

Lecture by metropolitan Elpidophoros of Bursa

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on Orthodox spirituality

If we claim to retain the sacrament of the altar, we cannot forgo or forget the sacrament of the neighbor – a fundamental condition for realizing God's Word

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THE WORD OF GOD IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

SACRED SCRIPTURE AND ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

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Allow me, first of all, to note that for a long time the opinion prevailed among theological circles and beyond that the study of Sacred Scripture was not synonymous with spirituality. And conversely: that spirituality does not spring from the study of Holy Scripture, but from frequent participation in the sacred services of worship, from monastic asceticism, from noetic prayer, and so forth.

Yet, since these biases have long been rejected both in the East and in the West (1), I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the organizers for the successful combination of these two important elements, namely spirituality and Scripture, and proceed with the exposition of my subject.

From the outset and by way of introduction, I wish to state categorically that there can be no true or authentic Orthodox spirituality and way of life that is not based upon and inspired by Holy Scripture. Without any doubt, Holy Scripture serves as the source, beginning and foundation of that which is called Orthodox spirituality. Orthodox spirituality does not merely consist of beautiful ideas, sublime thoughts and pleasant reflections; rather, it is a balanced and authentic ecclesial ethos, a pure life style, an upright manner, a precise attitude and way of life (2).

The phrase "Sacred Scripture" (???? ?????) is the most convenient, familiar and preferred terminology adopted in the Orthodox Eastern Church, in contrast to the term "Bible." Holy Scripture comprises the totality of the known and inspired books of the Old and the New Testaments (3). The fifty books of the Old Testament are separated into historical, poetical, instructional and prophetic. The twenty-seven books of the New Testament are separated into historical, instructional and prophetic or apocalyptic.

The Apostle Paul refers to "holy scriptures"(4) and "sacred writings;"(5) he also observes: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."(6) Inspired by God, Holy Scripture is also

trustworthy, remarkable, memorable and certainly most worthy of study. Holy Scripture does not contain falsehoods, vaguenesses, untruths and “gray areas,” as we would say today. It approaches and appeals to each one of us in a simple manner in order to deposit the great truths and mysteries of God. Moreover, Holy Scripture is authentic, containing an abundance of the grace of the Holy Spirit that safeguards her authors from whatever inauthentic rendition of divine revelation.

Holy Scripture may be perceived as a personal letter from God to every faithful Christian. It is the salutary and redemptive word of God. The all-benevolent God condescends to the ear of the believer and reveals His secrets for spiritual ascent and progress. All books convey information, but the Holy Scriptures convey transformation; they are transfiguration to the receptive human being. God reveals His will to us through the Holy Scriptures. The only-begotten Son and Word of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, “became flesh and dwelt among us”(7) for the sake of our salvation. Our Lord Jesus Christ, “the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared Him,”(8) and has made known to us his Father. The Son and Word of God was incarnate and entered human history in order to transfigure the unstable world. He inaugurated his kingdom for the salvation of his beloved creation. He did not abandon the fallen humanity after ascending to heaven, but continues to reign in the sanctifying and saving Church, which is the Body of the living Christ. Those baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity become members of this indivisible body, whose Head is Christ himself. These living members are nourished by his inexhaustible body and blood shared through the mystery of the Holy Eucharist.

Nonetheless, besides the mystical nourishment of the Holy Eucharist, the nurturing mother Church also offers to the faithful the heavenly Word of God that is essential to the establishment of faith. The principal task of the Church, her most beloved ministry, is the offering not only of the Lord's body and blood in the eucharistic and mystical supper at every divine liturgy, but also of his divine Word, the sacred preaching of the Gospel, contained and revealed in Holy Scripture.

Here I wish to recall the words of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, when he was invited to address the XIIth Ordinary General Assembly of Roman Catholic Bishops. This was the first occasion in history that an Ecumenical Patriarch was offered the opportunity to address a Roman Catholic Synod of Bishops. On that occasion, His All-Holiness declared: “The Church needs to rediscover the Word of God in every generation, and to make it heard with a renewed vigour and persuasion also in our contemporary world, which, deep in its heart, thirsts for God's message of peace, hope and charity”(9).

