

DOGMA AND DOGMATIC THEOLOGY

Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.

—(Mt 13:52)

I

Dogmatic theology is the systematic setting out of dogmas which, taken together, express the fullness of Orthodox teaching. Yet it must be asked whether such a dogmatic inventory can lay claim to comprehensiveness. Do all dogmatic questions have answers in the form of dogmas formulated and voiced by the Church? No. The number of dogmas is limited and, in the case of many, if not the majority, of questions, we are presented only with theological doctrines. Popular opinions in any case are not dogmas but *theologoumena*. Dogmatics is similar to a map of a continent not yet fully explored, where charted regions co-exist with the uncharted, and the borderlines are interrupted by pale and uncertain dotted lines. In fact, undisputed dogmas of the Church concern only a very limited number of definitions: the teaching on the Holy Trinity (as found in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed), and mainly those about the God-man (as found in the definitions of the seven ecumenical councils). Even

in the subject of pneumatology we enter the territory of theologoumena (as Bolotov has noted).

In the great majority of areas dealt with in dogmatic theology, we remain on the shaky ground of theological doctrine. These include areas of primary importance, such as the teaching about the world and the human person, about God's will and predestination, about the Church, about grace and the sacraments—notably all the questions concerning eucharistic theology—as well as about history and eschatology. This whole area is left to the discretion of theological doctrine: although presented as Church dogma it cannot pretend to infallibility, precision, or universally binding authority, and in any case allows for different theological opinions. (The boundary of accepted differences in each case is a *questio facti*.)¹

Dogmatic theology does not stop at the specific dogmas; it is much broader and therefore must inevitably be supplemented from sources other than the clear and obligatory dogmatic definitions. This "supplementing" happens on the basis of the living tradition of the Church, the analysis of dogmas, and the study of doctrines.

In this, therefore, we are dealing with the immediate life of the Church, which includes dogmatic facts of the first importance. These need to be elucidated in all their meaning and opened up in their dogmatic content with the assistance of doctrinal theological explication. In this way they become dogmatic definitions. Here dogma is not so much a given as it is an object of pursuit for the dogmatic theologian. The very foundation of dogma assumes a combination of effort, creative intuition, factual research, and dogmatic construction (i.e., religious philosophy or, more precisely, metaphysics). Dogmatic construction is unavoidable when defining dogmas, as it was a part of the various theological schools and conflicting doctrines and opinions that existed in the era of the ecumenical councils, and continues to exist to this day. For at the heart of dogmatic theology lies dogmatic quest, and therefore the possibility not only of finding but also of not finding.

Yet rivalry and conflicting opinion in dogmatic teaching are balanced in the life of the Church, because preceding these differences, and over and above them, exists the one life of the Church as its prevailing strength: the *lex orandi* in the largest sense is the *lex credendi*. The inexhaustible font of tradition irrigates dogmatic thought and doctrine. Unity in this life of the Church also pre-determines unity in theological thought, although the latter always requires a dialectical freedom.

Of course, questions within dogmatic theology can be simplified and practically replaced by schematic formulation of quasi dogmas, which might formally satisfy a scholastic. This is what happens when one sets out broad, catechistic, scientific expositions. In such cases dogmatic theology is often taken for an inventory of dogmas, undistinguished from theological opinions—which are proved by citing church tradition and scripture. In such cases dogmatic theol-

ogy is understood as something utterly complete and unchanging. It is given a face that is not its own, a scholastic mask, to the fright and revulsion of many. On the other hand, such pragmatic-pedagogical approaches can merit study, and it is appropriate to appreciate with all due respect the positive aspects of such teaching, as did Metropolitan Makarios and his Catholic predecessors. One must always stay mindful that what one is reading is simply a schematic description of something that in truth has yet to be dogmatically crystallized.

