clergy. Ordinary believers, who were thirsty for the beauty of the authentic Christian life, approached with vivid interest the patristic treasure and tried to acquire it, drinking from the inexhaustible sources of beauty and wisdom represented by the Fathers' thinking. The Romanians were familiar with the patristic spirituality and this shaped our way of Christian living and familiarized us with God. For this reason, good Christians spent many hours reading the works of the Church Fathers, meditating on them and assimilating them into their souls. The works of the Holy Fathers have represented a type of spiritual nurture needed by pious souls of Christians in the entire world. Their teachings and ardour fill us with admiration and the holiness of their life confers credibility on their works. These pages "express the intense will to improve the brethren inside and outside the Church, restoring to them the beauty of the image in God"³⁶. Yet, to better perceive the profundity of the saints' thinking, God the Logos, the One Who inspired them, should guide us to understand these things that "should make us rejoice when merely hearing them"³⁷.

Some contemporary Christians, however, would rather refer to the traditions of monks who reached a high level of spiritual excellence and not to the true Tradition of the Church that dates back to the early centuries: "there are many who feed on speeches originating in a marginal pseudo-ecclesiastical milieu"³⁸. Such a situation can be overcome only by re-establishing the living connection between the Fathers' teaching and the practice of the Church, because "our ecclesiastical practice is not always based on the Holy Fathers' teaching and this very fact is the root of many

³⁵ *Sfântul Paisie de la Neamț – Viața, învățăturile și minunile*, edited by Archimandrite Ioanichie Bălan, Episcopia Romanului, Roman, 2002, p. 21.

³⁶ Ioan G. Coman, *Patrologie*, vol. I, p. 29.

³⁷ Sf. Grigorie de Nyssa, *Opt omilii la Fericiri*, translation and biographical notes by Sandu Gh. Stoian, in *Comorile pustiei*, vol. 31, Anastasia, București, 1999, p. 5.

³⁸ Nicolae (Metropolitan), *op. cit.*, p. 21.

problems in the life of the contemporary Church”³⁹. Knowing the Fathers’ authentic teaching helps Christians to better know them and to refer correctly to God and lead an exemplary Christian life. “There is nothing else that the devil fears more when he induces certain thoughts to man than – as St. John Chrysostom says – the mind that meditates on godly things and the soul that always drinks from this spring”⁴⁰. In conclusion, saints’ advice is “strong and mighty” because it was experienced by themselves and then by the Christians throughout the centuries. Unlike the solutions suggested by some people “the Fathers’ advice is appropriate from the spiritual point of view, they originate in a healthy perspective on fighting sin and progressing in virtues”⁴¹ because they experienced faith by worshiping God and praying. “The Fathers’ advice is even more valid than that provided in our times by pretending experts in man”⁴². Christ, Who gives a word to them that preach [it] in a great company (Ps. 67:11), gave to the Holy Fathers abundantly and thus within the readers is born the faith founded on the Word and God’s power.

Re-establishing active contact with the writings of the Church Fathers support us in regaining the logic of the Faith, in cleansing our hearts and filling our minds with divine teaching. The divine words “bear away discouragement, keep us in a good frame of mind, make the poor even richer than the rich, protect the rich, turn the sinner into a righteous person, keep safe the righteous, deracinate bad things, plant those that are still not good, remove evil, a guide to virtue; not only that they provide guidance, but grow roots and establish forever virtues because these words are a spiritual and mysterious cure that destroys passions”⁴³. The saints show us how to free ourselves from the powers of evil, how to strengthen our faith that becomes ever more vivid, that becomes life, and cannot be suppressed and kept exclusively at a mental level, they reinforce our hope and stimulate our will and thus we wish with all our heart to follow them. “Just as the body needs food perceptible by the senses, the same is with the soul that needs a daily exhortation and spiritual nurture”⁴⁴ and “as hunger is a sign of the health of the body, likewise love for spiritual words is evidence of spiritual health”⁴⁵.

In every patristic text we discover how much God loves us (in fact, in every page of the patristic literature we can observe an emulation among the

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ St. John Chrysostom, *Homiliae LXXXVIII in Joannem*, in P.G., LIX, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1862, col. 38.

⁴¹ Nicolae (Metropolitan), *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ St. John Chrysostom, *In Psalmum XLVIII*, 1, in P.G., LV, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1862, col. 513.

