

Orthodoxy

By

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Professor Emeritus of Dogmatic, Moral and Comparative Theology
at St. Vladimir's Seminary



This article was an address delivered on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, March 7, 1971, at Ss. Constantine and Helen Cathedral, Cleveland Heights, Ohio. (*The Light of the World*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, pgs. 9-20)

Serge Verhovskoy's writings have been ignored by St. Vladimir's Seminary as well as by all other Orthodox new calendar jurisdictions because both what he taught and wrote does not support their ecumenical involvement. All the many seminarians who are now laity, priests and bishops were exposed to the teachings of the Orthodox Church through Verhovskoy's lectures; somehow, they have either forgotten or ignored his instructions and efforts to instill in them love for the Orthodox faith, the truth, the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church – the Orthodox Church. What was written in 1971 is applicable today, even more so, than in 1971.

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One hundred and twenty-three years ago, the Patriarch of Constantinople Anthimos VI wrote an encyclical letter to all Orthodox Christians, which was signed by all the patriarchs of the East and twenty-nine bishops. In this letter we find a passage that has deeply impressed both theologians and laity of our Church. It states:

In our Church, neither patriarchs nor councils could ever introduce any novelty, because the protector of the faith among us is the very body of the Church, that is, our people themselves, who always desire to preserve their faith unchanged and in agreement with the faith of the fathers.

Thus, our patriarchs have recognized the great importance of the laity in preserving the Orthodoxy of our Church. We know that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries our laity indeed, under the guidance of the best hierarchs, saved the Church of Constantinople and South Russia from the Latin Unia, even though many of our hierarchs at the time betrayed the Church. In general, the great majority of heresies were started not by the laity, but by representatives of the hierarchy.

The same encyclical contains many ideas directly concerning Orthodoxy. For example, at the end of the letter we read:

Brothers, our faith is not from man and not through man, but through the revelation of Jesus Christ, preached by the divine apostles, confirmed by the holy ecumenical councils, transmitted by the great and wise teachers of the universe and sealed by the blood of the holy martyrs. Let us keep the confession which we have received in its purity from all these men; let us reject any novelty as a suggestion of the devil. The Orthodox faith is perfect.

Patriarch Anthimos insists that whatever is sound in the faith of all heterodox they had originally received and kept from the Orthodox Church, but by accepting also false teaching, the heterodox had, in his words, "dug by their own hands a deep abyss between

themselves and the Orthodox." The patriarch does not hesitate to call the western teaching about the Holy Trinity a blasphemy. He writes that "so many western leaders try and have always tried to allure us by words of 'peace' and 'love,' which in fact are words of flattery and deceit." But until the heterodox accept the true faith and join our Church, he says, no real unity can exist between us and them.

The late Archbishop Michael (d. 1958) of the Greek Archdiocese has published in English another remarkable encyclical of another Patriarch of Constantinople, Anthimos VII, which was written at the very end of the last century and which preaches the same ideas. "Without unity in the faith, the desired union of the churches becomes impossible." Anthimos also considers it absolutely impossible for contradictory doctrines to coexist within the same Church. And, quoting St. Gregory of Nazianzen, one of the greatest fathers of our Church, the patriarch states: "If our Church has to defend the truth against errors, better is a praiseworthy war, than a peace which separates us from God."

The patriarch also proclaims that "it is manifest that the universal Church of God—which holds fast in its bosom unique, unadulterated and in its entirety the salutary faith, as a divine deposit, just as it was of old delivered and unfolded by the God-bearing fathers, who were moved by the Spirit, and formulated by them during the first nine centuries—is one and the same forever, and not manifold and varying with the passing of time, for Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." And he quotes St. Vincent of Lerins, a great Orthodox theologian of the West: "In the Orthodox Catholic Church we must especially take heed to hold that which has been believed everywhere, at all times, and by all."

When the holy patriarchs condemn novelties, however, they are certainly not defending a conservatism that excludes any development in the Church. Development is welcome; it is a sign of life. But it does not consist in the rejection of the eternal truth, which was once and for all revealed by God to the Church. As it was so well explained by St. Vincent, a truly Orthodox development must consist in an organic growth, which must be deeply rooted in the faith of the Church, in the Bible and in Holy Tradition.

Orthodoxy is nothing else but the total, sincerest faithfulness and dedication to the truth. The founder of the Church is our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the divine Logos (the Word), the personal revelation of God. He came into the world to reveal to us God, and the true nature and destiny of us men, and the perfect life which He has given to us. He called Himself the light of the world, the witness of the truth, and He said that He is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John,14:6). He came to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our steps onto the path of salvation. Where there is no truth, there is darkness and death.

