

**THE LANGUAGE OF THE CHURCH/  
THE LANGUAGE OF THE WORLD  
AN ADVENTURE OF COMMUNICATION  
OR CONFLICT?**

BY  
ATHANASIOS N. PAPATHANASIOU

---



**THE LANGUAGE OF THE CHURCH/  
THE LANGUAGE OF THE WORLD  
AN ADVENTURE OF COMMUNICATION OR CONFLICT?**

BY  
ATHANASIOS N. PAPATHANASIOU  
Dr. Theology (Missiology) - B. Laws

Sometimes I have the impression that to study the church tradition means to be ready for many surprises. And this was what I felt, when I came across a text written by St Gregory of Nazianzus the Theologian (4th c.): «*Innovators is how the unwise call the provident*»<sup>1</sup>.

This is more than a simple statement. In fact it is, at one and the same time, a riddle and a challenge, because it poses the crucial questions «What constitutes an innovation?» and «Who is an innovator?» for the Church. Many Orthodox might today disagree with St Gregory, since innovation is usually considered an act of audacity and virtually synonymous with secularization. Such a danger may indeed exist; nevertheless, we cannot overlook the fact that the Church herself promises the world a kind of all-embracing innovation: the vision that the entire creation will finally become new, in communion with God. This is the end described in the book of Revelation (21: 1-5). The consequence of this vision is that the believer's life is not a passive expectation of the end, but rather a participation in God's historical work. In other words, the Church in history is the anticipation and the laboratory of this eschatological end. In this laboratory, the world is gradually transformed into the Body of Christ.

A highly characteristic example of the attitude of the Church in history is evidenced in the way She has formed Her own dogmatic formulas. Very soon after Her establishment she faced the danger of heresies and misinterpretations of Her faith and experience. One truth

---

1. PG 37, 1152A.

She had to defend and clarify, was that the three Persons of the Holy Trinity are of the same substance. She expressed this truth using the Greek term «homoousios», meaning consubstantial. Thus, since the 4th c., every Christian recites the Creed in every holy liturgy and confesses: «*I believe ... in one Lord Jesus Christ ... consubstantial with the Father*». For the believer today, this term is certainly beyond any dispute, since it succeeds in summarizing extended chapters of doctrine. However, when the Holy Fathers established this vital term, they could possibly have been accused of impiety or innovation! The reason is that this dogmatic term (and many others, like «person», «incarnation», «energies» etc.) does not belong to the Biblical glossary! The Fathers, in other words, seem to have refused to express the dogma in the language of the Holy Scripture and to have adopted another language. What had actually happened?

Already in the 4th c. the Church had long since beyond her Palestinian cradle and established Herself throughout the Mediterranean, inevitably coming face to face with the dominant Greco-Roman culture of that world and time. This culture implied a way of life, a mode of thinking and a language different from the Jewish ones. The Church found herself before a crucial dilemma: either to remain restricted to the Jewish data, or to open Herself to the wider world<sup>2</sup>. The Church preferred the second option, addressed Herself to the nations and used their languages and way of thinking.

In fact, far from being a routine manoeuvre, this was a historical decision, which stemmed from the very nature of the Church. As St Maximus the Confessor put it, «*Christ wants His mysterious incarnation to take place continuously and everywhere*»<sup>3</sup>. Seen in this perspective, the incarnation is not an event locked in the past, but a procedure that started almost 2000 years ago and continues through history mystically and uninterruptedly. In order to save the world, the Son of God assumed the human nature, lived in certain human societies, spoke the language of His contemporaries. Ever since, Christ has been inconceivable without His body, the Church. The Church is the continuation of the incarnation in history: She is not a spiritualistic sect indifferent to the outer world, but a workshop where the world is constantly transformed into flesh of Christ.

2. The first confrontation with that dilemma is mentioned in the Acts (15: 1-29).

3. PG 91, 1084C-D.

In order to understand the relationship of the Church to the world, we must keep in mind the following theological parameters: The Church and the World are not two ontologically (that is, by nature) different entities, as if the one was made of «holy» material and the other of «evil» material. In the Christian perspective, the whole world (without exception) is conceived as the Creation of God, who is the only uncreated being. He brought the world into existence out of nothing, and invited it to become participant in His own immortal and loving life. That means that the final goal of the entire world is to accept this invitation willingly, become the body of the Son, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, and thus, by free will, enter the eternal Trinitarian life. Of course, it is not easy. The invitation does not come from this world (John 15: 14, 18: 36), so it always sounds hard and the world always wonders: «*Who can accept it?*» (John 6: 60). The human response to the divine invitation is actually what the slavic term «podvig» implies: an ascetical achievement<sup>4</sup>, an exploit: the adventure of freedom in history.

