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Bicentennial Symposium
Faculty of Theology, Arad, Romania
The Meaning of Theology in Today's Society and Culture

“On Human Presence in a Post-Human World”
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We thank God you have reached this day: the 200th Anniversary of the Arad Theological School. To those who now serve and to those of blessed memory who have faithfully served in the spiritual formation of the generations that have gone before, a prayer of gratitude and thanksgiving. I wish to thank Fr. Adrian Murg for the invitation and Fr. Teofan Mada and for his friendship and the Philokalia Conferences he so able anchored several years ago that brought me to Romania and filled me with spiritual joy.

Thinking about the theme of this symposium, “The Significance of Theology in Today’s Society and Culture,” brought to mind a set of considerations anchored in the gifts of Orthodox understanding of the spiritual life. When we seek to live faithfully to Jesus Christ in our fragile world these gifts speak directly and compellingly to challenges and opportunities unfolding in the twenty-first century. Pulling these gifts forward “for the life of the world” is the ground upon which I suggest we stand. My considerations are tentative, suggesting avenues for theological thinking and education moving forward. What do we have to offer, and offer tenderly, to the self-forgetfulness that often tempts human beings? What do we have to offer to a world including our own Christian communities in a time when the culture of amnesia has severely compromised or diverted the life-giving flow of Christian tradition?

The “Fifth Gospel.” Anytime we focus on what our theological and spiritual tradition has to say to our own time it may be best to begin by reflecting on how the diseases of human passion and our present age have also come to nest in the church. In the year 2000 I had an opportunity to think about the bimillennial of the birth of Jesus Christ with the eminent historian of Christian thought Jaroslav Pelikan.¹ He spoke of the “fifth gospel”, the gospel written to and for the church. The “fifth gospel” was the working title of a group of scholars he had tentatively engaged to reflect on “The Grand Inquisitor” in book 5 of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*.² Christ had returned to earth. “He came down to the ‘scorched squares’ of a southern town where just the day before, in a splendid auto-da-fe, in the presence of the king, the court, knights, cardinals, and the loveliest court ladies, before the teeming populace of all Seville³, the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor had burned almost a hundred heretics at once *ad majorem gloriam Dei*.” The Grand Inquisitor quietly and

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan was the honorary curator of the international exhibition, *Anno Domini: Jesus Through the Centuries*, that I curated for the bimillennial of the birth of Jesus Christ at the Royal Alberta Museum, Edmonton, Canada. His book, *Jesus Through the Centuries* (1985) was the inspiration for this multi-media exhibition which drew together artistic works from museums around the world. The exhibition opened in September of 2000 and ran until 6 January 2001.

² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volkhonsky (New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990) :246 and following.

³ In 2010 on a trip to Saint Petersburg I sat in the hotel across from Isaac’s Cathedral. Dostoevsky had lived near-by and the Pawn Shop memorialized in his novel is down the main street. I thought about “the fifth gospel” and how he set it in Seville. It was hard to avoid the thought that he did so to avoid the reprisal that would have come from setting it squarely there on the steps of the Isaac Cathedral, which was likely the inspiration for the narrative of the Grand Inquisitor.

discreetly issued an order for Christ's arrest and, as Ivan recounts his "poem" to Alyosha, the story unfolds in the Inquisitor's interrogation of Jesus Christ. He accuses Christ of having brought freedom to human beings, "the dearest of all things to you." This, he says, is the one thing human beings fear most and the church has spent fifteen hundred years working to ease this unbearable burden. And now Jesus had the audacity to return. "We corrected your deed and based it on *miracle*, *mystery*, and *authority*. And mankind rejoiced that they were once more led like sheep, and that at last such a terrible gift, which had brought them so much suffering, had been taken from their hearts. Tell me, were we right in teaching and doing so? Have we not, indeed, loved mankind, in so humbly recognizing their impotence, in so lovingly alleviating their burden and allowing their feeble nature even to sin, with our permission? Why have you come to interfere with us now?" Christ is silent throughout the interrogation.

