

Towards Another Understanding of Dogmatic Theology

By Achilleas Dellopoulos*

It is an undeniable truth that the character of our current dogmatic theology has to adapt to the conditions of a rapidly changing world. This adaptation, which will definitely enable the contemporary society to get in touch with theology – demanding related terms, doesn't mean that it will be done at the expense of its doctrinal truth.

The doctrinal truth, in terms of the Holy Trinity, the incarnated Logos, who has two natures corresponding both the human and the divine and one hypostasis, given that he is the one Son of God and Logos who becomes human at *eschata* deifying the human kind, stays immutable. The question raised in this connection is to what extent do the people participate to this theology and which are the consequences of this phenomenon.

Obviously, referring to people, we don't mean the experts who dispose the specialized knowledge, the scientists and theologians but the Church members who seek a meaningful theology regardless of specialized dogmatic terms.

How could the theology of today correspond to these structural needs of the new Church members? How could the whole dogmatic doctrine be presented nowadays without the classic terms? To this crucial subject tries to respond our article proposing a different way of understanding dogmatic theology based on the content of life and not on the terms or the formulations.

When the truth of the Church regarding the Holy Trinity, the relation between the persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the person

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of Christ and his double nature, began to be formulated as dogma, the people of that era were familiar with the language with reference to terms, such as essence, hypostasis, etc.

Besides, sifting through our ecclesiastical tradition from the apostolic era until the Ecumenical Councils, (third and fourth century A.C.), it is observed that the whole dogmatic truth was experienced in the Church even though the symbolic monuments had not yet been written. The dogmatic formulas ought to have been written with a stunning accuracy and precision because of heresy which threatened the Orthodox faith. If Church hadn't been living the content of faith in its liturgical praxis, in the mysteries, she couldn't have been able to determine with such an accuracy its dogmas. As Prof. Nikos Matsoukas has said: "life always precedes its formulation"¹.

Twenty centuries later, the dogmatic truth stays undisputed and embedded. Nevertheless, the Orthodox seem not to be able to conceive the dogmatic language. Moreover, it seems that they are totally unable to keep up with these formulas facing severe obstacles regarding the perception of these terms.

Taking into account these basic changes, the modern theology can and must meet this great challenge by using a constructive theology, namely, by explaining the content of faith and neglecting, if it is permitted to say, in the interpretation, the accuracy of terms. In this perspective, the biblical and dogmatic theology is not at all abandoned. On the contrary, it is of great importance to use the remarkable examples from the Church Fathers who explain the relation among the persons of the Holy Trinity.

Most of these examples come from the field of nature and can be easily conceived from Church members. Copying with this theme, the Church writers characterize the Father as the source of light, the Son as the light itself, and the Holy Spirit as the ray of light². With this meaningful example is highlighted in the best way the dogmatic truth concerning the consubstantiality of the persons of the Holy Trinity without specialized terms and formulas which keep most of the people off the content of faith.

1. N. A. Matsoukas, *Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology*, vol. 3, P. Pournaras Publications, Thessaloniki 2001, p. 129.

2. John of Damascus, *Contra Manichaeos*, PG 94, 1509C.

The miracle of nature inspires the Church writers' contemplation providing them with the necessary images which reflect both the unity and the trinity of God. Thus, the Father is considered as the source of water, the Son as the water, and the Holy Spirit as the flow of water. In this regard, specialized knowledge of dogmatic theology is not at all required to perceive how the persons are united and divided because the example is enlightened and sufficient. It extends, we would claim, the believer's imagination by offering him the possibility to study the beauty of creation and rediscover the Creator.

Saint Maximus the Confessor in this context says that the beauty and harmony of creation reveals the Creator³. The prerequisite for the view and understanding of God, who is hidden with a mystical way in all his creatures is the clearness of the eyes, a gift granted from the Holy Spirit to those who try to make their nature perceptive to divine light. Besides, Saint Gregory Palamas notes that nobody is able to approach the uncreated Creator, unless he perceives creation.

That's why, observing the nature, note the Church Fathers, the human being approaches the conception of the Holy Trinity. Observing for example, a rose and smelling it, a man sees that among the rose, its smell and its source, that is, the rosebush, there is an unbreakable union even though there are three different things⁴. Similar descriptions abound in the patristic bibliography not only in the field of creation but also in the field of the construction of human being.

If we think, for example, the mechanism of meditation, oral speech, and intelligence, we will definitely acknowledge the perichoresis or intermingling of three separate functions in the human brain. However, the man always reacts, conceives, thinks and talks as one⁵. This function depicts *mutatis mutandis* the relation between the persons of Trinity. The Father as the mind, the Son as Logos, and the Holy Spirit. The main difference lies in the fact that mind, logos, and spirit in the Trinity are Hypostases.

What better way to achieve the conception of faith than by using notable examples leading to thoroughgoing comprehension of faith? This path

3. Maximus the Confessor, *De Variis Difficilibus Locis*, PG 91, 1129A.

4. John of Damascus, *ibid.*, PG 94, 1513A.

5. *Ibid.*, PG 94, 1513A.

can also be used in the field of Christology. John Damascene's theology provides many of suitable examples illustrating the dogmatic truth of Christ's double nature. A notable example drawn not only from nature but also from the experience of human life is that of the incandescent knife.

In the red-hot knife we have two essences, the essence of fire and the essence of iron. The fire itself burns and the iron cuts. Although we have two natures with two consequential energies, we don't have two knives but one. This doesn't mean that the difference of the two natures is vanished. The same happens *mutatis mutandis* in Christ. Even though there are two natures with two consequential energies, the divine and the human, the hypostasis is unique and one in two natures⁶.