Thus, we can say that the Church is the part of the world that has already responded to the divine invitation. The other part still resists this invitation and has not found its way into the Church yet; however, it is neither evil by nature, nor necessarily alien to the Church. The opposition between the Church and the World, as mentioned in Bible (cf. John 15: 18-20, 16: 33; 1 Cor. 3: 19; Gal. 6: 14) is not based not nature, but on choice and orientation. This is why the Church never ceases to pray for the life of the entire world and for the final recapitulation of everything in Christ. This is what we can hear if we listen attentively to the Holy Liturgy. Besides, the ecclesiastical language by itself is always an invitation. According to the very tradition of Orthodoxy<sup>5</sup>, language signals to the human being realities that cannot be restricted or fully described in words. Every word in the mouth of the Church is not only a declaration of the truth, but also an invitation to a free, wholehearted, personal meeting with the truth,

4. For the theological use of this term, see George H. Williams, *The Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky*: «Georges Florovsky. Russian Intellectual, Orthodox Churchman» (Andrew Blane, ed.), St Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York 1993, p. 295-299.

5. The contribution of apophatic theology is of great importance. See John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York 1985, p. 89-92.

since the Truth is not *something*, but *someone*: Christ Himself incarnate. Theology is not only a treatise on God, but also an invitation to His Body.

So, until the end of history, the Church does not have the right to stop inviting the creation of God to communion with Him. The discussion between the Church and the World cannot be stopped and, certainly, no one can put an end before the final end. Seen thus, the message of the Church remains always the same, but every language is welcomed to become its flesh, so that the message of salvation be conceivable in every society, in every nation, in every epoch. In other words, the Church's task is not to *remember* Christmas, but to *be* Christmas and gradually prepare the creation for the final Resurrection. A Church that rejects the incarnational view expressed above by St Maximus –that is, a Church that denies to speak *to* the world and *with* the world– is not simply a silent Church; She runs the danger of ceasing to be a Church at all! In the event that She does not introduce the world into Her life-giving Body, She abandons the world to the realm of death. It is as if a local Church denies to accept the bread of the world and thus finally becomes unable to prepare the Holy Eucharist!

An inherent danger in this process is that a local Church may be stuck to a language of the past, spoken centuries ago, and consider it the language of God Himself! In this case, this Church becomes an innovator of bad things, because she turns its back on the incarnational tradition of Orthodoxy. The late Fr. George Florovsky, for example, mentions the words of A. Shishkov, tsarist minister of education, who opposed those who attempted to translate the Scripture into the vernacular: «*How dare they alter words considered to come from the mouth of God?*»<sup>6</sup>. But, the answer already existed in the Orthodox tradition. For instance, St. Gregory of Nyssa, when opposing the heretic Eunomius, who claimed that God reveals certain words, argued that God reveals the meanings and man invents the words. «*God's voice*», says Gregory, «*is neither Hebrew, nor expressed in any of the ways known to the nations*»<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, while human languages can become the

---

6. Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology*, I (tr. R. L. Nichols), Nordland (Collected Works, 5), Belmont 1979, p. 197.

7. *Contra Eunomium* II, 260, (W. Jaeger ed., Leiden 1960, I, p. 302).

flesh of the truth, they are not truth of themselves. This is what the great Russian missionary Makarii Glukharev (1792-1847) claimed, concurring with St. Gregory: «*Will the Word of God in the raiment (:dress) of Slavonic letters cease to be God's Word if it is in Russian raiment?*»<sup>8</sup>. This was also the conviction of St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain (c. 1749-1809), who faced the opposition of some churchmen when he prepared a publication of the Holy Canons of the Orthodox Church, together with their translation from the «ancient» into the vernacular Greek. They claimed that the texts of the Church should not be translated, because they should not become accensible to the «vulgar mob». Even this characterization alone («vulgar mob») reveals the ecclesiological base of the debate. One has to answer, in the first place, whether he considers the people of the Church active participants and real members of Christ's Body, or something else. The then Ecumenical Patriarch Neophytos defended the initiative of St. Nicodemus and claimed that if the opponents were right, then the Canons would never have been written, because their original language was the vernacular (the language of the simple people) of that time. Finally, St. Nicodemus's work gained the approval of the patriarchal synod<sup>9</sup>.