In dogmatic theology, therefore, we find dogmas as well as dogmatic facts that have been expressed in previous dogmatic definitions; we also have theological propositions² and theologoumena, which have not themselves received definite dogmatic definition. With regard to dogmas proper, the process of determining their ecclesiastically infallible expression is complete. On the other hand, theological propositions or theological opinions are at the stage that corresponds to the time before the ecumenical councils, when there were only theological schools with differing opinions. The challenge of dogmatic theology here consists above all in defining and explicating as precisely as possible these dogmatic facts in the life of the Church. (One example is the veneration of the Mother of God among the Orthodox, for whom the fullness in the practice of Mariology coincides with an absence of dogmatic formulation. The same is the case with the theology of the sacraments.)

It is likewise important to establish that the dogmatic facts of the life of the Church—its *lex orandi*—and the practical *credendi* have not only a significance but a commanding authoritative significance for the theologian. For the theologian they take the place of dogmas, and theological propositions are to be built based on these facts. At the same time, the theologian must inevitably construct them him- or herself, theologizing as responsibly as creatively, for these two are synonymous. Liturgical theology (including iconography, church architecture, liturgical rites, etc.), the living breath of the Church—its prayerful inspiration and revelation—is therefore immensely important for dogmatic theology. This is why the altar and the theologian's cell—his workspace—must be conjoined. The deepest origins of the theologian's inspiration must be nourished from the altar. Yet it is clear that liturgical sources must be subject to comparative-historical study to prevent them from becoming "dead-letter," or equal to the Word of God, which remains unique and incomparable in its authoritative significance.

It is important to show the primary significance that the Word of God has for dogmatic theology. It does not aspire merely to *human* wisdom or "philosophy," but receives its existence from revelation; in this sense the Word of God is the philosophy of revelation. The Word of God is the absolute criterion of theology. Theology cannot include ideas that could not be directly or indirectly confirmed by the Word of God, or contrary to it. The Word of God has an un-plumbable depth and an absolute character for us. It is the true revelation of God, which has been understood by human beings in all eras of our existence,

through all the history of ideas. This does not mean that the Word of God is some kind of *summa theologiae*, but that it potentially includes a *summa* in itself, as subjects for theology and dogmas, unfolding in human creation. The Word of God in this sense reveals its divine-human character. It does not bind creativity in its free inspiration, but defines it as a given (although a concealed) truth. Of course, the Word of God also exists as such for the Church, and only in the Church's life and its spirit does the Word of God open itself to human beings. The Holy Scriptures must be understood in the light of tradition. The Word of God contains in itself the pure gold of revelation.

II

Dogmatic theology, if it is to exist in accordance with Church tradition, must take into consideration other landmarks of church history—patristics, historical scholarship, etc.—and do so with constantly broadening horizons. When it comes to the written tradition, the place of primacy is held by the authoritative writers known as the Fathers of the Church. It is universally understood that dogmatic theology has to be “according to the Fathers” and to agree with patristic tradition. But what does this mean?

Before all, we must uphold wholeheartedly the spiritual and theological authoritativeness of the Fathers' writings as monuments of Church tradition. The Fathers are, in a sense, the Church's witness to itself. This leads to a practical challenge for the theologian—to analyze as deeply as possible the contents of the tradition of the Fathers. For this it is necessary to bring in all possible elements of church history and critical textual analysis, which is so richly facilitated by contemporary resources and methodology. On the basis of such research we must firstly establish the actual views of the Church writers, and secondly, understand them in their historical context, their concrete circumstances and historical relativity.

Here it becomes clear to anyone who happens upon patristic writing that even in the realm of one and the same question, there is rarely a single patristic tradition. These often-contradictory (or at least different) opinions therefore force us to make a choice, to give preference to one or the other patristic tradition, as is in fact done. This means that the Holy Fathers' writings in themselves cannot be considered dogmatically infallible. They are authoritative witnesses but they cannot by any means be transformed into unerring texts. In some circles one finds a rabbinic approach to the writings of the Fathers as “tradition.” But if in the interpretation of the Talmud it was possible to smooth out and harmonize the sayings of different rabbis, such a methodology is more difficult to apply to patristics, for here several different schools of opinion at times were in contradiction with each other, at times even anathematizing each other (cf., e.g., the Antiochene and Alexandrian Christologies).

