

UNITY OF FAITH AND PLURALISM IN CULTURE

A LESSON FROM THE BYZANTINE MISSIONARIES

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The Heritage of Patriarch Photius

One of the pioneers in adapting the gospel to the culture, language and particularities of a given indigenous nation or society was Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople (810-895). He was a great scholar, philosopher and missionary. Visualizing the conversion of populations, he inspired and prepared competent preachers and evangelists to send to the Balkan countries. It was during his time that Cyril and Methodius, both born in Thessalonica, were sent to central and eastern Europe to convert the Slavs, Czechs, Moravians and Poles, whom they taught in the vernacular. There is historical evidence that the first voice of the gospel was heard in these regions from these two brothers. Photius defended pluralism and liberty in a time of a monolithic latinization. Theological symposia are held in many Orthodox countries in order to show the relevance and the timely message of Photius for an inculturization effort and for the contextual proclamation of faith.

Photius enumerated and strongly recommended as a very legitimate practice the use of different spoken languages and cultures in different churches of his time with all their different dialects, expressions and idioms.

The impact of historical upheavals, social changes, political reformations and migration of rural populations was above all a summons to Photius that the church, in proclaiming the gospel to young nations, should address itself to the totality of the life of people. He realized that Orthodoxy could no longer afford to maintain a passive, defensive attitude nor could it be absorbed only by doctrinal debates with heretics. He refused a self-defensive attitude of all that patristic heritage bestowed on the Byzantine world. The church could no longer protect its identity by isolation; east and central European societies in the ninth and tenth centuries were constantly accelerating their pace toward rapid change and modernization. Slowly this outstanding ecclesiastical leader was beginning to see the need to venture out of the enclaves. He dared to announce to the Balkan world that what is relevant to Byzantine society is equally useful to them.

There is a danger in riches. The manna in the wilderness could not be stored, not even from day to day (Ex. 16, 14, 35; Deut. 29:5-6). Israel had to trust that the gift would be renewed as needed, and those who worked to keep this lavish gift, preserving it for future use, found that it spoiled overnight. That was a

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warning for Byzantium, which was hesitant towards expansion of the faith. To be guardian of the faith (*phylax pisteos*) was not enough. They sought a bold recapturing of the fearless risky creativity of their great fathers. Such thoughts stimulated Photius' plans to make Orthodoxy known in the context of the realities.

The missionary projects of Photius were due also to his far-reaching vision of the geographical place of the Byzantine world, which included territories that had formerly belonged to the *partes Occidentis* of the Roman Empire. Of special importance were neighbouring Bulgar and Slav territories, which were profoundly imbued with Byzantine influence. During the ninth and early tenth centuries it lost the major part of Macedonia, of Thrace, of Thessaly, of Epirus, and of Dalmatia, which were ruled by the Slavonic tribes. Prince Boris, who had himself been baptized and was resolved to promote the conversion of his people to Christianity, sent for Byzantine missionaries in 869. The Slavonic liturgical language and the so-called "Glagolitic" alphabet, on the basis of the Greek, were adopted in Bulgaria. The success of Orthodox penetration is attributed to its process of fusion with the culture and local traditions, resulting in an original civilization development, profoundly marked by Byzantine influences. The art of the "Macedonian Renaissance," like that of the sixth century, made its influence felt afar; Armenia, Russia, and even Italy were indebted to it and the writings of Michael Psellos show with what intensity the philosophy of Plato and the classical authors were being studied to serve theology and humanistic education.

Photius' vision to proclaim the gospel to far distant countries emanates from a human compassion and principle that spiritual treasures must be shared and not be kept exclusive to a few. This is reflected in his efforts to civilize the barbarians of the north. He was the first to reach the Scandinavian Rus, through them also the Russians of Kiev. His far-sighted views inspired him to establish a school of Slavonic studies at Constantinople—a seminary for providing priests to the Slavs. A fervent worker and universal champion for the promotion of culture as a Christian humanist, he was educator to all peoples within and outside Byzantium. Thus, he became friendly with Muslims, and it is well known that he held close bonds with the Islamic Emir of Crete, even though differences in religion often were a barrier.