The prophetic, apostolic and evangelical passages, which are recited during the sacred liturgical services and the Divine Liturgies are the best opportunities for a substantial and well-prepared sermon to be delivered by a devout preacher. Unfortunately, however, sometimes the sacred pulpit is distorted into a teleoptic window, where the preacher of the Gospel expresses in exalted terms his personal opinions about fleeting current events; or else, he might point out with animosity the errors of those considered “enemies,” again failing to convey the evangelical message that bears the aroma and truth of eternity. People do not come to church to hear yet another opinion about contemporary events; they come to be empowered, consoled, encouraged and cultivated spiritually (10).

The word of Holy Scripture is indeed timeless; it belongs to the ages and yet is always timely. It is, after all, the essential and life-giving Word of God that responds forcefully to the fundamental questions of young people, to the existential problems of all human beings. I believe that Holy Scripture should not be studied as any other book that merely satisfies our reason. It provides solid food for the soul. Its study resembles prayer. It is *the Book par excellence* of the Church, the Body of Jesus Christ. “The Christian Church is, above all, a scriptural Church. Although methods of interpretation may have varied from Church Father to Church Father, from ‘school’ to ‘school’ and from East to West, nevertheless, Scripture was always received as a living reality and not a dead book,” as Patriarch Bartholomew said in the aforementioned address (11). This is precisely why Sacred Scripture can be understood and interpreted correctly only when one acquires the “mind of Christ,”(12) as St. Paul reminds us. This implies the acquisition of an authentic ecclesial mentality, such as this exists in the sacred tradition of the Church and is expressed and reflected by our God-bearing Fathers (13). The study of Sacred Scripture with such a mentality and with these presuppositions can offer strength to our personal struggle; it provides courage to the life and direction of Orthodox spirituality. Anyone who approaches Holy Scripture in this manner will agree with the prophet-king David who said: “How sweet to my taste are your teachings, more than honey and the honeycomb in my mouth”(14).

The systematic, continuous and in-depth study of Holy Scripture will inform us that our shepherd is the most benevolent God, our Creator, while we are the rational sheep that receives God's blessing, the gift and the opportunity to be led and guided by the Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ. Into His flock, namely the Church, we entered through Baptism. And our pastoral care in the Church is never-ending. Within this flock, we find protection, security, benevolence and fearlessness. Self-shepherding is always dangerous, leading to isolation and error. The crucified and resurrected Christ is the selfless and self-sacrificing shepherd who does not suffer from vanity, self-aggrandizement or concealed arrogance. The shepherd must be wise, clear, good, pure, true, honorable, sincere, solid and full of love. Orthodox spiritual life cannot but possess all of these characteristics. If it contains any signs of unwise conceit, impurity of egotism, lack of genuineness or sincerity, bitterness and resentment, or perhaps feigned humility that incubates a false pharisaic attitude

and hypocritical talk about love, then what we have is an unholy performance, a well-presented theatre, which sooner or later will expose the mask-bearing actor as a fraudulent distorter of the spiritual life.

The devil and his cohorts work with every available means to alter, distort and disfigure the truth; the devil and his cohorts make every possible effort to remove altogether the sacredness of the unique and unrepeatable human person in order to distance us from the life-giving Word of God. But such "... evil is only eradicated by holiness, not by harshness; and holiness introduces into society a seed that heals and transforms," as Patriarch Bartholomew concludes (15). Sometimes spiritual radiance, peaceful serenity, meekness, purity and authentic joyfulness can speak more powerfully than the eloquent words of passionate sermons. As St. Ignatius of Antioch says: "The words [of such a person] have the force of actions and his silence the power of speech."