⁴⁴ *Idem*, *Homiliae in Genesin*, in P.G., LIII, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1862, col. 90.

⁴⁵ *Idem*, *In Illud, Vidi Dominum, Homil. II*, in P.G., LVI, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1862, col. 107.

Church Fathers to assert God's love for us) and we continuously discover new reasons to love God and our neighbours, and to appreciate nothing else more than Christ, because He did not appreciate anything else more than He appreciated us, to stay firm in our faith and to anchor our hope in Him alone. An inexhaustible treasure of thinking, the patristic writings exercise the mind, awaken understanding, nourish the soul, warm the heart and strengthen will. If in prayer we speak to God, through the holy texts, God speaks to us and reveals His will. The one who directs a clear eye, or better said looks toward it without passion, in accordance with reason, to "the bright and the holy candle stand of the Tradition of the Holy Fathers"⁴⁶ learns how to dedicate himself or herself to the effort of resembling Christ. Every believer should become "a Christ able to work, to love and sacrifice for everybody, including his or her enemies. Effort, love and sacrifice for one's neighbour represent the pillars of patristic humanism. On these pillars is being gradually built up the deification of the creature"⁴⁷.

If we shall hold in our hands holy books every day and direct the eye of our understanding toward the admirable writings of the saints, then we shall nourish our minds with profound teachings, with profound thoughts that elevate and exalt, because "the saints' minds treasured those which are beyond"⁴⁸. Thus, our minds will become impregnated with their words and our hearts will be integrally filled with their words. The divine teachings of the Fathers arouse our love for God, cleanse thoughts, refresh the strength of the soul, foster rejoicing in our hearts, teach us how to reject heresy and include in the Church the good teaching, "how to resemble God to the extent He took upon human flesh"⁴⁹, how to act to acquire higher virtues and how not to remain indifferent to others. Their teachings advise us to add more good deeds to the ones that we have already done and not to end this most beautiful endeavour. In their writings, the saints advise us to open the eyes of our hearts, to pursue ceaselessly the knowledge of God, "to leave aside the intention to do wrong, the lurking places of shame, to renew ourselves in the grace of covenants, to master anger, so that the evil should not reside in our hearts to enthrone in them that evil spirit that entered the heart of Judas and battered the gates of his soul"⁵⁰. Receiving "with alert mind and spirited

⁴⁶ Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Scrieri despre cele două voințe în Hristos*, 18, translation from Greek, introduction and notes by Dumitru Stăniloae, in *PSB*, vol. 81, IBMBOR, București, 1990, p. 295.

⁴⁷ Ioan G. Coman, "Valoarea literaturii patristice a primelor secole în cadrul culturii antice", in "Studii Teologice", XXIV, 1-2/1972, p. 7.

⁴⁸ Sf. Chiril din Alexandria, *Despre Sfânta Treime*, V, p. 228.

⁴⁹ St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio XXIX. Theologica III*, 19, in P.G., XXXVI, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1858, col. 100A.

⁵⁰ Sf. Ambrozie, *Scrisori*, letter LXXVI, translation and notes by David Popescu, in *PSB*, vol. 53, IBMBOR, București, 1994, p. 304.

zeal”⁵¹ these spiritual victuals for our salvation, we keep unaltered the beauty of the image sown in us, we become stronger in fighting temptations, we learn how to prove ourselves fruitful in applying the divine words and not remaining listeners to or speakers of these words, so that “our life should be in proportion to the teachings and the teachings should preach life;”⁵² we learn that “many are the ways God gives us to be saved, only let us not be negligent”⁵³, because “the one who wants to achieve salvation is held back by nothing else but his or her own laziness and non attendance;”⁵⁴ we learn how to protect ourselves consciously against duplicity, because the Fathers of the Church exhort us “what the mouth utters should be avowed by the spirit, what the word says should be felt by our heart”⁵⁵. As Christ is undivided, we should do the same and conduct ourselves in a single way and with one true way of living⁵⁶. If we shall fulfil all these “all the colours of virtue will flourish on our face”⁵⁷, we shall become acquaintances of Christ, the Good Painter, the Painter who paints promptly in those who believe in Him and always look at Him, a heavenly man in His own image⁵⁸. Thus, it would not be pious or wise to disregard the content of the patristic writings God provided to us as a valuable gift, without wondering, because when reading them, we cannot be satisfied admiring them. Referring to this, St. John of the Ladder wrote: “As the poor, seeing the royal treasurers become more aware of their poverty, the same is with the soul, which reading about the great virtues of the Fathers, humbles itself”⁵⁹. In conclusion, our first approach to the Holy Fathers’ texts should be humble and full of admiration. To acquire

