

# HOMILY

## ON THE FEAST OF THE THREE HIERARCHS

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Your Eminence, Metropolitan HILARION,  
Your Grace, Bishop NICHOLAS,  
Venerable Father and Archimandrite Luke,  
Venerable fathers, beloved seminarians, brothers and sisters in Christ,

Greetings on Feast!

I consider it a great honor to stand before you today, to stand in this hall where great lights of the Church have stood and spoken, such holy ones as St. John the Wonderworker and Metropolitan Philaret, Archbishop Averky, Metropolitan Laurus and Fr. Michael Pomazansky and others, who are great fathers not only of the Russian Church Abroad, but indeed of the Church Catholic.

This inheritance of holy examples and lives, of divine wisdom and teaching, is of immense significance for the seminary - but not only the seminary, indeed, the entire Church. The witness given by the Russian Church Outside of Russia with regard to the Holy Tradition, the monastic and ascetic ideal and in particular the ecclesiology of the Church, continues to inspire and guide Orthodox throughout the world.

I can speak from experience that the faithful in Greece have, over the past 15 or so years, embraced the holy ones of the Russian Church Abroad, through the lives of St. John and Fr. Seraphim Rose, which have been translated and circulated there. Likewise, and perhaps more noteworthy and less well known, the "Sorrow Epistles" of Metropolitan Philaret are held in great esteem by such leading voices of Orthodoxy in Greece as Fr. Theodore Zisis, and the Holy Synod's anathema of the pan-heresy of syncretistic ecumenism (in 1983) remains an historic precedent which many believers in Greece wish to see repeated in their local Church.

Thus, your fathers - our fathers - in the Faith are revered throughout the Orthodox world today and their witness and message continues to live on and inspire. This should be both a great encouragement to all of us and a humbling reminder our duty and calling to walk in their footsteps.

Today the Church celebrates the memory the Great Enlighteners of the Universe the Great Hierarchs and Ecumenical Teachers, Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom, and our seminary is especially blessed to have them as intercessors before the throne of God. As the Great Hierarch of Contemporary Greece, Metropolitan Avgoustinos Kantiotis of Florina would say, the feast of a saint implies the imitation of the saint. In this context, then, I hope that my presentation today will be for all of us of a personal nature, building us and the Church up through the example and wisdom of the Great Hierarchs.

The Three Great Hierarchs were shepherds of their rational flocks and the entire Church at a time of great change, straddling, as it were, the outgoing Pagan world and the rising Christian empire. Their pastoral task was to speak of heavenly truths to earth-bound wise-men in terms and a language which they understood. Their employment (and transformation) of philosophical terms and ideas was not an end itself but a means by which to bring men to "*the full knowledge of the truth* (2 Tim. 3:7).

## 1. Two Types of Wisdom

In the writings of the Three Hierarchs, but also in the epistles of the Apostles Paul and James, and indeed the entire patristic tradition, there are two types of wisdom:

- **ἄνωθεν**, from above (or divine, true) and
- **θύραθεν**, from without (or human and worldly)

Each one has limits as to its development, its aims and the means by which it is acquired.

The wisdom which comes from above (**ἄνωθεν**), from God, by revelation, is obtained by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. It is not limited, as is human knowledge. God Himself is revealed in His divine energies (actions). His mysterious presence in creation is inscrutable. It cannot be subjected to human inspection and proof. Man either receives God's mysteries with faith (trust), and sees that "God is good," or he rejects them.

The **ἄνωθεν** wisdom leads man to salvation, to regeneration, to taking man from the image to the likeness of God, to his perfection. Divine wisdom makes the passionate, impassive, the earthly, heavenly, the mindless, Godly-minded, the mortal, immortal.

The wisdom which comes from men, or **θύραθεν**, is obtained by human means, with study and reflection. Within human, **θύραθεν**, wisdom, the mind is taught to judge, to meditate upon, to following principles and human rules of logic, in order to examine the earthly, the created. It cannot, however, thereby judge and examine that which is from above, and that which is uncreated.

Hence, this wisdom is not necessary for salvation and must not become an end in itself. It can, however, cooperate with and assist the heaven-sent (ἄνωθεν) wisdom toward the supreme aim of our salvation. Its value, then, lies in its use and depends upon the proper perspective and disposition of the one employing it, whether or not he has respect for the things of God, according to the psalmist, "the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God (Psalm 110/11:10).