The success of great works does not depend so much upon the dexterity, art, and rhetorical power, as it does upon the blessing of God. Without the divine assistance and empowerment, human endeavors are reduced to mere vanities. In this regard, the most powerful weapon in the struggle against evil is prayer (16). Trust and reliance upon God provide tremendous security. This is the lesson and recommendation of the evangelical way of life, which never disappoints the humble person who embarks upon its journey.

Orthodox spirituality is not the ability to stand upon a high pulpit, the loud applause for some extraordinary achievement, or a form of nirvana that does not even exist in Orthodoxy; nor again is it some impeccable condition or passivity, an immobility or perfection. Perfection in Orthodox spirituality is an endless journey, according to St. Gregory of Nyssa. The spiritual struggle is constant and never-ending, persistent and life-long. In such a struggle there will be delays, backsliding, failures, hesitations, interruptions and deviations. This is why we have the evangelical truth of *metanoia* – repentance, change of mind, a new beginning, the sincere restoration of human life by divine grace (17). Repentance has nothing to do with anxious embarrassment and feelings of guilt, but rather with an acknowledgment of sinfulness, the acceptance of inadequacy and the profound desire to be reunited with Christ. It is an opportunity for self-examination, self-knowledge in recognizing captivity to ungodly passions or deprivation of godly virtues, the desperate need to be liberated from sins. Our return to God will always find the open arms of the expectant and loving Father, who is ready to embrace and fervently kiss the prodigal son.

Christ said: "I am the truth!"(18). His word is altogether true. Indeed, it is truth itself, since he is also love itself. This is why we must always and everywhere speak "in truth and in love." In our times, the Word of God is not generally acceptable to people. Hearts are tightly shut; they are hardened, often like stone. People's ears, too, are shut. The numerous thorny concerns of daily life, according to the evangelical parable, are very strong obstacles. There are, of course, also many hearts with good disposition, hearts that are pliable and blessed. With such hearts, any human weakness can be laid before the holiness of the Word of God in order to allow the Holy Spirit to manifest the meaning of Sacred Scripture and guides one to the eternal truth. Beyond the many dense words of the mass media, which provide us with daily information and news bulletins, the need for the life-bearing Word of God remains most urgent. Let us hope that there will always be those "who have the ears to hear"(19).

St. Paul exhorts his disciple Timothy: "You should be watchful in all things ..." (20). In so doing, he is motivating Timothy to be constantly vigilant in spirit so that he may overcome the passions and become secure, in the best possible sense, in his spiritual nature. Here, I believe, lies the essence of Orthodox spirituality: namely in watchfulness, purity, and vigilance that extend everywhere, always and over all things. Only in this way can contemporary humanity find peace. Man must see himself clearly; he must confront his internal conflicts; and he must fill his emptiness. Christ has established this truth in a powerful manner: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"(21). Only the pure, then, will behold the face of God in the heavenly kingdom. Not the externally clean, the selectively pure, those who are merely or pretentiously or externally clean, but rather those who are altogether pure in heart, in thought, imagination, activity and intention. The fundamental presupposition to acquire the vision of God, according to St. Maximus the Confessor, is purity. St. Basil the Great says that the impure person is unable to accept the divine energy. St. Gregory Palamas emphasizes the following point: "If we can say that God has a weakness, we must say that he, as the pure one, will not dwell among unclean things." And for St. Gregory of Nyssa abstention from every evil and an attitude of passionless are tantamount to purity.

The Orthodox spiritual life renders the heart of the believer merciful, satisfied, serene, graceful and peaceful. The authentic practitioner of Orthodox spirituality is Christianized; that is to say, he makes the life of Christ his own life, as the blessed Elder Sophronios Zacharoff says. It is then that the believer can truly become *theophoros*, *christophoros* and *pneumatophoros* – God-bearer, Christ-bearer, and Spirit-bearer.