⁵¹Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilia la Facere*, homily XXIX, II, translation, introduction, indexes and notes by D. Fecioru, in PSB, vol. 21, IBMBOR, București, 1987, p. 365.

⁵² *Ibidem*, omilia a II-a, V, p. 44.

⁵³ Idem, *Homiliae LV in Acta Apostolorum*, XXI, 4, in *P.G.*, LX, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1862, col. 169.

⁵⁴ Sf. Antoniecel Mare, *Învățătură despre viața morală*, chapter 45, translation, introduction and notes by Dumitru Stăniloae, in *Filocalia sau culegere din scrierile Sfinților Părinți care arată cum se poate omul curăți, lumina și desăvârși*, vol. XI, Humanitas, București, 1999, p. 21.

⁵⁵ Sf. Ambrozie, *Despre Sfintele Taine*, chapter IX, 54, translation and notes by David Popescu, in PSB, vol. 53, IBMBOR, București, 1994, p. 23.

⁵⁶ Sf. Chirilidin Alexandria, *Cartea Găfîrelor la a doua Lege*, translation from Greek, introduction and notes by Dumitru Stăniloae, in PSB, vol. 39, IBMBOR, București, 1992, p. 455.

⁵⁷ Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilia la Facere*, homily XXXVI, VI, translation, introduction, indexes and notes by D. Fecioru, in PSB, vol. 22, IBMBOR, București, 1989, p. 39.

⁵⁸ Sf. Macarie Egipteanul, *Cele 50 de omilii duhovnicești*, omilia a XXX-a, 4, translation by Constantin Cornișescu, in PSB, vol. 34, IBMBOR, București, 1992, p. 230.

⁵⁹ Sf. Ioan Scărarul, *Scara dumnezeiescului urcuș*, word XXVI, 2nd part, chapter 16, translation, introduction and notes by Dumitru Stăniloae, in “*Filocalia*” ..., vol. XI, IBMBOR, București, 1980, p. 372.

as much benefit as possible from reading and studying the divine words, we should first work on our own dispassion, because we cannot acquire much benefit from divine teachings if we do not cleanse our soul first⁶⁰, because “as the stomach, when it is in ill health, cannot receive and digest bad food, the same is with the soul fraught with pride, self-conceit, without vigour and weakened”⁶¹. The Fathers’ writings should be studied especially having in mind the intention to put into practice their teachings, according to the spiritual level of each of us.

Therefore, it has been said for good reason that the divine words of the Fathers of the Church

are words heard from the echoes of Paradise. Short and clear, they are dewdrops of the Eternal Morning... They came to light and were uttered on the request of the disciples, out of a need or effort of the spiritual love that was expected, out of a self-denial that originates in humility, out of the need of the son to be told what cannot be directly told. These words are slices cut from the bread of the heart, gestures and spiritual deeds, thoughts related to life made known for a certain moment and situation and they seem destined to be covered by oblivion. Yet, on many occasions, after a long time had passed, they returned involuntarily, they were brought back and recalled to those who inherited them and this is how they were kept, transcribed in letters⁶².

Reading the documented and soul-edifying writings of the Fathers, we keep their teachings and embrace their faith and merits.

Paraphrasing St. John Chrysostom, we can say that as the more we rub between our fingertips aromatic substances, the more perfume is released into the air, the same happens with Scripture and the writings of the Holy Fathers: the more one exerts himself or herself to better understand them, the better he or she can see the treasure hidden inside them and the more can he or she benefit from their richness⁶³. From this perspective, reading Holy Scripture and patristic texts gains us benefit:

first of all our way of using language becomes richer (our note: we stop uttering vain words); then the soul takes wing and exalts and it becomes illuminated by the Sun of Righteousness; the soul is delivered from bad thoughts and enjoys peace and quiet... Reading represents food for the spirit,

⁶⁰ St. John Chrysostom, *Homiliae LXXXVIII* in “Joannem”, 1, 3, in P.G., LIX, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1862, col. 27-28.