The two letters addressed by Nicolas I Mysticus (912-925), patriarch and successor to Photius, deserve some notice for the light they throw on the broad ideas of respect of Islamic values, and on the determination to cultivate friendship with people of non-Christian ideologies and faiths. As we know, Nicolas had been the pupil of Photius, and he reproduces the ideas of his spiritual father on the relations between Orthodox Christians and the Muslim world. These letters are addressed to the Emir of Crete:

Two sovereignties—that of the Saracens and that of the Romans, that is the East Roman Empire—surpass all sovereignty on earth, like the two great lights in the firmament. For this one reason, if for no other, they ought to be partners and brethren. We ought not, because we are separated in our ways of life, our

customs, and our worship, to be altogether divided; nor ought we to deprive ourselves of communication with one another by correspondence, in default of personal intercourse. This is the way we ought to think and act, even if no other necessity of our affairs compelled us to it....

Your wisdom cannot have failed to notice that the greatest among the high priests of God, the famous Photius, my father in the Holy Spirit, was united to the father of your Highness by bonds of friendship; so much so that no other man of his faith and country was so friendly to yours. For being a man of God and great in the knowledge of divine and human things, he knew that even if the dividing wall of worship stood between us, nevertheless the gifts of practical wisdom, sagacity, stability of behaviour, knowledge, and all the other gifts that adorn and exalt human nature by their presence, kindle in those who love what is good for a friendship for those who possess the qualities they love.¹

From these reflections we gather to what extent Photius was able to recognize the positive values in Islam. His broadmindedness and high esteem for non-Christians made him believe that an eventual dialogue could bridge many prejudices between two monotheistic religions:

Photius was also occupied by renewal. It was his earnest desire to consolidate an authentic spirituality by training men and women of God, under the guidance of hermits and contemplatives. A number of novitiate candidates came from Slavonic areas to settle in the community of the *presbyter ascetic* Arsenius in Constantinople. Photius, writing to Arsenius, gives instructions that all these be trained to a godly monastic ethos, so that upon their return they will be able to promote *askesis* wider in the society. It seems that Arsenius succeeded in training many, and this explains the sainthood bestowed upon him by the Bulgarians. Photius wanted to cover all the needs of a newly born Christian nation, thus attaching great importance to monasticism which always renders inestimable services for renewal, mission, national unity and to many intellectuals.²

By temperament Photius was not content that only a few parts of the earth were converted to Christ. His higher visions made him passionately anxious to introduce Christianity to more distant nations and, if possible, the whole inhabited world. Historians give witness to his numerous contacts and his sending of missionaries to Armenia, to the Black Sea regions. But Europe was for him a priority concern. He visualized the extension of the universal church to all corners of the earth, but these corners do not have a static terminal. They are the continually renewed beginning of an infinitive way of proclaiming God's love to the nearest human being. Here lies the inner mystery of the *ecclesia*, a mystery that is accomplished with the newly converted nations.

¹ P. G., III 28 and 36-37.

² *Epistolae* 95, pp. 102, 904-5. (For more information on this subject see Constantine Tsirpanlis, "St Photius as Missionary and True Ecumenical Father," *The Patristic and Byzantine Review*, No. 3, 1983, New York.)

So, in defending such broad principles, Photius in the local council of 879-880, established the principle of pluralism. As a result of this, each local church, being autocephalous (self-governing vis-à-vis Roman centralism) enjoyed independence in formulating and arranging its own traditions and customs without outside interference or urging. Since then, we have a solution to the thorny issue of harmonizing unity and diversity (the one and the many). Even prior to Photius, Athanasius of Alexandria had stated that "the Logos of God has decorated the order of all things, by putting aside the contrary with the contrary, and from all these constructing one harmony."³