At this point, I believe that it is important to clarify the meaning of Orthodox spirituality, inasmuch as many foreign elements have infiltrated from time to time to create serious misinterpretations. Spirituality is the grace of life in the Holy Spirit. It is a life purged by the Holy Spirit after a struggle for purity. By purity, we do not mean some sterile ethic with defined external criteria. A truly spiritual person is one who is adorned by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In the spiritual life, what matters is not so much what one thinks or imagines, what one wants to be or what one believes one is, but rather what in fact a person truly is. It is dangerous and dubious to use as a criterion how we feel psychologically or sentimentally; this is by no means a precise indicator of a person's actual spiritual condition. The spiritual life is not what

is pleasing to a person, what one finds comfort in or what one delights in. Such an individualistic spirituality is self-centered and selfish inasmuch as it seeks to please the self, to create its own leisure, which results in spiritual indolence and indifference.

Such an inauthentic spirituality can thrive equally in the East as well as in the West. Easy smiles, polite exchanges, sentimental sermons, painless recipes: all of these are readily disseminated to create a pleasant psychological uplifting that may even be considered spiritual by some. However, in this way, one only fools one's soul with illusions; in this way, one will never taste of the mature fruit of a healthy Orthodox spirituality. Attending church services, praying in the traditional manner, and studying Sacred Scripture are more indicative of religiosity rather than of spirituality. Often spirituality is identified with having profound thoughts and reflections about God or else with being emotionally moved by these. But as already observed, in the Orthodox East, authentic spirituality has more to do with the gifts of the Spirit (22).

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are not weapons with which to confront enemies, resembling some powerful panoply; instead, they are gifts of love that are showered upon humble and honorable strugglers. The Church has always been troubled by and suffered from self-proclaimed saviors, from presumed spiritual leaders with unholy ambitions and achievements. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are not granted in order for one to prevail over or oppressing others, but rather for one to advance spiritually and to serve others. The Church has the sacred mission of approaching human beings existentially and lovingly in order to teach others how to love and be loved, in order to heal others and teach them to accept others, to be in communion with others and inspire them to change. As we read in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*: "Within the communion of Saints, each of us is called to 'become like fire,' to touch the world with the mystical force of God's Word, so that – as the extended Body of Christ – the world, too, might say: 'Someone touched me!' (Matt. 9:20)"(23).

Often in Christianity a kind of puritanical spirituality has prevailed, one which at times influenced the East, where certain religious organizations gave great significance to manners of external behavior, which resulted in much weariness and suffering for many. Such puritanical spirituality of former decades was presented as counter-balance to another, more psychological spirituality. However, both of these spiritualities are considerably alienated from the very precious essence of Orthodox spirituality. For Orthodox spirituality is concerned deeply about the whole person struggling and engaging in asceticism, although never rendering asceticism as a goal in itself. After all, asceticism is only a means to achieve the ultimate goal, which is restoration, renewal and transfiguration of the old person. This is what St. Seraphim of Sarov understood as the acquisition of the all-powerful Holy Spirit. This visitation of divine grace is not determined by man from below, but by God from above.

Sometimes people are jealous of their brother, who receives priority or preference, who repents more profoundly or tastes the fruit of the Spirit sooner. Indeed, sometimes, like the elder brother in the familiar parable of the return of the prodigal, some people even argue with their heavenly Father. This is why the basic and significant criterion for measuring progress in Orthodox spiritual life is the cultivation of love. The New Testament is replete with hymns, statements and exhortations regarding the acquisition and cultivation of love. Love is the essence of God's energy and activities. The more we love, the more we resemble God, who Himself is love. The truth is that although we struggle to learn how to love truly, we normally do not want to love the other person as he or she is; we first want to change other persons as we imagine or want them to be. Allowing space for the other, honoring the other, listening to the other, respecting the other, following the other, supporting the other, and being patient with the other – all of these are essential characteristics of true love.

