

NOT LICENSED THEOLOGIANS

By
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— The Firing Squad —

Some fifty years ago, when I was a student at the theological academy, our professor of Dogmatics, Father John Romanides, told us a story about *his* student days at the Theological School of the University of Athens.

In order to obtain his doctorate from the University, Father John, a newly ordained priest at that time [the 1950's], had to defend his dissertation before a panel of theological professors. The subject of his dissertation was "The Ancestral Sin" [meaning the sin of our ancestors, Adam and Eve; this is sometimes mistranslated into English as "the Original Sin"].

As various questions about his dissertation were being fired at him from the professors [all of whom had received their credentials at Roman Catholic or Protestant universities in Europe], Father John answered to the best of his considerable ability. Finally, the head of the theological department, the big gun himself, Dr. Panayiotis Trembelas, took aim at Father John, who, as is customary in these interrogations, was standing before the panel of seated professors.

"You have many citations in your dissertation from the writings of Symeon the New Theologian," said Dr. Trembelas.

"That is correct, Sir Professor," answered Father John, with the proper deference.

"You must delete them," continued Dr. Trembelas. "Symeon cannot be cited as a source in your work, because he never received a theological degree."

[Yes, you just read the foregoing sentence correctly.]

Without batting an eyelash at Trembelas' unbelievable remark, Father John answered calmly, "Very well, as you say, Sir Professor. Would you want me to delete also all my references to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John the Evangelists, since they, too, never received a theological degree? They, too, were not licensed theologians."

Stifled laughter could be heard coming from the panel of distinguished professors.

— The Latin Captivity —

Sadly, Trembelas' unfortunate remark was solid proof of an ailment that had long been, and still is, afflicting "Orthodox" theological schools. This ailment is known as "the Latin Captivity" — a history of some 200 years wherein the academic, scholastic, and pedantic "theology" [or more correctly, rationalism] of the West has carpeted the theological academies of the East like a big, wet, and cold blanket. Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky, Father George Florovsky and Father John Romanides complained about this spiritual plague repeatedly in their writings. In some places in Russia and Ukraine, this "Captivity" was so pervasive that even the theological lectures in "Orthodox" seminaries were given in Latin. On occasion, in these lands, seminarians were obliged to *preach* in Latin in the parishes! [Imagine the poor *bábushki* — the little grandmothers — who had to stand through this....]

With this in mind, one can begin to understand why "World Orthodoxy's" religious leaders today are so eager to unite with the non-Orthodox in the Ecumenical Movement. Just consider for a moment: if you believed that the Orthodox Church was so impoverished theologically that it did not even have a theology of the Holy Spirit [see my article, "We Celebrate Pentecost"], or had saints that were lacking in theological degrees and were not "licensed theologians"(!!), then you too would certainly feel attracted to other religious affiliations.

The Church has its traditional method of preparing its clergy, and this method has worked well for many centuries, even before seminaries were invented in the seventeenth century. As we

have mentioned on other occasions, Father George Florovsky, one of the most prominent Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century, never attended a theological academy as a student. His theological education was drawn *solely* from the sacred services. And, if you are going to be serious as a student of theology, then you can go on to "graduate studies," such as those described in the Dismissal Hymn for monastic saints: "By fasting, vigil and prayer thou didst obtain heavenly gifts" — like Saint Symeon the New Theologian (despite the fact that, according to Dr. Panayiotis Trembelas, the saint was not a "licensed theologian").

Unfortunately, the "Latin Captivity" is still very much in effect [one "Orthodox" seminary here in America even had a Roman Catholic clergyman teaching a course in the Church Fathers until recently; another "Orthodox" seminary in America has Roman Catholics on its Board of Directors]. Hence, "World Orthodoxy's" eager involvement in the Ecumenical Movement. One thing inexorably leads to another.

— The School of the Holy Spirit —

But, thank God! Orthodoxy still prevails in our hymnology and in the church services, and in the hearts of many of our clergy and faithful.

What, for instance, does the Dismissal Hymn of Pentecost teach us?

Blessed art Thou, O Christ our God,
Who hast shown forth the fishermen as
supremely wise,
By sending down upon them the Holy Spirit.....

Oh!

So, *that's* where Matthew, Mark, Luke and John got their theological degrees! From the School of the Holy Spirit.

I *knew* that Divine Grace was somehow involved in all this. No *wonder* we call our saints "God-inspired" and "God-bearing"! No *wonder* we run to them for healing of soul and body! No *wonder* we venerate their holy relics, and celebrate their memories, and ask for their intercessions! No *wonder* we revere people like Saint John of Kronstadt, and Saint Nectarios of Pentapolis, and the Prophet Elias, and Saint Seraphim of Sarov, and even Saint Symeon the New Theologian [even though he never got his theological degree from the university]!

— An Unimportant Footnote —

Some years ago, before I was ordained, I was going for a walk with one of the fathers at our Monastery in Brookline, Mass.

"So, you are a licensed theologian?" he asked.

"Well, I don't know. That's what they told me."

"So, what do you do with your license?" he asked again.

I thought for a few moments, and finally said, "Well, I try to make sure I'm wearing it when I go for a walk. That way, at least, I know that I won't be picked up by the dog pound."

— A Footnote of Some Importance —

There is a place in the Orthodox Church for theological "academies." However, they must be planned properly, with prayer and a lot of discretion. No educational system is foolproof, but if adhered to carefully, the Orthodox Church's "Three Levels of Christian Education," [see my previous article] are almost the perfect guideline for such a system. More on this later.