Yet none of these steps is really an innovation. They are just the application of the Church criteria at different moments in history. The Apostle Paul has said that the members of the Church should use understandable words, so that everyone may know what is said; the major task of Christians is to instruct others and construct of the Church (1 Cor. 14: 9-19). And the construction of the Church is quite different from magic ritual. Magic is supposed to function automatically, regardless of human intentions and purposes. But Church membership demands conscious participation. Neither worship nor other dimensions of ecclesiastical life should be regarded as the domain of agnosticism, of unconscious romanticism or mindless instincts. This is why the Holy Liturgy, Baptism, and so on, include the confession of faith. The Church demands that every single member of her be aware of the doctrine and confess it personally: «*I believe...*».

The Orthodox tradition should be described as the tradition that is

8. Florovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

9. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, *To Pidalion* (in greek), Astir, Athens 1976, preface, p. ix-xi. English translation: *The Rudder* (tr. D. Cummings), Chicago 1957.

not disturbed or alarmed by the multitude of the languages, whether among diverse nations, or among historical periods of the same nation. The Bible says that in the beginning *«the whole world had one language and a common speech»* (Gen. 11: 1). When they attempted to build the tower of Babel, their relationship with God was broken and their relationship with one another as well. Their common language was broken into numerous different languages and the human race was scattered over the face of the earth (Gen 1: 1-9). The linguistic multitude appears as a consequence of sin. Nevertheless, the Church never sought a playback, that is, the imposition of one common language on the nations or through the ages. She realistically accepts the already existing post-Babel languages and tries to transform them into new flesh of the truth. This is what happened, firstly –in opposition to Babel– at the Pentecost, when people from different nations heard the Apostles declaring the wonders of God in each of their own languages (Acts 2: 4-6). This was the beginning of the opening un of the Church to the world, so that *«every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord»* (Phil. 2: 11). It is very characteristic how an important Christian text dating from the 2nd or the 3rd century, the «Epistle to Diognetus», describes the presence of the Christians in the world. It clarifies that the Church is certainly something new to the world, but, at the same time, She is not a marginalized sect speaking an extraterrestrial jargon: *«The difference between Christians and the rest of mankind is not a matter of nationality, or language, or customs. Christians do not live apart in separate cities of their own, speak any special dialect, nor practice any eccentric way of life... Nevertheless, the organization of their community does exhibit some features that are remarkable, and even surprising... For them, any foreign country is a motherland, and any motherland is a foreign country»*<sup>10</sup>. This is why, after all, St. John Chrysostom assures us that it is no shame if the Church adopts the so-called barbarian languages<sup>11</sup>.

One could go on mentioning several examples of this Church attitude<sup>12</sup> [e.g. the missionary work of St. Innocent Veniaminov (1797-1879) among the tribes of Alaska, Nikolai Ilminski among the Tartars

10. *Early Christian Writings* (tr. M. Staniforth, rev. A. Louth), Penguin Books, 1987, p. 144-145.

11. P.G. 63, 501.



(1822-1891), St. Nikolai Kassatkin in Japan (1836-1912), etc]. But, what is of special importance to us today, is the debate between the western clergymen and St. Cyril, the Apostle of the Slavs. The western clergymen claimed that the Liturgy should be performed exclusively in the three ancient languages, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, in which Pilate ordered the composition of the inscription of the Crucifixion, «*Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews*» (John 19: 19). St. Cyril confronted them and called them Pilate's disciples. He defended not only the right of every people to hear and speak, but also the right of God to reveal Himself to everyone<sup>13</sup>. So, today, if we, Orthodox Christians, tend to pronounce one language as «holy» and the rest as «profane», we turn our back on the tradition of Orthodoxy and espouse the opinion of the western clergymen just mentioned; while –it should be recalled– the Roman Catholics proceeded to the adoption of the vernacular, at least since Vatican II.