At points the Church would make a de facto selection and put its accent on certain ideas of certain writers.

But in general to proclaim the inerrancy of the writings of the Holy Fathers as such is impossible, again, because of the existence of disagreements and even contradictions in their writings. Furthermore, such an approach toward their writings absolutely does not correspond to the specific weight that in reality is attributed to them by the Church itself. Indeed, to claim inerrancy in the works of each Church writer on any topic would truly be a patristic heresy. This heresy did in fact exist in the Middle Ages, and was frequent throughout the twelfth to fifteenth centuries in the East, as well as in the Roman Catholic West. (At the Council of Florence, patristic writings were placed on a par with Scripture by Cardinal Bessarion—and were therefore declared God-inspired.)

Such an approach could be consigned to quaint historic rarity if it were not sometimes evident even today as a leading force in theology. Yet Orthodox theology is not the Talmud, and a real veneration of the Fathers must reverence not the letter but the spirit. The writings of the Holy Fathers must have a guiding authority, yet be applied with discernment. Therefore, firstly, for all of their authoritative character, the writings of the Holy Fathers need to be treated as a criterion of historical relativity, one that has unavoidable limitations. Who in his right mind would take as the teaching of the Church St. John of Damascus on the zodiac, although it is included in his *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*,³ or his *Dialectica*, where he simply repeats the teaching of Aristotle? This limitation of the Fathers' writings is much more greatly felt, of course, when it comes to their scriptural exegesis, which was utterly bereft of the modern hermeneutics of textual and historical scholarship. In this area, the Fathers' writings often appear to us simply antiquated, although they retain authoritative meaning in the dogmatic and pedagogical study of the Word of God.

The writings of the Holy Fathers in their dogmatic proclamations must also be understood within their historical context. One must not apply to them a meaning that is not inherent in the nature of the problems they were actually concerned with. One cannot seek in the writings of one period answers to the questions inherent in another. In any case the writings do not possess a universality applicable to all periods in history. The writings of the Fathers are historically conditioned and therefore limited in their meaning. This does not prevent them from having an eternal value insofar as they are woven into the dogmatic conscience of the Church, but it is important to establish that the writings of the Fathers are not the Word of God and cannot be compared to it or made equal to it. In principle, nobody is making such an equation nowadays, as was done before, but in *fact* it does happen, and this approach is harmful when put to ill use. We say this not to diminish the authority of the Fathers of the Church but so that this authority may be taken for what it is. (In fact, one of the dangers of theologizing “according to the Fathers” is a tendency toward

patristic exegesis in support of *one's own* particular doctrine, proof-texting from statements put forward—sometimes tendentiously—in the patristic texts.)

The practical conclusion of all this is that the Fathers' writings cannot be accepted blindly as bearing dogmatic authority; they must be analyzed comparatively and critically. We must also add that the authoritative patristic tradition does not have exact boundaries in time and space. The principle that is generally applied is that this authority grows along with the antiquity of the writings—that is, in reverse proportion to their newness. Of course this principle also cannot be applied universally, as in all periods of Church history one meets with writers who sin against the truth, starting with apostolic and post-apostolic times. It is also impossible to delineate the precise era during which the Fathers' writings were the most applicable. We can say rather that in the history of Church writings, different periods emerge during which specific issues are treated (Logos theology, Christology, Trinitarian dogma, etc.), and that then, most importantly, the tradition of authoritative (and in this sense patristic) writing continues and is never-ending.