If we recall century by century the history of our Church, we see that the first concern of the apostles, the fathers and the martyrs was to know the truth, to preserve it in absolute purity, to explain it in the right way and to establish the life of the Church and of all Christians on the foundation of this unique, divine truth. The martyrs preferred to die rather than to compromise. St. Maximus the Confessor, along with St. Martin, Pope of Rome, preferred tortures and death to the acceptance of error, which some of us probably consider of little importance. It would not be an exaggeration to say that our Church worships the truth, because the truth is God, and His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. "This is eternal life, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ Whom Thou hast sent," says the Lord (John 17:3).

Thus, the knowledge of truth coincides with the spiritual life; ignorance, and, even more than that, false knowledge, is spiritual death. How can we be in communion with God, in Whom and from Whom is all our perfection, if we do not know Him, or if our knowledge of Him

is wrong? How can we live in Christ if we do not know Him, or if we deform His image and teaching? How can we serve the Church if we do not know what the Church really is, or if we replace the true vision of the Church by our human imagination? How can we be moral if we have lost the true vision of man which God intended, or if we replace the true Christian ideal of life by the vicious immorality of modern disbelief or pseudo-Christianity?

In our Church, when we speak about knowledge, we do not speak about abstract theories. True knowledge is a participation in its object. To know God is to be in communion with Him; to know the Church is to live by the true reality of the Church; to know other men is to penetrate into their lives and to associate with them. Knowledge is absolutely necessary if we are to reasonably determine how we must live and what we can and must do. It is impossible to walk in darkness. True knowledge — knowledge acquired in the love of truth — is the first and greatest incentive and stimulation for living according to the truth. Christianity cannot inspire us if we have no knowledge of it. No one was ever saved walking in darkness. God, and Jesus Christ, is our Light.

I believe that true Orthodox Christians have a special grace from God, and this grace is love of Orthodoxy, that is, love of truth and love of the Church of truth. According to Patriarch Anthimos, Orthodox Christians are sealed by seven seals of the Holy Spirit, and they have been given a gift of obedience to truth. Thus, it is natural for an Orthodox Christian to accept the truth of Orthodoxy, being moved by faithfulness to God, Who is the truth and from Whom any truth is derived, or being moved by faithfulness to the Church, which, according to St. Paul, is "the house of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). It is not, however, sufficient to accept some truth only because it belongs to our family or national tradition.

There is a definite analogy between the attitude of a modern scientist and that of a Christian toward knowledge of truth. For the scientist, to know the truth means to know the reality of the material or organic world; for the Christian, to know the truth means to know what God and the spiritual world really are. In both instances, it is not a matter of someone's opinions or theories, but of reality itself. Nevertheless, the value of theology is often reduced to various doctrines, which are considered as having some authority or simply being interesting — as if the primary value of theology did not consist in giving Christians a vision and an explanation of the divine and spiritual existence itself! We need to know, and we can know, God, Jesus Christ, the Church and Christian ideals of life as they are objectively, in themselves, and not just human theories about them.

The teaching of Christ is the main source of our knowledge. Christ says that He knows God and His truth directly, and that He would be a liar if He denied it (John 8:55). St. Luke based his gospel on the information that he received from "eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word" (Luke 1:1-2). St. John the Theologian starts his famous First Epistle with the following statement: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life — the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us. This is the message we have heard from Him and proclaim to you, that God is light" (1 John 1:1-3, 5). And St. Paul has the same consciousness: "I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11-12).

Thus, New Testament theology is not a human theory, but a description of the reality

which was known in the direct experience and direct revelation by Jesus Christ or his apostles. The Church has the same understanding of the authority of the fathers, the ecumenical councils and all the saints. For us, the fathers are not just prominent scholars, but above all living witnesses of truth, inspired by the Holy Spirit. To be inspired witnesses of truth is also the function of the ecumenical councils, which express the understanding of truth that is always present in the mind of the Church. And all the saints have had the same great privilege of having a real experience of communion with God, of having a vision of God and of the living truths of Christianity.

We often forget that the apostles ascribed to all Christians the possibility of a direct, experiential knowledge of truth. St. Paul writes to the Corinthians that "we speak the wisdom of God... [which] God hath revealed unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God... But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:7-16). To have the mind of Christ means, evidently, to participate in the same perfect, immediate knowledge of truth that Christ certainly possessed in his divine and human mind.

St. John writes in his First Epistle that all Christians must believe in the divinity of the Son of God, and then he adds: "but the grace which ye have received of God abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same grace teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in Him" (1 John 2:27). The grace of the Holy Spirit — life in God — is the highest and true source of our knowledge.

In his Epistle to the Romans, St. Paul ascribes the possibility of direct knowledge of God to all men. Whatever is knowable of God is indeed manifested to man; the invisible reality of God, His eternal power and divinity have been knowable for creatures since the creation of the world (Romans 1:19-20). Thus, if men do not know God, it is because they have become foolish and have "expelled God from their knowledge" (Romans 1:28).