Thus, the criterion of a truly spiritual person is whether or not that person loves truly, selflessly, sacrificially, and in general as the Lord Jesus Christ loves. The role of Christian asceticism is to soften the stony heart, to provide a sort of integrity, balance and roundedness, so that we may roll toward others, so that we may have contrition and compunction when we see our passions. Then, we can be more com-passionate, more forbearing, more forgiving, more tolerant with and genuinely loving toward others, namely with our fellow sinful brothers and sisters.

In a homily addressing those who delay their Baptism, St. Gregory of Nyssa notes that our love for God is reflected in the good disposition we manifest toward our brothers; this love is our salvation and the cultivation of the virtues. In order to follow the upward and the narrow way of Orthodox spirituality, we must thoroughly study the Sacred Scriptures as well as its true interpreters, the holy Fathers; we also need to be genuine, courageous, patient and above all humble. Moreover, we must abandon ourselves entirely to the grace and mercy of the all-benevolent God. We must surrender to the one who loved us to the utmost extreme, long before we did. Any love we reserve for God is demonstrated practically through our love for others, through actions of charity. Then, we can speak about Orthodox spirituality and about love as the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The goal of Orthodox spirituality is sanctification and holiness. We must be careful not to overlook or abandon this goal, assuming a myriad of other activities that are foreign to the true nature and purpose of spirituality. A deep sense of gratitude and consolation, thanksgiving and praise reflect our spiritual nobility, the magnificence of what in Greek we might call *philotimon* – namely, a sense of love and honor, a sense of dignity and nobility that distinguishes an adopted son. When criticized for not being able clearly to see the tangible presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of our Church, it is not sufficient simply to enumerate the names of contemporary saints; we must also include our own personal experiences of the Holy Spirit. All of these things are not exclusive prerogatives of clergy and ascetic monks, but of all

persons baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity. St. Maximus the Confessor claims that those who regulate their life according to the divine laws are received by God in a mystical way as members of His own family.

We must also remember that Orthodox Hesychasm is inspired by Sacred Scripture, just as it is strengthened and supported by the sacramental life of the Church. This is how the human person is united to God. This spiritual unity transcends all knowledge; it is what directs spiritual perfection into existence. During the hesychastic controversies of the 14th century, the conflict of scholasticism and rationalism with Orthodoxy and *orthopraxy* was in fact an encounter of humanity with God through the divine and uncreated energies. Orthodox theological thought reveals to a sublime degree how Orthodox spirituality is profoundly connected with divine worship, an authentic.

Sometimes we must also fearlessly welcome self-criticism. The Church contains the fullness of the truth. Yet, we cannot always prove this truth. The task of the Church is to maintain and proclaim without adulteration the revealed truth by presenting a synthesis of the Orthodox doctrine and the Christian ethos in all their authenticity, and to offer a witness to love, hope and conviction. Father Dumitru Staniloae writes: "The task of theology in our time is to give to humanity a supreme light for all the aspects of human life, an ultimate consolation, a steadfast conviction that their activities have indeed an essential meaning. Its purpose is to motivate people to participate full heatedly in these activities, with the conviction that they are working to carry out the plan of God, who calls the totality of creation toward its ultimate destiny"(25). The contribution of theology to humanity today and tomorrow is to help people acquire a new spirituality characterized by a radically Orthodox content.

As we are all aware, within historical Christendom, there exists the tragic phenomenon of disunity, which naturally creates serious problems. In this regard, the witness of the Orthodox Church is the witness of the living Christ, who came for the regeneration and salvation of the entire world. Above all, Orthodox Christianity offers a witness of truth and love, the witness of a unique truth and a unique love. In general, the world does not comprehend what it means to sacrifice the ego, to make selfishness disappear; as a result, it cannot experience the creative and selfless love of God. Nevertheless, in this fallen world, the authentic love of Christians can overcome the evil of the world. Faith and hope in God help us to grow wings; they make our love soar still higher. Thus, believers and followers of Christ are always *elpidophoroi* – that is to say, bearers of hope. Such a witness of godly love on the part of the faithful can never be simple theory, but rather entails sacrificial life. Such true life is the fruit of freedom that presupposes respect of the other person's freedom. The great love of God for all creation in no way diminishes human freedom. Unfortunately, there is much talk of freedom today, but those who talk about it are the very ones who trample upon freedom most crudely.