In other words, each historical period, not excluding our own, participates in the theological inspiration by which the authority of the Fathers' writing is established. We can observe this also in our day when this inspiration is received by churchmen such as Fr. John of Kronstadt, Bishop Theophan [the Recluse], St. Tikhon [of Zadonsk], St. Dimitri of Rostov, as well as by other writers and hierarchs. In other words, patristic writings do not and cannot form a completed canon. The patristic tradition is not locked into some historical frame. It is not only the past but also the present and the future. And if different periods in history have their own problematics and challenges, no one is forgotten by God. The legacy of the Holy Fathers, in spite of its holiness, as well as the necessity of detailed study, cannot be for us a finished task—done before us, completed for us, or achieved in our stead—to be accepted with a passive obedience. To the contrary, it is necessarily a part of *our* task: having this talent, we must not bury it in the earth but multiply it by our own creative efforts. We are convinced of this not of our own whim, but by an absolute necessity, although it is difficult to show this.

The point is that the Fathers' legacy of the past is a mosaic of different parts of history, produced by different historical circumstances. In no way is it comprehensive. On the contrary, it is limited in content and therefore cannot meet the demand for a satisfactory and comprehensive solution to problems that arise in dogmatic thought. It does not even pose a comprehensive list of questions. It is necessary to say clearly that for a whole array of problems that face us powerfully and distressingly nowadays, there is either no patristic tradition or there is an insufficient one. The reason is not that these problems are foreign to the Church, and nonecclesial as such, but simply that the classical patristic era never grappled with these problems. More exactly, it was occupied with other problems that were inherent to it. That is why we must accept that

there is no sufficient or clear patristic teaching on many questions (such as pneumatology, sacramentology, and particularly eucharistic theology—the consecration of the holy gifts, the eucharistic offering, grace, and freedom, God's foreknowledge versus predestination and, to a significant degree, history, eschatology, and Christian sociology).

Of course, even on these questions there are definite opinions that possess authority, and which must be taken into consideration and studied. Yet the fact remains that in the classical patristic period, the modern problems that have arisen since the period of the Reformation simply did not exist. And where there is no question there can be no answer.

An honest appraisal of history forces us to admit that up to now Western Reformation and Counter-Reformation theology has been extremely authoritative for Orthodox theology. Alas, the identity of Orthodox theology appears here to a great degree more polemical, more reactive, than positive. Faced by the need to defend itself, patristic tradition occupied itself with heterodox opinions, of which some were accepted and others rejected. This amalgam is characteristic of the main Orthodox faith-teachings of this period (e.g., the "Orthodox Confessions" and the "Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs").

This fact once again testifies to the limitation of historic patristic tradition, and therefore the need for its creative continuation. Of course this concerns only theology. The fullness of the Church, its charismatic life, exists forever. But this fullness is sometimes more and sometimes less fulfilled in the history of the Church.

From this it follows that dogmatic theology is broader than patristic tradition. History has seen a misguided naïveté, which demands that all problems be reckoned "according to the Fathers," refusing or being suspicious of any problem that is not present in their writings. If we look at the most creative periods in the history of dogma we will see that each century bears its own problems—new problems compared to those of the past. While one must treat them in such a way that does not break with tradition, one should not cower from their "newness." To be suspicious of new problems and their consequent doctrines, or to forbid them somehow, would mean falling into antihistorical Talmudism and into a kind of patristic heresy.

III

The absence of some problem or teaching in patristic writings does not make it nonexistent or irrelevant to the Church, as some have thought. This would be the case only if patristic writings were the sole and comprehensive source of Church tradition. But reality has it otherwise. Only the Word of God is such a source, and it itself is revealed in its true meaning in the Church—most importantly in the Church's prayerful and sacramental mystical life. The Church

holds within itself dogmatic revelation, but it requires faithfulness in this revelation. New theological propositions or theologoumena do not appear as mere human intellectual constructions, but as *witnesses* to the life of the Church. They are revelation expressed in theology (in the same way as it is expressed in icons, hymns, rites, and sacraments) from the fullness of Christ. "See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:8-9).