The Son of God, Jesus Christ, has given us the real knowledge of truth. He Himself confirmed that the prophets were inspired by God, and the apostles, who were also divinely inspired, had no other pretension than to know, keep and transmit the truth which they received from Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. All other generations of Orthodox Christians, guided by the saints, the councils and the faithful hierarchy, have had in their turn no other goal than to keep in purity and true understanding the same divine truth, transmitted by Holy Tradition.

It is very important to know that all true Christians not only can learn the truth from the Bible and Holy Tradition, but, with the assistance of the grace of God, and transcending time, they can also spiritually become witnesses of all the great, eternal truths and great events on which Christianity is founded. In the services of the great feasts of the Church, we are always invited to come and see the events being celebrated, as if we would be true eyewitnesses of them. The gospel, read in the Church, has the same power and meaning as the preaching of Christ Himself. And in the holy Eucharist we really participate in the Lord's Supper and enter into communion with God and with the whole heavenly Church.

Many Christians in our time think that the only correct understanding of Christianity is a historical one. History, in their opinion, not only changes Christianity, but breaks it in parts, and in such a way that, in fact, each country and each generation has its own Christianity, which is incompatible with that of others. Consequently, they claim that it is absolutely necessary

for our generation to also create a new form of Christianity. The continuity of a Christian tradition is said to be both impossible and undesirable.

The position of our Church, however, is completely different. We believe that there is one and the same Christianity throughout all the ages and that this Christianity is Orthodoxy. And the fact of a harmonious and organic continuity of Orthodox Tradition from the time of Jesus Christ and the apostles down to our own time is not only a matter of our faith, but it can be proven. It is impossible to find in the whole history of the Holy Tradition of our Church any crisis or spiritual revolution that would break the tradition or introduce any contradictory elements into it.

Two factors were necessary and sufficient for this achievement of Orthodoxy: the will of God to preserve in the world the truth which was revealed once and for all by Jesus Christ and through the saints; and the good will of faithful Orthodox Christians in accepting and living by the Christianity of God, Jesus Christ and the apostles, instead of creating a Christianity of their own. It is not difficult to demonstrate how all heterodox Christian denominations started by rejecting, at least partially, the true Christianity of the Church, and later on how they passed through crises that deformed their traditions more and more. It is, moreover, remarkable how many denominations are identified with the persons of their founders, e.g., Luther or Calvin, or how their theology is shaped almost entirely by some individual theologians, e.g., Augustine or Thomas Aquinas. All this is decidedly not the case with Orthodoxy. We identify our truth with God Himself, and our faith with that of all the prophets, apostles, saints and all faithful Orthodox Christians.

Orthodox theology gives us a whole and totally coherent vision of truth. It is absolutely impossible to find any contradiction in it. On the other hand, it is quite easy to find contradictions and confusion within the teachings of other denominations. Only ignorance of theology — both the Orthodox and the heterodox — can bring anyone to the supposition that what the theology of other churches teaches is as convincing and coherent as the teaching of Orthodoxy, or that our doctrines and their doctrines are essentially the same. It is enough to carefully study the non-Orthodox doctrines to see the numerous false and contradictory ideas in them. Perhaps there are some who would accuse us of what is now called "triumphalism." But this is not "triumphalism"; it is simply love of truth. And this love, which is the essence of Orthodoxy, is a gift of God given to our Church. If Jesus Christ our Lord said that He would be a liar if He denied that He knows God, then we Orthodox would also be liars and apostates if we denied that our Church really possesses the truth. If we deny this fact, then we are no longer Orthodox. And if we believe in Orthodoxy without knowing what is the truth which the Orthodox Church teaches, then we are poor Orthodox believers.

If we are sincere in our love of truth, we must do our best to know it as much as possible. To know the New Testament and the basic doctrines of the Church is an absolute must for all of us. For many centuries, one of the most effective sources of the knowledge of Orthodoxy for our fathers was our liturgical services. Whoever knew not only the Divine Liturgy but also the texts of the other sacraments, the great feasts, the first week of Great Lent and Holy Week knew at least all the essential teachings of the Church. Therefore, it is deplorable that in America there is a clear tendency to serve as few and as brief services as possible.

What are the greatest temptations undermining our faithfulness to Orthodoxy and clearly weakening our society? One is that, unfortunately, many Orthodox have hardly any faith and keep only external, earthly relations with the Church. Much more dangerous,

however, is the wave of false theology with which the entire Christian world is being corrupted and which is inevitably penetrating more and more even into our Church. Some statements of our hierarchs and theologians no longer sound like statements of witnesses of Orthodoxy. The greatest danger is the almost open rejection of the primary and fundamental value and existential meaning of truth. Truth is considered as of no importance for life: Many think that a minimum of knowledge is sufficient for our activity, and that so-called "good relations" with our fellow men do not require communion in truth and faith, which is rather an obstacle for them. We are told openly that the entire teaching of the Church must be totally reconsidered and adjusted to one goal only, which is the immediate unification of all the Christian denominations in an absolute minimum of faith and in a common activity in this world. And this disdain of truth and the minimalization of faith are directly connected in our time with the conscious acceptance of immorality. Those who do not accept the moral principles of the New Testament will inevitably fall into immorality.

