

Studies in Patrology III

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A saint once said, “Without the early church fathers and their teachings and sufferings we would not have the same one true faith shared by the chosen Apostles which was originally taken from the Lord Jesus Christ.

I. **The Role of the Church Fathers in Orthodox Education:**

The Christian Orthodox education, especially Dogma’s and moral behavior, is challenging and yet so vital.

Therefore, we see these Church Fathers imparting knowledge extensively in Orthodox education that still remains unchanged and has been the corner stone of Christian Dogma throughout the centuries. Father George Florofsky, who is one of the great Patrology scholars, said that the study of the Church Fathers is not simply the history of Christian writings but is the science of Patrological Theology. The Orthodox education established by the early Fathers reflects the truth that is derived from the Holy Gospel and the pure and holy life to which all church members aspire.

The Church Fathers are not the True Light but reflected the Light of Truth in their teachings to further understanding and to diminish rational doubting. St Paul, the Apostle, prophesied concerning the role of the Church Fathers. “And with joy give thanks to the Father, who has made you fir to have your share of what God has reserved for His people in the Kingdom of Light.” (Colossians 1:12)

II. **The Role of the Church Fathers’ in Correct Interpretation of God’s Holy Word:**

In the Second Holy Epistle of St Peter, the Apostle, (3:16), he explains that there are some difficult things which ignorant and unstable people explain falsely, so they bring on their own destruction.

Throughout the years, some ignorant and illiterate people explained some Holy Gospel verses wrong. However, we through our Church Fathers have maintained the True Faith and correct explanation/interpretation of all the Holy Bible Books. Much of the early Church Fathers’ writings centered on explaining scripture found within the Holy Bible and how those verses were applicable to the believer’s life. Through the early Church Fathers we are blessed with explanations and meanings spiritually and literally for all the Holy Books of the Bible.

St Basil, the Great, said, “in the Church Fathers explanations of the Holy Bible we will find an understandable explanation which may be mystical, physical, or spiritual. We will find these holy explanations assist to raise our hearts and minds to God and help us grow spiritually.”

Truly, we have Fathers who specialized in writing interpretations of the Holy Bible such as St Athansius, the Apostolic (explained the Holy Book of Psalms), St John Chrysostom (every Holy Book of the Gospels), St Augustine and so on.

III. **The Role of the Church Fathers’ in Teaching About Daily Behavior:**

Our faithful Church Fathers wrote their teachings, letters, books, defenses, and recorded ministry in response to the urgent needs of the believers at their time. The early writings were the response and reflected the needs characteristic of personal problems and an ever-changing community. In their

writings we have teachings related to problems and solutions given for these problems. Problems were addressed based on how they affected ones' spiritual life and growth.

Such problems as richness and materialism were identified. St Clement, the Alexandrian, wrote a lengthy manuscript "Does the Rich Man Have Salvation? How? The scholar Tertullian, from North Africa, ardently believed and wrote that patience and praying were the holy means that connected us to the Lord. He further wrote that believers should abstain from fun and types of entertainment, which took ones' focus away from God. He addressed such issues as how the Christian woman should dress.

St Gregorian, the Theologian, wrote regarding such selected topics as "denying the Lord Jesus Christ as a result of fear and societal pressure. St Athanasius, the Apostolic, wrote about the Incarnation. St Basil, the Great, wrote to the youth of his day encouraging them to read and study Greek literature, anger, drunkenness, envy, and humbleness.

St Gregorian, the Nicean, completed the manuscript of St Basil concerning the "Creation of Man", and "The Luck, The Understanding, The Knowledge and Death of Children."

St John Chrysostom wrote in detail regarding the priesthood and repentance. Also St John wrote about mental thinking and concentration on the pure holy life. He offered his advice to young widows, instructed parents on the raising of children, and wrote about extinguishing materialism and squandering ones' life. Finally, St John Chrysostom addressed how marital couples should live life together in a pure and holy manner.

St Isidorus, the Pliosophy, wrote about two thousand messages centering on such topics as dressing, hospitality, humbleness, luck, lusts, and the life of holiness. He wrote for soldiers, teachers, scholars, politicians, physicians' kings, monks and priests. St Isidorus was the spiritual father for many thousands of people, among them St Cyril the Great.

St Ambrosius authored topics concerning those ordained for the holy services. St Augustine wrote about the eternal life of man, the scholars, and the useful works of the monks.

All the above-mentioned authors and topics are not inclusive but are a select few. Their writings reflect the richness of their teachings that have transcended time and place. Indeed they show us the way for meeting the Lord.

IV. **The Fathers and Orthodox Spirituality:**

For man to spiritually live according to God's law and be close to God is not easy. To accomplish a truly spiritual life man needs teachers, scholars, advisors, trainers, and counselors. The Church Fathers were not just literal or theoretical such as Aflaton and other non-Christian philosophers, but they offered the mystical life, which included the holy pure means of connecting man to God on the basis of pure love to God.

The Church Fathers offered the mystical life beyond the literacy, theory, or feelings. In addition, they offered through the spiritual, peace through the mystical life that began from the Light and ended in Divine Love. This mystical life remains a continual renewal; it is the holiness of the spirit in truth (John 17:17).

