

Dogmatics of the Orthodox Church

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Preface to

“Dogmatics of the Orthodox Church

THE ORTHODOX PHILOSOPHY OF TRUTH

By Archimandrite Justin Popovich

Ερώ τοιγαρούν εμόν ουδέν τα τε σποράδην
θείοις τε και σοφοίς ανδράσι λελεγμένα,
συλλήβδην εκθήσομαι.

I shall say nothing of my own, but I shall set down
summarily things which have been said in various
places by wise and godly men.

—St. John Damascene[1]

On the path from nonbeing to All-being, man travels through God’s miraculous mysteries adorned in wondrous forms of created matter and spirit. The further he is from nonbeing and the closer to All-being, the hungrier he becomes for deathlessness and sinlessness, the thirstier for changelessness and eternity. But sin oppressively pulls him toward nonbeing and, through death, greedily robs the soul. Life’s entire wisdom is to defeat nonbeing within and without, and to submerge oneself fully in All-being. This wisdom is taught by the philosophy of the Holy Spirit; it is wisdom and knowledge—indeed, it is the grace-filled wisdom and grace-filled knowledge concerning the nature of being, the focus of which is knowledge of things divine and human, of things visible and invisible. The philosophy of the Holy Spirit is at the same time the moral creative force which, through man’s becoming like God by way of ascetic, grace-filled advancement,

multiplies his divine understanding of God, the world and humanity. This ethical character of Orthodox philosophy is emphasized by St. John Damascene when he says, “Philosophy is the making of one’s self like God (ὁμοιοῦσθαι θεῷ),” and as a result, “it is the art of arts and the science of sciences (τέχνη τεχνῶν και επιστήμη επιστημῶν).”² As the life-creating philosophy of the Holy Spirit, it is the only art capable of fashioning a God-like and Christ-like person out of the diverse and complex human being; and as the science of the Holy Spirit, it is the only science capable of teaching the self-absorbed and mortalized creature called man how to defeat death and obtain immortality. That is why Orthodox philosophy is the art of arts and science of sciences.

The philosophy of the Holy Spirit is made of eternal truths about God, the world, and man, which in the evangelical language of the Church are called dogmas. Therefore, Dogmatics is the philosophy and science of God’s eternal truths, which have been revealed to man so that they may become incarnated in people’s lives and fulfill the eternal meaning of people’s existence—their arduous voyage from nonbeing to All-being. But it is obvious that contemporary man’s sense of immortality and eternity is paralyzed, and that his knowledge of the eternity and divine-humanity of everything human is darkened. Having been lulled to sleep and taken captive by metaphysical and ethical relativism, contemporary man usually ends in an all-encompassing nihilism. When one awakens from the nightmarish sleep of relativism, but merely detects the miraculous reality of the eternal and death-one always finds within oneself power to take wing and soar toward the eternal truth concerning the world and man. The instant the eternal problem arises in man’s soul, he immediately experiences terrible and unquenchable yearning for eternal truth. Then the mer-less feelings of hunger and thirst for knowledge hound him through the desert of life toward the oasis where eternal truths grow, and where springs of living water murmur smoothly into eternal life. In this new disposition, man transforms himself into a yearning arrow traveling toward that which is deathless and eternal, divine and holy. He is heading from things human to things divine-human. And if divine life flows into his soul by way of God’s truths, within him thrives life—deathless and eternal—because life and truth, eternal life and eternal truth, are one and the same in their divine-human reality. I am the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), proclaimed the wondrous Lord Jesus, because only in Him are these three one and of one essence; while outside of Him there is neither a way to the eternal, nor truth about the eternal, nor life in the eternal. That is what makes His Divine-human Person unique and irreplaceable. In everything belonging to Christ, this indivisible trinity reigns: the way, the truth, and the life. In every dogma of the Lord Christ these three are always one and indivisible, because each dogma is a path leading through eternal truth into eternal

life. That is why in dogmas everything is infinity, immortality, and eternity, and nothing is transient, mortal, or fictitious.

Eternity and God-manhood are the one and only category of New Testament life and thought; hence dogmas as everlasting truths are always eternal and divine-human. Energizing his thinking by a grace-filled, evangelical life, man steadily ascends from one eternal truth to the second, from the second to the third, and so forth, through countless others, toward the peak of all peaks, finally fulfilling the Kingdom of God in the plenitude of his existence, knowledge and

that is the password to evangelical, divine-human, and eternal truths of Christ, the Orthodox man through knowledge, his will, his sentiments, and his life from everything corrupt, ephemeral, relative, and mortal. Immersing himself in everything holy, everlasting, absolute, and eternal, he revives himself. Through a grace-filled ascetic struggle he thoroughly conquers the sin-loving, self-absorbed and anthropocentric old man within, in the name of the God-man Who is always sinless, alive in God, centered in God. In his joyous striving towards the God-man, the Christ-yearning man grows in thought and life, descends to all depths, and expands into all expanses—so thoroughly does he grow with God toward divine-human heights (which are beyond reach of the relativist-nihilistic understanding), where the wonder-working Lord Jesus is all in all for our thought, soul, feeling, and life.