In this perspective, then, we can see clearly that the Holy Hierarchs' use of the terms and ideas put forward by the human wisdom of their day was a pastoral tool, a pastoral condescension - with full respect, but also full knowledge of the limits of that wisdom. St. Basil the Great, in his famous "Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature," says the following in this regard:

**"Now, then, altogether after the manner of bees must we use these writings, for the bees do not visit all the flowers without discrimination, nor indeed do they seek to carry away entire those upon which they light, but rather, having taken so much as is adapted to their needs, they let the rest go. So we, if wise, shall take from heathen books whatever befits us and is allied to the truth, and shall pass over the rest. And just as in culling roses we avoid the thorns, from such writings as these we will gather everything useful, and guard against the noxious."**

## **2. Coming to the Knowledge (*Epignosis*) of the Truth**

The Great Hierarchs' primary task, then, as shepherds and catechists was not simply to teach, much less to inform, but rather to initiate a proud and rationalist pagan world into the Mystery of the Gospel. This is the heart of the work of the catechist: to initiate his disciple into the event of Pentecost. In fact, the Greek word for catechism, 'κατήχησις', is formed from the event of Pentecost, when a sound (ἦχος) came down (κάτω) from heaven.

The aim of the Great Hierarchs' pastoral work was not one of moral improvement or philosophical enlightenment but of communion with the Holy Trinity, which presupposes repentance, purification and initiation. To paraphrase the Apostle of Love, "that which they had seen and heard from the beginning," that of which they had **επίγνωσις**, or first-hand, experiential knowledge, that they declared unto the 4th century pagan world, "that they may also have communion" with them and the Holy Trinity.

The Holy Fathers did not believe that salvation was simply a matter of obtaining **γνώσις** (knowledge), but, rather, **επίγνωσις**, experiential knowledge of God Himself, of His uncreated energies, which meant first of all entry into the Church and initiation into the life in Christ. This initiation was a process of purification and illumination, of divesting oneself of the passions and heretical ideas of the rationalists and investing oneself with the mind of Christ and Orthodox *phronema* or mindset; of putting off the old man and putting on Christ.

Enlightenment for the Three Hierarchs did not mean the acquiring of knowledge ABOUT God, ABOUT the truth in terms of ideas - although this can be helpful and an important preparatory step - but rather all learning was meant to lead *to personal, experiential knowledge of the Truth Incarnate*. They undoubtedly encountered in their day that which the Apostle Paul describes as a characteristic of the last days, namely, men who had "the form of piety" but denied "the power thereof," who are "always learning" but "never able to come to a full knowledge (**επίγνωσης**) of the truth" (2 Tim. 3:5,7).

This is a characteristic of the heretical man: having lost the ethos or way of life he innovates and shipwrecks with regard to the dogma or truth of Christ. Or vice-versa: having ignored or devalued the dogmas of the Church as the basis of spiritual life, he soon falls into a worldly, grace-obstructing way of life.

Thus, given the ever-imminent threat of heresy, much of the Three Hierarchs' pastoral and catechetical work consisted of the struggle against heresy and heretically-minded men. The heretics used Aristotelian Philosophy to logically examine and pronounce upon the things of God which surpassed logic - and they did this without the necessary pre-requisite of experience. Our Saints fought heresy at its root, stressing in word and deed that dogmatic teaching and ethos are inseparable, two sides of the same coin; that there is no possibility for the autonomy of one from the other; and that the loss of one is the loss of the whole.

As St. John Chrysostom wrote:

**"There is no benefit from a pure life when one professes heretical dogma and, likewise, the opposite is true: right dogma is of no benefit when one leads a corrupt life."** [Οὐδέν ὄφελος βίου καθαροῦ, δογμάτων διεφθαρμένων, ὡσπερ οὐδέ τούναντίον, δογμάτων ὑγιῶν, ἐάν ὁ βίος ᾗ διεφθαρμένος» P.G. 53,31 καί P.G. 59, 369]

And elsewhere:

**"Let us not think that holding the faith alone is sufficient for salvation, if we do not also show forth a pure life."** [Μηδέ νομίζωμεν ἀρκεῖν ἡμῖν πρὸς σωτηρίαν τὴν πίστιν, ἐάν μὴ βίον ἐπιδειξώμεθα καθαρόν. - P.G. 59, 77]

For him who has a corrupt life it is a matter of time that he will adopt heretical dogmas. And, although we are not to concern ourselves with the corrupt lives of others, we *are* called to examine the dogma and the faith of others - *including bishops*. We judge on the basis of that which we have all inherited, both in our Chrismation and in the Holy Tradition.

In Church life today we observe the tragic consequences when clergy and laity ignore the inseparable relation of faith and life, both with the temptation on the left and that on the right. Whether one has shipwrecked in terms of faith or in terms of life, it matters

little to the enemy of our salvation. His aim is to remove us from the full life of the Church, to deprive us of the Grace of God and make us into the "world." Whether you exit the Church on the right or the left, he cares not - so long as you exit, so long as you are removed from the Mystery and Mysteries. This brings me to the work of a seminary, such as our own, which is aiming to "follow the Holy Fathers."