Concerning the relation between the two natures, the *perichoresis* happens through the divine nature because the divine nature pervades all while nothing penetrates it. Furthermore, it transmits constantly in the flesh the divine energy staying absolutely pure and immune from the passion of the flesh. Precisely like the sun which constantly transmits his energies to us staying untouched by ours⁷.

If this is happening with the sun, man can imagine how it would be with the Creator of the sun and Lord of the universe⁸. Without these examples, whose meaningful interpretation stays beyond doubt, the Christological dogma would not be in any case understandable. Neither the richness of human nature stemming from the divine nature of Logos through *perichoresis* nor the veneration of Lord's flesh would be explainable.

In this regard, the traditional difficult terms regarding Christology are to comprehend through examples. Otherwise, it would be extremely difficult to point out that the Lord's flesh is not to be venerated itself but only through the unity with the Deity. Just as man feels fear to touch a glowing coal because of the fire united with the wood, so too is the Lord's flesh regenerated its union with the Deity⁹.

6. John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, PG 94, 1053CD-1056A.

7. *Ibid.*, 1012C.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 1013C.

Conveying ideas through examples is far more effective than teaching dogmatic theology using traditional terminology. The qualified success of this procedure has long been acknowledged and it's high time we changed it once and for all. We can firstly quote the examples and then, according to their understanding, we can explain the traditional dogmatic terms. Last but not least, there is in this concept the term *θέωσις* (*theosis*), which according to Saint Gregory Palamas, cannot be easily grasped. Despite being frequently mentioned and expressed, its deeper meaning remains unrevealed¹⁰.

It has been wisely mentioned that abstract situations, like *life* and *theosis*, are not to be defined because a definition always excludes something relevant. Therefore, a description of what a Saint has lived and said will reveal some of the results of God's presence without limiting its energies. For example, when Symeon the New Theologian talks about his apocalyptic visions, he presents God as light, as lighting which captures his mentality and all his sensory organs making him astonishingly surprised¹¹. Then, follow tears from his eyes proving this was not of course Saint's achievement but the gift from Holy Spirit's grace¹².

Both Gregory Palamas and Symeon the New Theologian avoid to determine *theosis*. Especially, the latter, whose texts are argely filled with apocalyptic visions, stresses the results of his experiences with a particular focus on the holistic transformation of human nature¹³. What a deified man feels, Symeon underlines in his *Catecheses*, is this perennial peace, which Paul determines as the peace which prevails and is above comprehension¹⁴.

Consequently, *theosis* coincides with internal peace, called *apatheia*, donated by God as a divine attribute. As a result, the most dominant attribute a deified man receives is peace. This means that he is free from divisions and willing to conciliate with everyone.

10. Gregory Palamas, *In favor of the Holy Hesychasts*, 3,1, 32, ed. P. Christou, *Gregory Palamas' Writings*, vol. A', Thessaloniki 1962, p. 664.

11. Symeon the New Theologian, *Catechesae* XVII, SC 104, 30-40.

12. *Ibid.*, *Catechesae* XXIX, SC 113, 195-200.

13. *Hymn* XXX, SC 174, 263-267.

14. *Philip*. 4, 7.

This is exactly, according to our point of view, the theology we seek for today, the theology of conciliation. The threat of division is constant, dominant, and persevering, and has penetrated all sectors of life. Apart from divisions abounded in the political and social milieu, we have recently observed, since 2016, when the Pan-Orthodox Council took place in Crete, the difficulties and divisions that have arisen harming the unity of the Church.

When the division arises, the uncontrolled passion of authority, power, leadership and primacy, dominate. It's the seem of devil which flourishes in the soul of uncultivated persons who are prone to hegemony, determined to rule no matter perilous that might be. Symeon the New Theologian in one of his *Catecheses* notes that the burden of leadership shouldn't be shouldered from a man who furiously pursues his target of becoming a leader. Addressing to monks, he notes that a skilled and dexterous ruler is the one who managed to reconcile with God.

In light of these criteria, the theology needed both in the Church and in the world is one that will always be on the verge of condemning the division regardless of the prestigious position it might has. This will be feasible if we rediscover our tradition, if we reexamine the texts of the Church Fathers, particularlry those addressing with the most perilous problem, which is in all its forms.

The most relevant person, who has written in detail about the forms of division, is the prominent theologian and leading figure of the Church, Saint Maximus the Confessor, who lived in sixth century A.D. According to his theology there are four fundamental divisions that must be healed the human being: the division between God and man and wife¹⁵, paradise and earth¹⁶, tangible and intelligible beings¹⁷.

Having been created by his Creator as a laboratory of cohesion¹⁸, given that he is made of both soul and body, he is absolutely skillful to make a scientific dialogue with the visible and invisible part of the world in order to comprehend that the world is one and unique without the division in

15. Maximus the Confessor, *De Variis Difficilibus Locis*, PG 91, 1305C.

16. *Ibid.*, PG 91, 1305D.

17. *Ibid.*, PG 91, 1308A.

18. *Ibid.*, PG 91, 1305A.

paradise and earth. Better to say that this world, where we live, is the paradise in its unity. The more united the person is, the more indivisible he sees the mystery of creation.

Therefore, having perceived the undivided mystery of creation, which depicts mystically the Creator, he is now able to operate, to behave as a lab of cohesion providing everywhere unity and peace. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God”¹⁹.

To sum up, we strongly believe that the so called *ethos* of Orthodoxy embraces the other, fights for justice and freedom, condemns war, atrocities and violation of human rights and in this way carries a tremendous impact within and outside the Orthodox Church, on believers and non-believers reminding the first centuries of Christianity when nothing belonged to nobody but everything was common and all Christians united celebrated the kingdom of heaven as if it was already present.

19. *Matth.* 5, 9.