The mystery of the Truth is neither in things, nor in ideas, nor in symbols, but in the Person, namely the Divine-human Person of the Lord Christ—I am the Truth. The all-perfect Truth: never diminished, never changing, always one and the same in perfect fullness, always one and the same, yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). The Truth: always eternal, even within time; always infinite, even within the finite; always immortal, even within the mortal. All other truths originate from this Truth as rays from the sun; that is why they are also eternal and immortal. In fact, all dogmas constitute one and only one Truth the God-man Lord Christ. They all lead to Him because they originate from Him; they all lead to Him just as every ray of sunshine leads to the sun. If man would only begin to follow to its source the truth about the good, then he would inevitably come to the Lord Christ, Creator and Origin. If he follows the truth of righteousness, again he inevitably led to the Lord Christ as its Source and its Creator. If he is searching for the truths of life, of the world, of eternity, of love, of perfection, of charity, of grace, of joy, of humility, of hope, of prayer, of faith—he always comes to the Lord Christ as the only Source and Creator. He who is led by Orthodox philosophy feels and comprehends

with all his being that there is nothing relative either on this side of the grave or the other; with his entire soul and throughout his life's struggles, trials, and experiences, he flows into infinity and eternity—Christ's infinity and eternity.

Eternal dogmatic truths are neither abstract concepts, nor syllogistic conclusions, nor logical hypotheses. Rather, they are events and experiences with historic immediacy and reality, because they have been proclaimed, revealed, seen, heard, and have occurred in space and time among people. For example, the dogma of the Holy Trinity is an eternal truth, proclaimed to the world through many Old Testament and New Testament prophecies, events, and experiences; the dogma of the God-man Christ is founded on the historic existence of the God-man Jesus of Nazareth; the dogma of the Resurrection is the historic fact of the Resurrection of Christ. What applies to these dogmas, applies to all other dogmas, since all of them, from the first to the last, are established on historic reality—testified by eye-witnesses without any doubt. If a person considers without bias the content and the meaning of the dogmas of the New Testament, he will have to realize that all of them represent, and also are, divine and divine-human facts occurring within the limits of time and space. People may not be able to comprehend them, but they cannot dispute them. It is a reality that the stubborn opponents of God deny the facts themselves, even when they see them with their own eyes. The Pharisees are classic examples of this and are the prototype of all Pharisees of all times. They dispute and negate facts simply because they are facts, because they do not want facts to be facts, and they try with all their might to transform facts into hypotheses, into illusions, into fictions.

Dogmatics is a mosaic of its own kind. It sorts and classifies eternal dogmatic truths according to their attributes and according to the light that they emit, so that, within the mosaic of these eternal truths, the image of Christ is obtained, which is actually the full image of the Revelations of both the Old and New Testaments. Dogmatic truths are in all their aspects divine, limitless, boundless, and eternal, since they originate from the limitless, boundless, and eternal God. By their nature they cannot have their provenance from man, and they cannot be according to man. Here the human being does not create, because humans do not have in themselves the powers and forces to create eternal and limitless truths, but rather they receive them from God in their finished form. Human creativity in this respect consists in accepting the eternal dogmatic truths in faith and transforming them into one's own life, thinking, and feeling through grace-filled evangelical struggles, thus achieving holiness and perfection. In this respect the Holy Fathers

are the living incarnation of eternal dogmatic truths. They are the possessors of the holy dogmatic truth, and as such they are its preachers and confessors. An Orthodox dogmatician must go to the saints for all dogmatic truths and learn from them, not forgetting that communication with them is only achieved by means of prayer, fasting, and vigil. It follows that the work of the Orthodox dogmatician is ascetical and diverse. It is an ascetic struggle primarily because the Orthodox man learns from the saints by means of holy struggles in prayerful reverence and awe before the bearers of God's eternal truths. In the introduction to his dogmatic discourse *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, St. John Damascene established, once and for all, the guiding principle for Orthodox dogmaticians: "I shall say nothing of my own, but I shall set down summarily things which have been said in various places by wise and godly men." In quoting these words of the great and holy theologian, I remain in my unworthiness and lowliness, and I hardly dare say that I used the same principle in my work. I also add with fervent sincerity that in respect to him, St. John Damascene, and to all the Fathers of the Church—the philosophers of the Holy Spirit—I remain deaf and dumb. I only stammer out (oh, if I could only recite clearly!) God's eternal truths taken from the great Fathers, great in holiness and wisdom, and primarily from the wonderful musician of holy truths, St. John Damascene. If anything in this work of mine is good, evangelical, and Orthodox, it belongs to him and them, and everything that is contrary belongs to me and only me. I

have also learned much from the more recent great dogmaticians: Metropolitan Macarius, Bishop Sylvester, and Metropolitan Anthony. In my work I have also considered the works of other Orthodox dogmaticians of recent times: Archbishop Philaret, Archimandrite Anthony, Protopresbyter Malinovsky, Zikos Rosis, Androutsos, Dyovouniotis, and Protopresbyter Stevan Veselinovich.

I have to make special mention that I was sometimes forced in my humble efforts to create new dogmatic terminology which we lacked,³ or which, if it existed, had not been completely worked out.

The first volume of *Dogmatics* includes everything up to Christology. The rest—from Christology to eschatology—I will publish, if God allows, soon.

The Feast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, The Year of Our Lord 1932
Hieromonk Justin

EDITOR'S NOTE: For information on the original publication of Fr. Justin's Dogmatics in Serbian, see p. 221 above.

An English translation of Dogmatics was initiated by Dr. Nikola Kostic, and is now being carried on by Vladimir Maricic. With God's help, an English translation of the entire work will be published by the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood.

A collection of articles by Fr. Justin in English is also being prepared. Entitled Man and the God-man, it will be published by Sebastian Press, the publishing house of the Western American Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Notes

1. Dialectics!, *Patrologiae Graecae*, vol. 94 (Paris, 1864), col. 533A; cf. St. John of Damascus, *Writings* (N.Y.: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1958), p. 10.
2. *Ibid.* 3, *Patrologiae Graecae* 94:533BC; *Writings*, p. 11.
3. That is, in the Serbian language.—ED.