Cyril of Jerusalem left us an excellent simile with the operation of the Spirit of God which offers us water for eternal life (John 4:14). By penetrating into the plants and trees, water gives us the whiteness of the lilies, the redness of the rose, the purple of the violets and hyacinths, other colours to dates and the vine leaves. The Holy Spirit, although being One and undivided, distributes grace to each, thus creating a variety of characters and personal or ethnic conditions.⁴

The importance of language in the mission to the Slavs

The importance of language can be explained in the context of the persisting policy in the west, where strongholds of "Triglosites," supported from Rome, were refusing the use of any other language in worship except those three written by Pontius Pilatus on the cross: namely, Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The introduction, therefore, by the brothers Cyril and Methodius, was seen as a scandal, a dangerous innovation, desecrating the sacredness of liturgical language. This integrist movement hindered for many centuries any attempt to simplify the archaic Latin language, or to accept all those new languages spoken in so many converted new lands. Certainly, such a persistent view made the mass in Latin incomprehensible—people standing but unable to participate in the very mystery, this provoking indignation, which was slowly preparing for the Reformation. Thus, the rapid success of this movement is explained, because congregations could easily follow prayers, the liturgical language, the Bible and all instructions.

Christianization of Moravia coincides with the defeat of the Avars by Charlemagne in 796. It is difficult to give the exact date since historical evidence is fragmentary. The best known report concerns the consecration of a church in Nitra by the Archbishop Adalram (circa 828), during the reign of Pribina.⁵ It seems that sporadic missionary efforts by Germans appeared already in Pannonia and Moravia. Some of these missionaries declared in a letter to Rome that *terra Sclavorum qui Moravi discuntur* was once subject to Bavarian rulers and that through them the Moravians *e paganis christiani sunt facti*.⁶ Seem-

³ *Contra Graec*, 42.

⁴ *Catechesis* 16, pp. 33, 932-33.

⁵ M. Kos, *conversio Bagoariorum*, p. 136.

⁶ Gustavus Friedrich, *Codex diplomaticus et epistolaris Regni Bohemiae*, I, No. 30.

ingly dissatisfied, the indigenous people, through their ruler Ratislav, sent an embassy to Constantinople asking for missionaries who could better understand the aspirations, the temperament and the whole culture, so that a religion deeply rooted in the local population could be proclaimed, with knowledge of the Slavonic language: "Many Christian teachers came to us from Italy, Greece and Germany, each teaching in their own manner.... Since our people have turned from paganism and hold the Christian practice and law, but we do not have such a teacher as would explain the true Christian faith to us in our own language."⁷

Michael III, emperor of Byzantium, following this request, designated Cyril or Constantine and Methodius for this historical mission.⁸ Upon their arrival, a rapid growth of Christian expansion took place, and the number of priests increased so that they were sent to all the towns; the pagans began to believe in the true God and "turned away from their errors," as is recorded in a valuable historical document.⁹ In order to meet the various religious and liturgical needs of the priests and of the laypeople, a translation of more and more devotional and liturgical books from the original Greek started. Thus, "Cyril soon translated the entire church order and taught to the disciples Matins, the Canonical Little Hours, Vespers, Compline and the Eucharist. So, the ears of the deaf were opened, as the prophet says, to hear the words of Scripture and the tongue of the stutterer was loosened."

The historical period of the eighth to ninth century is characterized by confusion as to what limit is imposed by tradition and what new historical conditions were demanding a change. Many were identifying faithfulness and tradition with immobility. Nothing ought to change. Whoever dared to introduce a simple modification was thought to betray the religion, disrespecting the order and the directives of the church. It is in this context that one should see the difficulty of accepting new languages in worship and in expressing doctrinal view. The conservatism of the *Trilingues* became intolerable, especially in the west, relying on a misinterpreted comment of St Jerome (342-420),¹⁰ who in reality was saying that "readers of the Bible should respect greatly the three respective languages," himself being a specialized biblical scholar. The opponents were referring to certain vague expressions of Isidore, Archbishop of Sevilla (560-636), who also highly respected the three ancient languages.¹¹

Triglosites were well aware of all interdictions against their views. Their error was officially condemned by a council convoked by Charlemagne in Frankfurt in 794, which openly declared that God can be adored and worshiped in all existing languages throughout the world. It was evident that Cyril and Methodius, fully aware of the fanatical opposition, were fighting for liberties in

⁷ *Vita Methodia*, cap. 4.