The "fifth gospel", Dostoevsky's gospel to the Church, *is* the gospel critiquing the many ways miracle, mystery and authority have side-tracked the Church's gift of proclaiming the freedom and liberty that flow from a life transfigured in and through Jesus Christ. "For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only *use* not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" as the Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians (5:13). A temptation we face as Christians, nowhere perhaps more tempting than for those of us who love the Church, invites us to turn away from the spiritual disciplines that temper the fears and appetites that bind us. We yield to this temptation when we offer a simulacrum of theological Orthodoxy wrapped in the "skins"⁴ of miracle, mystery and authority. It is a common temptation to turn the Gospel into an ideology rooted in fear or appetite. Just as Saint Gregory in his time reflected in his oration on Saint Athanasios, the temple may need to be cleansed of "God-hucksters and Christ-peddlers,"⁵ those who use the language and authority of the Church in the manner of the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor, and do so for the maintenance of misguided authority instead of calling forth that liberty which heals the enmity in the world.

The Rhythm and Purpose of a Liturgical Life. We live in an era preoccupied with individual rights and freedoms, a modern accent of no small consequence. When we gather to offer the Divine Liturgy, we bring the wounds of the world before the mercy of God. In an era when so many of our fellows, including some within the church, have withdrawn into ideological silos and fraternities of like-mindedness, we gather to remember "the least of these" and we stand with our fellow sinners, "of whom I am first." In an era preoccupied with singing the praises of the latest human achievements and personal accomplishment, many of which are worthy, we gather to remember our creaturely glory as "the image and likeness of God." Calling to mind the gift of the life, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the pathways to holiness we gather with the great cloud of witnesses and offer our confession and pray for healing; we gather to open again the wellsprings of praise, a renewed attentiveness to the Spirit "who is everywhere present and filleth all things."

⁴ "Ambiguum 10", *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers, The Ambigua*, Maximos the Confessor, edited and translated by Nicholas Constas (Cambridge Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2014 :151 and following.

⁵ "Ambiguum 12, *Ibid*: 347-349.

And we gather “for the life of the world”, a gathering that renews our personhood in relationship to others, restoring us to life and “being as communion.”⁶

The rhythm of the liturgical life weans us from a world of our own making and nurtures us with the divine Word. It teaches “us to see who would not learn to look,” restoring us to communion with God, others, and our created being. This is the existential trinity. The rhythm of the liturgical life is a discipline and invitation, turning us from fear and contempt to empathy and communion, from projection to contemplation, from self-absorption to the wonder of the unfolding of divine presence. This movement of our minds and hearts, offered in and through the liturgical life, restores us again to our created nature, to each other and to the life of the world. The discipline of liturgy tunes us to hear the wonder of God’s creation. This, or so it seems to me, is the ultimate gift we offer. It comes as always as the gift of restored presence.

Personhood in the Age of Biology. The twentieth century has been called the “age of physics.” Among its many gifts and diseases were nuclear weapons, nuclear energy, and nuclear medicine. It also gave birth to the human genome project, genetic medicine, quantum mechanics, neurobiology, artificial intelligence, the new media, and human rights legislation along with other gifts and challenges. As these developments moved forward the question of what it means to be human, a central theological question, fell into the centre: what does it mean to be a person? Thus, various scholars, public intellectuals, theologians, and scientists have pointed out that the twenty-first century is likely to be called the “age of biology” and, for this reason alone, it will be a century of renewed theological thinking and will demand a renewed engagement in the intellectual and spiritual formation of the young in a world where the Christian tradition’s understanding of the person has been reframed by various forms of modernity. Maximus the Confessor and the finest Orthodox thinkers on the human nature, the origin of estrangement, personhood, and a life of communion, offer us a stance, clarity, and freedom to consider the challenges of what some call our “post-human” world. These twenty-first century challenges include various disembodied techniques such as the virtual reality, artificial intelligence, genetic medicine, issues of religious freedom and responsibility, as well as the intermingling of religion, state, and nationalism. Each deserves full attention. The current and coming generation of Orthodox scholars building on the neo-patristic renaissance we inherit have an opportunity to speak a new pastoral word to each of these challenges, an appropriate word of affirmation, healing, discipline, caution, and, in some cases, careful but firm critique in light of Orthodox anthropology. Along with redoubling our engagement with patristic sources and precisely because of it, we can, without fear, engage the issues and themes arising from these scientific, social and cultural changes. A two-pronged approach is needed: deeper patristic engagement in the theology of the spiritual life, and, a new literacy. We do not need to be specialists in the various challenges coming to meet us but we do need to have a working knowledge of them and their implications. A course in the philosophy of science, its gifts and limits is needed, along with opportunities to learn about and understand each of these challenges and bring what we learn into conversation with Orthodox understanding of the human person, our suffering and mortality, our telos and our life in communion with the other.