### 3. The Work of a Seminary intent on "following the Holy Fathers"

There is a great pitfall that theological schools can slip into: it is to make the goal of their work **μάθησις** (fact learning) as opposed to **επίγνωσις** (experiential knowledge) and **μύησις** (initiation). The focus of their work becomes producing **ἐπιστήμονες** or intellectuals and academic theologians, able to teach, no doubt, but not necessarily able to initiate, to be a *mystagogue* (from Greek: **μυσταγωγός**).

When the spiritual and intellectual center of a seminary moves from the altar to the podium, or from the Gospel book to the text book, then that school has acquired the "form of piety" without "the power thereof". In such a case, the "*epignosis* of the truth" - the experience of, communion with, Christ - will remain something sought for but never actualized. And then the fearful words of our Lord will be applied:

**"Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt hath lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men." (Matt. 5:13)**

One cause of falling into this tragic error is the loss of discernment in how to "hierarchize", or prioritize spiritual matters. This error, in turn, is caused by the encroachment of the worldly spirit due to alienation from the ascetic life as the presupposition of participation in the Mystery and Mysteries of Christ.

If we truly wish to be "followers of the Holy Fathers," to be Orthodox in practice, it is necessary that we also be following them in the presuppositions of their dogmatic teaching, which is, namely, their life in the Holy Spirit, the pre-requisite of which is purification from the passions and enlightenment of the intellect through God's divinizing Grace. (This purification from the passions is considered of greater importance than than theology itself by the great Theologian himself, St. Gregory, for only then can the intellect of man truly come to know God *by participation in Him*.)

In this context, we sadly observe that our contemporary academic theology has (with a few notable exceptions) not followed Patristic theology. The reason for this appears to be because it has been deeply effected by the secularized, heterodox theological environment in the West. In particular, this refers to their theological methodology and mistaken theological presuppositions.

Western Heterodox theological methodology is mainly based upon reductive and abstract functioning of the intellect, autonomous from God, on the basis of "Universals."

Thus, in the West, dogmas were mainly considered to be theological ideas which are conceived in the mind without any particular relation **to the life** of the one expressing it. On the contrary, Orthodox theological methodology is experiential, characterized by living knowledge of God which is actualized within the Church, the communion of *theosis*.

Only on the basis of a personal encounter with the Living God can dogmatic precision be guaranteed, even with absolute surety when the dogma is expressed collectively by **an Oecumenical Council** (which has been received as such by the *pleroma* of the Church). Academic theologians, however, who seek to express Dogmatic theology without the analogous sacred spiritual experience of God are ever-in-danger of distorting and departing from Orthodoxy. To such, the great elder and newly glorified Saint Paisios of the Holy Mountain had this to say:

**"Theology without experience is akin to a mole attempting to describe the sun."**

The great inheritance bequeathed to us by the Three Hierarchs and the Holy Fathers - including the fathers and founders of this school - was their great gift of discernment and example of how to properly order matters pertaining to spiritual and theological knowledge. While valuing **θύραθεν** / human wisdom, they knew its proper place and did not allow it to supplant the central place which **ἄνωθεν** / divine wisdom occupies, and while engaging in theological discourse they never lost sight of the spiritual presuppositions.

#### **4. Conclusion**

It should be clear, then, that, according the Great and Holy Hierarchs, the great work of our seminary, of every seminary and indeed every mystagogue of the Church, is to first of all **initiate men into the Mystery of the Gospel by leading them through the process of purification and illumination**. There is much a seminary can and should do, but if it is not producing ascetic strugglers cleansed of their passions, illumined by the Holy Spirit with the mind of Christ and in a position, as mystagogues, to initiate others into the Mystery of Salvation, then it will eventually lose its salt and fail in its mission.

I firmly believe, and have come here from Greece largely based on this belief, that Holy Trinity Seminary, along with the entire Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, has a great and decisive role to play in the future of Orthodoxy on this continent and indeed universally. Standing on the shoulders, as it were, of the spiritual giants who have graced this place and left us their deposit of faith, the presuppositions exist and the potential is great for this institution to see a new flowering of Orthodoxy among a next generation of spiritual strugglers.

**And inasmuch as it remains grounded in both the dogma and the ethos of the Holy Fathers of the Church it will continue to bring forth great fruit.** For we stand on sure ground when we follow the Holy Fathers and do not move the boundaries that they have set. For two thousand years, the one Church of Christ has been guided by the Holy Spirit, stable and unshakeable in the salvific Truth that was taught by Christ, delivered by the Holy Apostles and preserved by the Holy Fathers. Neither the cruel persecutions of the Judeans and idolaters, in the early Church, nor those producing so many new martyrs under the Ottomans and atheists, could overcome Christ's Church. She has brought forth a host of martyrs and emerged victorious, thus proving Her divine origin.

As Saint John the Chrysostom beautifully expressed it:

**“Nothing is stronger than the Church... if you fight against a man, you either conquer or are conquered; but if you fight against the Church, it is not possible for you to win, for God is the strongest of all.”**

May we have his blessing and that of the Three Great Hierarchs on this school and all of our efforts!

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