

BLOW THE DUST OFF

by
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Beware of the doctrines of heretics, for they,
more than anything else, can arm the spirit
of blasphemy against you.

(Saint Isaac of Syria, *Homily 4*)

It was with great expectations and high hopes that we looked forward to entering the theological division of our seminary. After all those years in the college division, we were chomping at the bit to get into some serious theological studies.

One of the classes we were really looking forward to was the study of the New Testament, with a professor who had the reputation of being a very spiritual man. With eager anticipation and the naïve innocence of youth, we came to the class, fully expecting to delve into the deep things of our faith.

It was the Gospel of Saint John — the loftiest of all — that we were to study. Oh joy!!

As the sessions began, and the lessons fell into a pattern, one thing became very obvious to us. Our professor, an archimandrite, who had attended the theological school of the University of Athens, and had gone on to further studies in Germany, was a deep, a very deep, admirer of the very liberal Protestant scholar, Rudolf Bultmann.

It was Bultmann this, and Bultmann that, and the typical Western rationalism everywhere, and Bultmann's theory of "demythologizing" everything in the Holy Scriptures. That is to say, if something in the Holy Scriptures was described as being a miracle, it was "obvious" that it had been interpolated into the text by later authors; if it was a prophesy, it was "obvious" that it had been interpolated into the text *after* the (supposedly) prophesied event. Needless to say, no evidence was ever given for any of these speculations. It was always "self-evident" (to whom?).

In addition, our professor would often sprinkle his lectures with comments beginning with the phrase, "You Orthodox say *this*...." or, "You Orthodox believe *this*" We assumed that he was just being funny, or ironic. But one could never be certain, because the Orthodox answers he gave were feeble, and so we were left with the vague impression that our Orthodox beliefs had no real support anywhere.

Well, a number of us were getting pretty tired of this. We thought that this was, supposedly, an Orthodox Christian seminary.

So, one day, one of our braver classmates raised his hand in class.

"Father, may I ask a question?"

"Of course," responded the professor.

"Well, you are Greek. All of us here in the class are Greek. As you know, in this country, the Greeks have a reputation for knowing how to make money."

"What are you getting at?" asked the professor, with some irritation. I should add here that our professor had the reputation for being quite imperturbable and calm in dealing with various situations.

"Well," answered my classmate, "we are paying you *money* here (with the word "money" he pounded his fist on his desk) to teach us Orthodox theology."

At this point, the rest of the class — cowards that we were — ducked our heads behind our books, afraid to look up.

"If we wanted to hear what the Roman Catholics are saying," continued my fearless classmate, "we would go down the street and get it from the horse's mouth at Saint John's Seminary in Brighton. If we wanted to hear what the Protestants are teaching, we would go right to the primary source and attend classes at Boston University or Harvard. But we are paying you *money* here (at this point, he pounded his fist on his desk again) to teach us Orthodox theology."

We finally plucked up courage to take a glimpse at the professor. He was *very* angry from this frontal and very audacious (but thoroughly justified) attack. In those days, you always spoke to a professor with respect and deference. Finally, after a few moments, the professor regained his composure and, looking at my classmate with a steely gaze, he said, "If you want, you can go down to the library, and find what John Chrysostom [notice: not "*Saint*" John Chrysostom] has to say about what we are studying, and you may *blow* the dust off the books of his commentaries [here, he made as though he were blowing the dust off a book], and read them yourself. *I don't care what he says*," he ended with emphasis. After this, the class continued as before, as if nothing had happened.

Now, this professor, as I mentioned, was an archimandrite who stood before us at the Royal Gates in the holy services in church, and there would intone the ending prayers: "Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers...."

But, in the classroom, it was "*I don't care*" what the Holy Fathers say.

The really sad news about this is that, in a few months, this man became a bishop of the new calendar jurisdiction he belonged to.

There *is* some good news here, too. Seminarians who came after us tell us that this bishop mellowed in subsequent years. In those days, especially after Father John Romanides and Father John Meyendorff, it became fashionable to quote the Church Fathers, so he too would cite them in his classes, and was more circumspect in what he said. Maybe he had understood that he had overstepped himself, and had scandalized us. True, our classmate had been very provocative and brazen, but it was only out of frustration and desperation that he had acted in such an outspoken and audacious manner.

But the really frustrating thing is that we were encountering this same rationalistic, "Latin Captivity" approach in almost all our "theological" classes.

Our only recourse was to "blow the dust off" the books of the Holy Fathers and to start reading.