The secular activity in the world proposed for us by the so-called progressive Christians is, in fact, determined by ideals whose origin is manifestly non-Christian and which are preached everywhere by atheistic liberalism. We laymen must be active in the world, but let us act in a truly Christian way, with the Christian understanding of the problems of the life of our society. Let us not slavishly imitate those who are often enemies of Christianity.

Some Orthodox are so moved by sheer sentimentality that they are, so to speak, ready to kiss the heterodox and recognize their supposed "Orthodoxy," as if by such spectacular actions and superficial proclamations of unity all Christians, so deeply disunited for centuries, can suddenly become members of one Church! Furthermore, some Orthodox think that if they will establish the best possible relations with Western Christians, diluting the Orthodox faith in the sea of ecumenism, then they will be helped by these Western Christians in the extremely difficult situations in which many of our Orthodox churches now find themselves. This, however, is pure illusion. The West did not save us from the Moslems in the fifteenth century, and it will not save us from any of our present terrible troubles. Besides, the very idea of betraying our faith to buy favors from the West is an abomination!

Love without truth is a false passion! Nevertheless, love is now being constantly opposed to truth. In the name of love, any compromise with the most obvious enemies of Christianity is approved. Pluralistic ideological promiscuity is being recommended as the best path toward unity. In the opinion of many modern Christians, love justifies any sexual immorality, any cynical leniency toward crimes. But anything that is built on false compromises will not survive. Truth is not an abstraction — it is the source of life. According to the Scriptures, the tree of life is wisdom.

Freedom is one of the greatest gifts of God to the human being. But freedom is also as terribly abused by the modern mind as is love. The positive meaning of truth is to be free from evil and for all that is good. However, freedom is too often identified with arbitrariness and its negative use: freedom from God, freedom from truth, freedom from the love of the Church, freedom from any principles. We would do well to remember the words of St. Paul: "The Lord is the Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Corinthians 3:17); "Brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to sin" (Galatians 5:13); "All things are permissible for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (1 Corinthians 6:12).

Our love of Orthodoxy and our absolute dedication to it must not bring us to religious isolationism and by no means toward hatred of the non-Orthodox. We must be open to all

Christians and to all men in the world; we must bring them the treasures of truth which we have kept for twenty centuries. Even when we cannot convert others, we can still enrich the non-Orthodox and the whole American society by our message. Whenever we meet other Christians, we must always appreciate them in the light of our truth. If we should discover in other Christians some elements of true Orthodox Christianity, we can enjoy with them a partial community in faith and we can act together, being inspired by that common faith. But let this unity be a true one, and not one imagined by ecumenical passion. The tragedy of modern heterodox Christianity is that, under the influence of modernistic ideas and trends, it often loses its Christian character. The unity that can be partially discovered with the great Christian denominations, inasmuch as they are still faithful to their own traditions, is no longer possible with the mass of modernistic Christians of all denominations. It would be no exaggeration to say that this modernistic Christianity is no Christianity at all. Real Christians could be united in a common opposition to the atheistic world and modern-pseudo Christianity.

There is no identity between Orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Whenever we see differences and contradictions between us and the heterodox, there is no other choice for us but to make a patient effort to clarify the errors of our heterodox brethren in a friendly manner and to try our best to bring them to the truth.

I would like to conclude with several references to the encyclical of Patriarch Anthimos from which I quoted in the beginning of this article:

Nobody will separate us from the love of Christ. Nobody will divert us from the doctrine of the gospels. Nobody will estrange us from the guidance of our fathers. Wherever we will be — in the north, the south, the east or the west — let us direct our eyes toward the divine beauty of the Church.

Furthermore, Patriarch Anthimos says:

This apostolic exhortation and persuasion we send to the whole Orthodox society of the faithful, to the clergy and to the God-loving people, to the superiors and to the subordinates, to the rich and to the poor, to the parents and to the children, to the teachers and to the students, to the educated and to the ignorant: strengthen each other, withstand the devilish temptations, be vigilant and firm in the faith.

And finally:

The God of all grace, who has called us into His eternal glory by Christ Jesus: make us perfect, establish, strengthen, settle us (1 Peter 5:10) and grant that all those who are without and far away from the one, holy, catholic, and Orthodox Church may be enlightened with the light of His grace, and the knowledge of the truth. To Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Preserve, O Lord, the holy Orthodox faith and Orthodox Christians unto ages of ages.