⁶¹ Idem, *Homiliae LV* in “Acta Apostolorum”, 3, in P.G., LX, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1862, col. 384.

⁶² Sandu-Tudor, Daniil, *Dumnezeu-Dragoste*, Christiana, București, 2000, pp. 160-161.

⁶³ St. John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Genesin*, 13, 1, in P.G., LIII, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1862, col. 106.

it strengthens it and makes it stronger and wiser and it does not allow the soul to take delight in shameful passions; it gives it wings and, in essence, it takes the soul to Heaven⁶⁴.

The words of the Holy Fathers are “a treasury of various medicines, so that whether it be needful to quench pride, to lull desire to sleep, to tread under foot the love of money, to despise pain, to inspire confidence, to gain patience, from them one may find abundant resource”⁶⁵.

As a good Christian is meditating on the meaning of existence and creation, not only does he or she ask himself or herself about these, but he or she turns to other people for answers.

The most appropriate answers he or she gets from God is through saints. Yet, God gives him or her through the intermediary of the saints answers according to the level whereat he or she is. By this He shows that the answer depends on the effort of the one who asks and the level he or she has reached. The answer is in fact the understanding that emerges in man. But the saint brings about and confirms this understanding. This proves once more the intimate love or the mutual interiority between the one who is spiritually advanced and the one who asks questions. But this also depends on the one who asks⁶⁶.

Therefore, the old examples of faith that testify to God’s grace and work toward the spiritual edification of man, have been kept in writing “so that by reading them, by doing gooddeeds, God could be worshiped and man strengthened”⁶⁷.

God’s word, uttered by the blessed voices of the saints, cannot be completely comprehended only by the movement of our eyes and lips, but we

must infix ourselves into this word, must try to live it, to become impregnated with it, as the Fathers of the Church did, not just by trying it, as a result of curiosity, but you should endeavour to comprehend it out of piety, to dwell in it, then to eat and digest it, to make it your own word, to sleep and get up with it, you must let it inside the most intimate part of your soul, to triumph over yourself⁶⁸.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, 29, 2, col. 262.

⁶⁵ *Idem*, *Homiliae LXXXVIII* in “Joannem”, 37, 1, in P.G., LIX, ed. Abbot J.P. Migne, Paris, 1862, col. 207.

⁶⁶ Dumitru Stăniloae, explanatory note no. 928 in Sf. Varsanufie și Ioan, *Scrisori duhovnicești*, in “Filocalia...”, vol. XI, Episcopia Romanului și Hușilor, Roman, 1990, p. 677.

⁶⁷ *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitas*, 1, ed. H. Musurillo, p. 106, apud Ioan Rămureanu, *Introducere generală la ”Actele martirice”*, introductory study, translation and notes by Ioan Rămureanu, IBMBOR, București, 1997, p. 15-16.

⁶⁸ Sandu-Tudor, Daniil, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

We should not content ourselves only with reading and quoting the Holy Fathers' texts, but it is necessary to comprehend them profoundly and become their disciples, to acquire their spirit, to acquire their thoughts, the patristic intelligence and the logic of the Faith, all these to make the patristic literature accessible to the man of the 21st century and to provide appropriate answers to questions of contemporary humankind as the Holy Fathers responded in their times and as they would do if they lived today. Let us derive from the Fathers the orthodoxy of faith, love for God and our neighbours, the truth and the light of Grace in which they were clothed, so that we make vivid and bright the message of the Gospel in our times. Their wisdom and courage in defending the true faith and the unity of the Church are worthy of admiration and to be followed. The Holy Fathers are real models for us from the perspective of the way they knew how to conjoin *orthodoxy*, which is the right teaching, with *orthopraxy*, which is living in truth and dynamic faith. We may also take them as examples in the spirit of social apostolate, serving God and one's neighbour.

In conclusion, the great benefit of reading and comprehending the patristic writings will become clear and accessible to readers, who, in their turn, following in the footsteps of the athletes of Christ, will be capable to reveal other spiritual fruition that were not mentioned here, because it is difficult to identify and mention them all in this brief review.

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