Such theologizing "according to human tradition" begins, in fact, around the period of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Orthodox dogmatic theology, when it falls under Western influence. Here it theologizes less according to the Fathers than according to Tridentine and generally Western theologians; it maintains the appearance of patristic tradition but is deprived of its real power. The entire teaching of the Church on grace and on sacraments is camouflaged. It is not positive but polemical theology, dependent on Western tradition, and especially on Western problematics. This polemical character of more recent theology, which is accepted by many (and which only pretends to be patristic), must be overcome. Within this approach, dogmatic definitions are polemical both in their origin and content; Orthodoxy is defined as non-Catholic or anti-Catholic, non-Protestant or anti-Protestant, or finally (even more tempting), as a Catholicizing anti-Protestantism, or a Protestantizing anti-Catholicism.

We must not reject or diminish the riches of Christian achievements in Catholic and Protestant theology, which contain real Christian truths. Even less should we believe that the Orthodox theologian should distance himself from Western theology. Indeed, it is already a long time since theology has moved beyond intentional confessionalism, and in some of its aspects theology belongs to the whole Christian world. This pertains to such disciplines as biblical studies, patristics, church history, archaeology, etc., and only an ignoramus would shun the contribution of these fields. Still, finding itself in fraternal cooperation with that of all other Christians, Orthodox theology must remain itself, nourished by the wellspring of truth entrusted to it. This requires renewed theological creativity—we may recall, for example, that the writers of the first millennium appear to be unable to orient us in some areas in the problematics and life of the second millennium.

It is specifically in polemical ("accusatory") theology that there arises a great many illusory dogmas or quasi dogmas whose provisional and relative character is often insufficiently recognized. This false impression is created when dogmatic theology is deliberately given a complete and categorical character, resulting in pseudo-dogmas on every question. In reality a major portion of Orthodox dogmatics needs responsible and serious work. We need the genuine and living tradition of the Church, untainted by confessional/scholastic preconceptions and subjected to objective study and evaluation. This is the theology

that must find expression and ultimately pave the way for an authoritative ecclesial discernment of dogma.

Unfortunately, we have a whole series of dogmatic preconceptions that are mistaken for ready dogmas, the main one being that theological opinions expressed in dogmatic language are finalized dogmas of the Church. Here, the principle of *in necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas* is negated. Gone is the healthy mutual tolerance of dogmatic opinions (a tolerance which of course would be absolutely out of place in the case of actual dogmas). In one dogmatic manual, you have creationism expressed as an Orthodox dogma; in another, traditionism expressed the same way. In one case the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation is refuted; in another it is accepted as a sign of true Orthodoxy, and so forth. Such simplification becomes particularly unbearable in eschatology, where the absence of genuine dogmatic definitions gives full license to theological prejudices and fosters the tendency to reject or even fight against research about it.

We still have not attained such dogmatic maturity that we can discern the difference between those fundamental dogmas, which have already been accepted as obligatory and authoritative, and dogmatic doctrine, with all its changeability and instability. This inability to distinguish prevents the normal development of theological thought and dogmatic research, which is indispensable to it as to any area of thought. Dogmatic research was a characteristic of the patristic period: even the Fathers of the Church, before they became such, were simply theologians seeking the truth.

Thus in dogmatic theology, room must be granted for research and analysis; that is to say, research into what is truly included in the tradition concerning this or that question, and the dogmatic working-through of this material into theological propositions or hypotheses. In the process of such research, there will inevitably arise new dogmatic problems dictated by a genuinely dialectical ecclesial consciousness. It is therefore necessary to cast aside the preconception that whatever is new is not of the Church. Obviously not everything new in dogmatic theology is truly of the Church, but simultaneously it is all the more *not* of the Church, or even anti-Church, to bind and fetter ideas by merely duplicating the old. This idea constitutes a rabbinical legalism, an unchanging preservationism that is in fact actively reactionary and, in this sense, ironically, is in itself an innovation. Immutability is impossible, being only a disguise for regression. Such preservationism is basically un-Orthodox—Orthodoxy is alive and, therefore, a growing and developing tradition, just as it was during the flourishing period of the history of dogma.

IV

This leads us to Orthodoxy's fundamental question of dogmatic development. Is it possible? Is it permissible? And if so, in what sense? If asked in relation