⁸ Nestor, *Chronicle*.

⁹ *The Life of St Methodius X*.

¹⁰ *Epistola ad Heliodorum*.

¹¹ *Originum libri XX*.

language and worship in proclaiming the gospel to all nations, plunged in those days in deplorable ignorance and full paganism in many parts of Europe. More and more felt that if the church of Christ wanted to accomplish its mission of making known the redemptive message of our Saviour, new methods and living native languages should be used in order to reach them. Christ's teaching must become understandable, intelligible and accessible, since he himself came down from heaven in order to be close to the human condition, human being amongst human beings, weak amongst the weak. Thus they started to translate liturgical texts and catechetical instructions in the new Slavonic with Cyrillic letters.¹² Unfortunately, their magnificent initiative, serving not exclusively one particular church, namely the Byzantine, but the whole universal Christendom, was viewed as unorthodox by the Latin "Philatians." They started through political agents to accuse these brothers that they suffer "from arrogant pride, because they dared to do what nobody before them did; neither the apostles, nor a venerable pope of Rome, a Gregory, a Jerome, an Augustine"!

The linguistic problem became controversial not so much on the grounds of language as a verbal instrument, but behind it was hidden another wider factor influencing the relationship between Constantinople and Rome. We know the basic thought dominating the Hellenistic period: that the emperor, as head of the state, is responsible for the spread of proper worship. The principle must be understood that the supreme ruler of the nation had to care for the needs of citizens involving a wide range of welfare including religion, since religion plays such an important role in shaping the whole life. Consequently, a much wider responsibility was inherited from Constantine the Great, the first Christian king, and later became a permanent feature of leadership in all countries converted to Christianity.¹³ Another principle, which proved to be very helpful, was that ecclesiastical organization should follow the pattern of the political division of the empire, thus contributing to the solid foundations of the structure of early Christian communities.

These two factors greatly increased the process of Christianization of groups living within the boundaries of a given kingdom. The newly-emerging nations benefitted from it, not only from the point of view of their acceptance of the gospel but also with regard to national unity, coherence and of stabilizing their socio-political entity as well. Due to this mutual pragmatic sense toward the cultural, social and ethnic expediency, evangelism, instead of having been a marginal issue, peripheral element and stumbling block, was gradually accepted as an asset.

All the available historical sources agree that the teaching of the two brothers had a tremendous social impact upon the Slavs and the Slovaks. The cultural, as well as the intellectual, social, artistic and spiritual, standard of whole

¹² *Historia slavorum Constantin.*

¹³ F. Dvornik, *De auctoritate civili in conciliis oecumenicis*, Acta VI Congressus Velehrandensis, Olomouc 1933.

nations converted was considerably improved by the zeal and genius of these apostles and their associates. Behind the renewal of the evangelized peoples found in all aspects of life, one has to find the new faith proclaimed by them. In this light we have to see their achievement: the genial invention of the Slavonic Bible, as well as the admirable Slavonic translation of liturgical books. Although there were many adversaries disapproving these unusual new translations, we must admit the exception of Pope John VIII, who, in various letters, sent out support and even recommended their use.¹⁴ John praises the Slavonic script and approves the new liturgical texts translated by Cyril and Methodius, aiming to offset the so-called "Three Language School" or "Trilinguists," which openly opposed the use of any Slavonic language during the worship. John reminds his opponents that God had also created a fourth language, namely the Slavonic, for his honour and glory. He had even created the Greek, the Latin and the Hebrew. Disregarding the bitter opposition of the Bavarian episcopacy, he blesses the whole endeavours of the Byzantine evangelist:

We highly appreciate the Slavonic writing, discovered by a certain philosopher Constantine, with which they may praise God. We order, therefore, that in the same language be proclaimed the praises and the wonders of Jesus the Lord. In fact, we are advised by divine authority (Ps. 116; Acts 2:11; Phil. 2:11; I Cor. 14:5) that not only by three languages but by all existing we worship the Lord. Undoubtedly, there is no obstacle to the faith and the doctrine if we sing the Eucharistic Mass in the same Slavonic language, or if we read the holy gospel or the divine lectures of the New and of the Old Testament provided they be well translated and interpreted. Or even if we celebrate all the other services of the canonical hours.

