

The Church Fathers and Us

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

There are two opposing currents regarding the Church Fathers, often clashing heatedly. One advocates following the Fathers' teachings in all matters, considering any deviation from them, any new interpretation of their pronouncements, or even any confrontation with new doctrinal challenges, as a form of heresy and a departure from Orthodoxy. Some adherents of this current even accuse those who disagree with them as being heretics. The other current, however, considers itself modern and contemporary, seeing no need for the Fathers. It views them as something antiquated, outdated, from the past, or a mere bright spot in history. Followers of this current focus on the present, its realities, and its challenges. They embrace the theological teachings of other churches, disregarding the rich ecclesiastical heritage of ours.

One current venerates the Fathers while the other disregards their importance. Which is correct? In truth, both are mistaken, for they proceed from incorrect premises, confining the Church Fathers to the past alone and neglecting the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit and His sanctifying action in the purified, the enlightened, and the divine.

The teachers among the Church Fathers linked the life of holiness with theological knowledge. They were not theorists, even though they explained and interpreted, and some of them went to extremes in one area or another. They were not founders of philosophical or even theological schools of thought. They did not start from the philosophical thought they had mastered, but rather placed it at the service of faith, adapting it to express the truth they found in Christ. They spoke in language appropriate to their time. The Church needs to explain and interpret the faith to each generation in language it understands, and the Fathers excelled at this.

We may find among some, especially those in a time distant from us, a difficult language for us, a style we do not appreciate, or positions that do not align with our current scientific, social, or political understandings. This stems from the differences in methods, theories, concepts, and challenges between our time and

theirs. In truth, we cannot speak of them collectively, for they are not a monolithic entity in every respect. Each carries the language, concepts, sciences, customs, and culture of their own era. They may differ in their stance on a particular ecclesiastical issue, as has happened repeatedly throughout church history, but they do not differ in the fundamentals of the faith. Let us recall the differing positions taken by the Apostles Paul and Peter, and how they resolved them at the Apostolic Council (Acts 15).

In fifteenth-century Russia, a major debate took place between Saints Joseph and Nilus, to the point that monks of that period were called either Josephites or Nilusites. The point of contention centered on the ownership of monasteries. Should monks have the right to own land and institutions? The Josephites argued for their right to ownership in order to dedicate it to serving the poor, while the Nilusites rejected this out of respect for the spirit of monastic poverty and the complete detachment they had vowed.

The brilliance and holiness of the Fathers lay in preparing themselves for God's work within them and in their ability to re-evangelize the people of their time with the true Gospel, or what we call today "evangelization." This word, derived from "Gospel," means planting the Gospel in the present society, or applying theology in the "here and now." The Church is called, in every time and place, to use the language of the people to whom it proclaims the Gospel and to explain it to them.

Some limit the era of the Church Fathers to the first eight centuries. This is not Orthodox teaching, to say the least, for it implies that the Holy Spirit ceased to work after the eighth century. This is not true. God remains present in His Church and will continue to be active in it for all eternity. God has never failed to provide His Church with Holy Fathers who nourish humanity with sound teaching and true spiritual sustenance. Thus, we see the chain of transmission continuing from the days of the Apostles and St. Ignatius of Antioch in the first century, up to St. Sophrony the Athonite (of Essex).

If we study each Father individually and compare the teachings of any two of them who lived in different eras, we will find a single core of faith expressed in different ways. Certainly, a Father in our current century will face challenges that were not

faced by the Fathers of previous centuries. The issues raised today were not relevant in previous centuries. Consider, for example, the relationship between the Bible and ancient cultures, the issues of the biological sciences, political and social theories, changes of moral values, and so on. After the 17th century, humanity began a new approach to intellectual inquiry, and science has developed significantly since then. This scientific progress has instilled in the human mind a critical approach to everything. Those concerned with education must take these factors into account in order to safeguard the faith, protect believers, and guide those who are far from it.

Should the Church refrain from addressing contemporary challenges simply because the early Church Fathers did not discuss them since they were not relevant in their time?

The problem lies not so much in the theological approach itself, but rather in the way we approach theology. Theological discourse has never been separated from divine vision in the Orthodox Church specifically. Therefore, its fundamental tenet is "the theologian is the one who prays." When people are sanctified, pass through the stage of purification, and attain enlightenment, God dwells within them, and they draw from His light, which illuminates their mind, enabling them to express Him in a manner appropriate to their time. And if they teach those who are not yet enlightened, they rely on the teachings of the sanctified and follow their path of holiness. Theological teaching is not a particular intellectual framework. The Church is not a philosophical school. It is similar to someone who speaks of love because they have tasted it, known it, and experienced it.

For the Fathers, the ascetic life and prayer were intertwined with the gift of teaching, guidance, and interpretation. What they offered, and continue to offer, to the Church and the world is the product of lived experience, not intellectual theorizing influenced by this or that philosophical school.

Fidelity to the Fathers requires us not to cherry-pick their teachings, that is, not to take a saying here and another there to prove a preconceived notion or refute a position we deem deviant. Rather, we should engage with them through what our Church theologians call "the patristic mind" or "patristic consciousness." The

Church is "patristic" in the sense that the teachings of its Fathers are fundamental to understanding its theology, spirituality, and mentality, and therefore it cannot do without them. Living in the company of the Fathers means emulating their relationship with Christ and the virtuous lives they led, drawing deeply from their teachings.

When you live according to the true spirit of the Church, you acquire an Orthodox, or "patristic," sense through which you perceive everything, which also alerts you to errors. But you don't acquire this alone; rather, it comes within the church community with which you live in unity of faith. The community protects you from extremism or excess and thus helps you to remain upright.