All this linguistic sensibility is not merely a matter of the translation of texts from one language to another. Beyond this, it has to do with the very construction of the Church. It enables a local Church to be truly local and truly Church. It enables Her to express Herself, to produce her own texts and produce a new transplantation of the Truth into a new field, in a new cultural context, in a particular civilization, in a particular society.

Yet, world-wide discussions today focus on Globalization. The world seems to be swept up by the dominant model of modern western civilization. Some people believe that the strengthening of the particular, local cultures is the only hope in the face of a storm of levelling. Others think that no particular culture has any future. The fact is that today, for several reasons, two languages prevail. On the one hand English, which seems to have become universal. On the other hand, the Internet and Virtual Reality seem to be emerging as a kind of new universal and powerful language. Both of these are establishing the parameters for the future global communication. This communication, no doubt, offers the exciting opportunity of exchanging messages from one corner of the earth to the other, but, at the same time, it promotes

---

13. Francis Dvornik, *Byzantine Missions among the Slavs. SS Constantine-Cyril and Methodius*, Rutgers U.P., N. Brunswick-N. Jersey 1970, p. 115, 129.

a questionable ideal: The ideal of a communication without real, local community; a bodiless contact<sup>14</sup>. Will humankind use all this technology just as a useful instrument that facilitates the meeting of human persons, or will it lapse into a sui generis «spiritualistic» way of life that does not care for human community at all? All these are challenges for the Church. In no event should She alienate herself from the linguistic treasures gathered through the ages. After all, a good knowledge of the original language of the ecclesiastical texts is of vital importance for serious theological studies. Nevertheless, at the same time the Church must be ready to give her witness sufficiently in new and, perhaps, unforeseen conditions. Her language should neither be reminiscent of an exhibit in a museum, nor a fossil. Its roots lie in the distant past, but its branches must blossom in the present and prepare the fruit for tomorrow.

Life in the world has never been easy. Especially when trying to discern the future, the feeling that knocks at the door of our soul is often uncertainty, if not panic. One can sympathize with this anxiety, but must not be led to predominantly hostile feelings towards the world. The Christian task to speak to the world must not degenerate into an aggressive verbalism that forces its ways into the ears of others, yearning to proselytize them even at the expense of their freedom. As authoritarian act like this may be called commercial marketing or ideological imperialism, but certainly not a Christian stance. As I said before, the language of the Church must remain an invitation, not an imposition. Besides, it must always contribute to a dialogue, not to a monologue. Let us remember the discussion of Christ with Nicodemus, with the Samaritan woman (John 3: 1-21, 4: 1-30) and with others. It is far from certain that modern Christians will remain faithful to their commitment if they refuse to listen humbly to the agony, the pain and the questions of the modern world.

For this task, it will help us greatly if we bear in mind an essential characteristic of the ecclesiastical language: it is not a voice without a body. The Church speaks not only through her verbal voice, but, at the same time, through Her very existence. What counts is not only what

---

14. Important dimensions of this matter have very often appeared in lectures given by the Metropolitan of Pergamon, John Zizioulas.

She says, but mainly what She is: a living body that gives new answers to new problems. But here some crucial questions arise. Does the Body of the Church today live indeed as a Body; Do the Orthodox churches today function really as communities? Is their theology born and cultivated in these communities, that is, the parishes? Does theology spring from a common experience of Holy Eucharist, or is it mainly a matter of individual labour? Are the local Orthodox Churches able to communicate with the modern world and invite it to the Body of Christ? Is the liturgical life in the parishes accompanied by emphasis upon catechesis, an insistence on theological criteria and freedom in discussion? These are just some of the questions that need to be discussed and answered.

To conclude, the inspired words of Fr Georges Florovsky perhaps give us some indication of the direction we need to follow in order to find an answer to these question:

*«Orthodoxy is once again revealed in patristic exegesis as a conquering power, as the power giving rebirth and affirmation to life, not only as a way station for tired and disillusioned souls; not only as the end but as the beginning, the beginning of a quest and creativity, a “new creature”»<sup>15</sup>.*

#### NOTES

This paper was presented at the VII International Consultation of Orthodox Theological Schools, organized by «Syndesmos, the World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth», in St. Petersburg, Russia, 20-26 January 1999.

---

15. Florovsky, *op. cit.*, p. xviii.