⁶ *Being as Communion*, John D. Zizioulas (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985) and Olivier Clement, *On Human Being, A Spiritual Anthropology* (London, New York, Manila: New City, 2000). The work of Dumitru Staniloae made a seminal contribution to the renewal of Orthodox understanding of the spiritual life and the centrality of communion. See his *Orthodox Spirituality*, trans. Archimandrite Jerome and Otilia Kloos (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2002).

The Image and Likeness of God. We are called into being through God’s freedom and joy. We are meant to be. In a world where so many see life solely through the prism of alienation this “Good News” is a surprise and opens pathways toward the joy of freedom. This is the first gift we have been given by the Holy Spirit to share with our students, our neighbours and the life of the world. The world of identity politics, hyper-individualism, all idealized notions of who one is or ought to be, the whole world of advertising, these way of understanding oneself lose their hold when we not only proclaim but respond to those we come to know as the image of God.

The new genetic medicine opens a remarkable opportunity to heal genetic diseases, even in the womb. Genetic medicine is a singular gift. It also tempts us to seek “human enhancement” and presumed perfection. The Orthodox doctrine of the human person offers ground upon which to stand in the face of such opportunities and to distinguish between healing and a movement out of our finitude into dangerous fantasies of the super-human and post-human. While there is no place in the Orthodox understanding of the human person to romanticize suffering it does open ways to understand our suffering and the suffering of others, our finitude and dying as no longer holding us in bondage since all human experience is held in the redemptive life of Jesus Christ. The Incarnation announced the glory of our creatureliness, of our finitude; it offered us the freedom to enter into the life given to us with ease and joy. We are freed through the Incarnation to be present to what is and to eschew idealized phantasies and utopian dreams.

God’s Beautiful and Fragile World. The world, indeed the cosmos, is the play of the divine energy. While we have despoiled it and brought about the ecological crisis through our disordered spiritual appetites it remains God’s beautiful world. We created this crisis. We can turn around, the *metanoia* the Apostle Paul spoke beautifully about, and step onto the pathway of restoration. Science and technological innovation can help. But central to this turning around is the recovery of modesty, humility, and our longing to be in the world with all that “in wisdom” God has created. Cynicism, selfishness, and anomie are transformed when we see the world as the play of God’s wisdom and delight. We are called through communion to the divine delight and the holy work of restoring the life of the world. This is our primary vocation, rooted in our baptism as priests of creation, blessing and healing our broken world

“Creation as Sacrament” is a word our world longs to hear. The work of the Ecumenical Patriarch in *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*⁷ provides a blue-print for the range of themes we have the opportunity to address out of the heart of our living-tradition. Are we ready to get on with this life-giving opportunity?

The Gift of Askesis and Recovering the World. Awakening to the wonder of the world and the joy of human encounter requires disciplines that clear our minds and hearts, disciplines that make room for others, that make room by attending to a world not of our making.

We live in a world where knowledge is buried under a steady stream of information, where personhood is covered over with presumed identities. The new communication technologies respond to our appetites and feed us – loop us in – based on who we “appear” to be and wish to associate with. The algorithms that drive the new media often are designed to extend and deepen our passions.