Exhausted by the endless concerns of a noisy and distracted life, contemporary humanity yearns for peace and quiet, both externally and internally. The witness of the Gospel truth and the silence of Orthodox spirituality are especially timely requirements. The powerful testimony of love, freedom and silence must be abundantly offered today by the Church to all those who desire salvation. This blessed offering is an obligation and a responsibility of the Church to all. Orthodoxy is ecumenical and must embrace all with love (26). In the words of St. Gregory the Theologian: "We do not seek to prevail, but to receive brothers, at whose separation we are devastated"(27). St. Gregory, our foremost theologian, reminds us that our purpose is not to win because our Lord has already gained the victory over the one that needed to be overcome. Our purpose now is to gain our brother and sister so that we may overcome the disunity that divides and devastates us. The witness of the Orthodox Church is the testimony of the salvation and regeneration of all. This is the message of Sacred Scripture; and this is the experience of Orthodox spirituality.

Permit me to conclude this presentation with the words of my Patriarch referring to one of his predecessors among the Saints: "As St. John Chrysostom reminds us, the sacrament of 'our neighbor' cannot be isolated from the sacrament of 'the altar' ... If we claim to retain the sacrament of the altar, we cannot forgo or forget the sacrament of the neighbor – a fundamental condition for realizing God's Word in the world within the life and mission of the Church"(28).

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(1) Cf. The Message of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the 19th Ecumenical International Conference on Orthodox Spirituality at Bose Monastery (September 7-10, 2011): "None of the spiritual principles and elements make sense or produce results without the fundamental principles espoused and expounded in the Holy Scriptures."

- (2) Op. cit. "...the Word of God is not simply something inspirational or influential. It is definitive and normative for the spiritual life, serving as "a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path." (Psalm 118:105)
- (3) P.N. Trembelas, ?????, ????, in *Religious and Ethical Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, Athens, 1964, p. 658.
- (4) Rom 1:2.
- (5) 2 Tim 3:15.
- (6) 2 Tim 3:16-17.
- (7) John 1:14.
- (8) John 1:18.
- (9) His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," The Vatican, October 18, 2008.
- (10) Monk Moses the Haghiorite, ??????? ?????????????? ????, ??????? (Christ grants joy to Christians), Athens, 2008, p. 116.
- (11) His Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Ibid*.
- (12) 1Cor 2:16.
- (13) "Scripture is the living testimony of a lived history about the relationship of a living God with a living people." His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Ibid*.
- (14) Psalm 118:103.
- (15) His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Ibid*.
- (16) "Imbued with life of the sacraments and the purity of prayer, we are able to enter the innermost mystery of God's Word." His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Ibid*.
- (17) "Yet for this spiritual revolution to occur, we must experience radical *metanoia* – a conversion of attitudes, habits and practices – for ways that we have misused or abused God's Word, God's gifts and God's creation." His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Ibid*.
- (18) John 14:6.
- (19) Archimandrite Chrysostom Papathanasiou, ? ???? ?????? ?????? ??????????, Athens, 2003, p. 33-36. Math 5:8.
- (20) 2 Tim 4:5.
- (21) Matt 5:8.
- (22) Protopresbyter Vasileios Thermos, ????? ???? ?????????????? ?????: ??? ? ?????? ?????????????????? in ?????????? 7/2011, p.444-445.
- (23) His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Ibid*.
- (25) Fr. Dumetru Staniloae, ?????????? ??? ??????????, Athens, 1989, p. 218.
- (26) George Mantzaridis, ????????? ?????, Thessaloniki, 1979, p. 299-300.
- (27) St. Gregory the Theologian, *Logos* 41, PG 36, 440B.
- (28) His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Ibid*.

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