Certainly, who has made these three principal languages, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, has created too all the others for his glory and blessing. Consequently, we ordain that in all the churches of the region, for the attribution of a much higher honour, the gospel be read at first in Latin, followed by reading in Slavonic, as is the practice established already in certain churches. By using the Slavonic version, we facilitate those people who do not understand the Latin. But there are certain people who enjoy mass sung in Latin more than in any other language, then we ordain that holy masses be celebrated exclusively in Latin.¹⁵

Responsibility of the church to the local culture

There is no place in the church of God for liturgical uniformity, cultural domination, colonialism, brutal conformism or a uniformity forcibly imposing worship and theological expressions upon others. We may envisage this harmonization of different colours as a mosaic. Equally, it would be absurd to condemn other Christians who prefer this or that liturgical expression, this form of language, this kind of liturgical singing and music. This is not Orthodoxy.

¹⁴ Letter in 879 *Epistl. VII*, No. 200; Bull "Industriae tuae," in 880 *Epistl. VII*, No. 25.

¹⁵ Letter to Bishop Anno in 873, A.D., pp. 126, 850.

Spirituality can be expressed in different ways and must not be taken to mean a stereotyped form of piety, otherwise the human element is overstated as compared with the divine at the expense of unity and the spreading of the gospel. By overstressing marginal secondary elements, we promote them to absolutes and essentials while in reality there exists a dialectic synthesis and harmony.

It was precisely this ignoring of cultural aspirations and the pluralism in humanity that manifested itself in the monolithic attitude of the Latin church when it adamantly insisted on Latin remaining the compulsory language in the worship of newly-converted nations, such as Bulgaria and elsewhere, creating the consequent split. Photius protested in an encyclical in 867 and denounced the anachronistic steps of Rome. The conflict was seemingly over evangelistic methodology and deontology, but behind it was the Roman claim to primacy of universal jurisdiction. It accentuated the conflict between the Roman claim to be the centre of unity for Christendom and the Eastern Orthodoxy conception of the five patriarchates of almost equal status.

There is a deeper and more objective approach to theology and culture as a way of life that owes its origin to the early fathers of the east. Such a work is both indigenous and fruitful. Our faith and worship has to be expressed and re-interpreted through the language and the gestures, the customs of contemporary peoples scattered throughout the world. This was the extraordinary achievement of Patriarch Photius, seeking to integrate various Slavonic customs in religion and in liturgical life. Such an approach to inculturation remains a continuous responsibility. The church of today, especially that in diaspora and overseas, is urgently seeking a *diachronic* and *synchronic* liturgy, preaching theology and spirituality that will embody the best traditions of local culture.

These two brothers, left to our age, called technological, electronic, nuclear, spatial, revolutionary, an everlasting model of how preaching and evangelism should be in every historical period of change. While the central message will remain untouched and unchangeable, its language, form, semantic expression and terminology should always be reviewed, adapted to new emerging needs. Human beings, while remaining the same throughout history, from other aspects—cultural and intellectual—undergo considerable change, inviting appointed pastors to give more attention than they usually do to the methods used, to the language employed and to how they ought to speak in order to awaken apathy and sleepy consciences. Without absolutizing methods and *informatique*, from this new science, nevertheless, we are not at all excused, if we rely exclusively on old outdated patterns of our fathers, irrelevant for today. Certainly they were valid in their time, but not for today. We need to become flexible, contemporary. We must, as an imperative challenge, stand with one leg in the past, in history, but we have to put the other leg into the present, with all that that implies and demands, for a proper articulation of our faith to the people. Only then will the proclamation of our faith become effective and credible.



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