⁷ *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, edited by David Bentley Hart and John Chryssavgis (Boston: Holy Cross, 2020). Also see John Chryssavgis, *Creation as Sacrament, Reflections on Ecology and Spirituality* (London: T&T Clark, 2019).

Tragically, where the cacophony of the mind and heart fill our inner life there is no room for God, for others, for the life of the beautiful and wonderful world in which we live. As the apostle Paul taught us, “all long for God”, it is written on our hearts because we are made for communion, not for the incestuous colonization of our appetites, spiritual, intellectual and sensual. We are made for encounter and presence, not for Twitter or Facebook or all the other apps that subvert the soul’s inclination toward communion.

Our spiritual fathers and mothers knew about this habit of creating presumed identities. We have inherited the disciplines of askesis to help us move from creating the world in our own image to a life of communion with the new life coming to greet us. Are we able to teach these disciplines to those who unconsciously long to move from the virtual to the encounter in communion?

Ideologies or a Theology of the Spiritual Life. Ideologies appear to dominate our cultural and political life. They have come, also, to nest in the church, adopted as a simulacrum of theological orthodoxy. Ideologies arise from and shine a spot light on our fears and diseases. They draw us near to the like-minded, to those who share the disease. All ideologies are necessarily oppositional: those on the political right and left, those pitting secular and religious perspectives against each other. Ideologies are co-dependent twins, enemies feeding each other. The modern heresies our church faces – hyper-nationalism, various forms of fundamentalism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia – pull us deeper into the precincts of fear and enmity⁸. Moral absolutes, self-righteousness, the desire to protect and extend power and control are the opposite of the mind of Christ. Ideologies reveal the landscape of our passions, and our theology of the spiritual life helps us to diagnose these passions and administer healing.

Saint Maximos the Confessor, whose name graces the church on the campus of the Arad Theological faculty, has taught us with care and depth that peace and joy animate the mind and heart when askesis has taken root. All our relationships move toward “chastity, humility, patience and love.” Spiritual discipline breaks the habit born of a “spirit of idleness, curiosity, ambition and idle talk.”⁹ Drawing near to God frees us from the captivity of all ideologies and opens the pathways of joyful presence. It is this presence we witness in Jesus Christ in the Gospel narratives. Enemies become friends. The oil of gladness anoints our wounds. What was brittle and shaped by enmity becomes supple again and enmity turns to empathy.

Philokalia. And that is why, or so it seems to me, the gifts of our spiritual disciplines and the theology that follows from these gifts are far too important to be left to theologians: it is a gift for the restoration of God’s world. Romania’s fine theologian, Dumitru Staniloae¹⁰, reflecting on his prison experience, said, “I realize that our theology had been too abstract and theoretical. We needed to be closer to the people in our teaching, nearer to where they really are. I decided that I would always try to be nearer to people and their present predicaments in my writing.” He asked himself, as

⁸ Cyril Hovorun has written persuasively about this in *Political Orthodoxies, The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018) and *Scaffolds of the Church, Toward Poststructural Ecclesiology* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017).

⁹ “Prayer of Saint Ephrem”, *Three Prayers*, Olivier Clement, trans. Michael Breck (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000:71-84.

¹⁰ A.M. Allchin’s obituary for Dumitru Staniloae, *Sobornost* 16:1 (1994): 38-44.

we ought, “What would the people of my old village [in our cities, nation and world] have made of this?” If there was ever a time to bring this question forward for our students and also into parishes, into the public square, into universities and board rooms, it is now. This is the work of *philokalia*, the work to pull forward the love of the good and the beautiful which hold hands in the depth of our personhood, the work that in the best of Orthodox teaching is the *telos* of all creation. The world is crying for such teaching. Those who have gone before in the Faculty of Theology at Arad, we give thanks. For those who have inherited their mantle and drawn near our common vocation for the life of the world and do so with joy, we hold dear in gratitude.

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