So the role of the Church Fathers in our spiritual life can be summarized as:

1. The goal of our Christian life is to be one with God. This goal's objective is to share in the Divine Nature, "In this way He has given us the very great and precious gifts He promised, so that by means of these gifts you may escape from the destructive lust that is in the world and may come to share the Divine Nature." (II Peter 1:4) This goal may be found in the entire Fathers' writings as mentioned by St Athanasius, the Apostolic. God's Son became man's Son to make everyone sons of God by His Grace.
2. The sharing of the Divine Nature cannot be achieved by our own human wills on trial. The Holy Grace is the fundamental and the basic principal in renewing and correction of our lives. "We believe and are saved by the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, just as they are." (Acts 15:11). All Apostolic Fathers and their children such as St John Chrysostom, the scholar Clement the Alexandrian, St Ephraim the Syrian, and many others taught the same principal—we as humans should choose the holiness first and then Grace will complete us in a way deemed necessary for us. St John Chrysostom said, "God doesn't work beyond our will to preserve our freedom, otherwise our freedom will be destroyed."
3. The spiritual life cannot be achieved without prayer. The Church Fathers' prayers were a continuous conversation with God. Prayers were recited with joy. The Church Fathers' prayers can direct us to internal perfect peace and deep spiritual joy. St John said, "The words of deep pure prayer are like the fire you ignite before God."
4. The Christian must partake in the Church Mysteries. This must be spiritual not simply ritual. The Fathers considered the Church's Mysteries as a living and continuous work and not only ritual work. We do not encounter meaningless symbols but spiritual living work, which leads us to the Divine Nature.
5. Spiritual life cannot be completed with sharing the saints—those saints were not theory creators about faith but they lived out this faith on a daily basis. We can consider the saints our personal teachers, counselors, and advisors as they lived before us and lived in this world but the world did not live within them. Faith without works and works without faith are not acceptable in our beloved Church. Therefore each and every Christian should work and suffer, "So that we may share His Holiness." (Hebrews 12:10)

V. **The Role of the Church Fathers' in Religious Raising:**

In the Orthodox Church there is no distinction between religious raising and the so-called secular raising. Secular raising is the result of religious reform in the West. The goal of the Orthodox Church is promoting the true Christian life through which the Lord Jesus Christ appears to the world. So the Church raises the human being to think, work, live, and grow according to God's will. The Church views the man resembling God.

Therefore the Church recreates man to be "sharing the Divine Nature and to be a perfect man." (Ephesians 4:13) The Church is not only a religious endeavor but in truth is the holy crucified body of the Lord Jesus Christ who has risen between the dead, so it is visible and mystical, physical and divine at the same time and without separation.

We are in need of the mystical spiritual life as detailed by the Church Fathers and Church. The Fathers translated the Holy Gospel into a mystical written work throughout the Divine Liturgy, which sanctifies the human beings.

We should understand then, these profound and holy mystical services and not consider them ritual only. We need Orthodox Theology in our Churches. Orthodox Theology can lead to a balanced life and can reflect the richness and reality of the Orthodox faith regardless of corruption.

The Church through the Fathers built many churches in a specific type of architectural design with icons expressing many theological facts. In this manner, the Church offered an open book expressing our Orthodox faith to be read even by those who cannot read. Further, the Church made hymns that express theological teachings of our Fathers and arranged it into musical notes, which encourage the spirit to fly in the worship to Heaven.

Also the Church took flowers from gardens and made incense to teach man about prayer, the true spiritual Joy, and the good aroma of the Lord Jesus Christ. Wax was taken from honeybee hives and candles formed to teach man about the Light of the Lord Jesus Christ which shines upon all. It took the threads and made the priests white clothes to teach man the life of holiness and pureness. In summary, the Church makes the entire Universe a holy altar of worship to God.

VI. **Applicable Examples From Our Fathers:**

The Fathers offered themselves as living examples of holy Christian life. They built their life on stories. St John Chrysostom said, “The words of those Fathers reach the hearts of the audiences faster than hot steel.”

As we live in the world, which is full of corruption, we need to desire to be as the Church Fathers examples and to live life as they have lived. St Agnatio, The Theoforian, said, “I will choose the Lord Jesus Christ. I want to give all that I have to have Him. I want to be as wheat and ground for His sake. I want to give all things to have the Lord. St Gregory the Theologian, ordained as a bishop, had only 17 Christian believers in his parish. After his holy life in the service there were only 17 non-believers in his parish at his departure. St John Chrysostom stated, “There is one person who when he has a true love to God can change the whole city to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Another example, St Athanasius, in his life suffered much for his only goal, the Truth and became one of the few heroes of the Orthodox Dogma.

St John Chrysostom, another applicable example, lived a pure and holy life, taking care of his shepherds, his priests and his contacts. He was indeed a true living picture of the Lord Jesus Christ.

All of the Fathers lived in our world and overcame Satan and worldly lusts. They abided by the Holy Gospel and became a living Gospel. St Isidorus the Pleosomy, said, “They worked according to their words and talked through their works.”

Their goals were not making miracles but their life to be a miracle preaching the Lord Jesus Christ, “Whoever obeys the Law and teaches others to do the same will be great in the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Matthew 5:19). This is the secret of the Church Fathers greatness and persistence in our life. They lived the Holy Gospel and witnessed for the Lord Jesus Christ.