

The Bread of Theology

The following is translation of Bishop Atanasije replying to the question of where the best place is to study theology. It is from the same conversation as below:

I studied in Serbia, Greece, and was at Halki for only five months – there were problems there, the Turks were preparing to close Halki. So in terms of Halki, it's difficult to say. In general, education in Constantinople was on the model of the Russian academies and there were no outstanding theologians there. In Greece the schools are state-run, but there are good theologians. Granted, there is competition among the theologians. In general, life goes on dynamically, and there is theology there, but not always of an academic nature, it's often even better outside the schools. There is a lively, strong ascent of theology there, but there are also many dangers and difficulties. There are young educated people on Athos, in the Athonite monasteries, where there are fifty to eighty monks: Philotheou, Simonos Petra, Grigoriou, Vadopdi, Iveron – there nearly have of them are educated, and there are theologians among them, and in other monasteries as well. Some of them write, some of them are beginning to. In general, such an ascent is going on everywhere. Metropolitan John (Zizoulas) of Pergamon told me that there are young theologians in Russia who in ten years will surpass us. Ten years have passed, and I still haven't seen that anyone has concretely surpassed him – that was his humility, he is a very good theologian, deep, dynamic, knows the Fathers very well, but is always wanting to dialog with contemporary mission... He is also a good philosopher, he succeeds well there, he's a good disciple of Florovsky, and I have trust in him, although I'm not in agreement with him on everything. Such theologians are, of course, needed; he is a deep person. In Patristics, I'll say openly, he's gone a step further than Florovsky. That's what he said. One should never say that certain people are following "tendencies," because this is always a revelation of the Holy Spirit.

There are young theologians in France. For instance, the Frenchman Jean-Claude Larchet, who will in two or three years be a Serbian priest – he's in the Serbian Church. He's published good books. Vladyka Kallistos (Timothy)? A very good, deep theologian.

In America there has been a certain weakening of theology after the famous fathers: Florovsky, Schmemmann, Meyendorff. There are few of them there. The Saint Serge Institute has also weakened – but what can one do? As Florovsky said, in the history of the Church there are ascents and descents. There are Orthodox who think that, look, the era of Orthodoxy is approaching, that Haghia Sophia will be ours, Orthodox, and so forth. Even if this is a somewhat Utopian view, it doesn't mean that we shouldn't work.

I see an ascent in the Russian Church because, by the way, I came here not only because of your love, but in order to have a look around, to feel things out. There is a vital life in the Russian Church. Even if it is sometimes somewhat external, there is still life here. But there are problems that have been inherited, and there are new problems – the devil never leaves anything in peace.

About theological education, this is what I'll tell you. Where is it better? Everywhere. In my opinion, Greece and Russia now hold the first place. The Serbs are doing something, of course, for the time being with Vladyka Amfilohije. There are young people there -- but we'll see. And in the West things vary.

It is especially important to return to the tradition of the Holy Fathers. You have it easier, since you have many of the Fathers in translation -- you read them in Russian translation. We Serbs don't have this. I began to read the Fathers in Russian translation. We had very, very little back then, although now more has been translated, and things are progressing. Without the Fathers there can hardly be a renewal of theology. Moreover, one can not limit oneself only to reading. To be a theologian does not mean to be a good scholar, one who has read many books. God's grace and life are essential. St

Gregory Palamas prayed to the Theotokos – he was a poor student when he tried to study. He prayed: "Enlighten my darkness!" -- and he received it, and became a great theologian. May God grant that you study, but always with life. As Metropolitan Philaret said, life always witnesses. So God gives according to the heart, according to humility, according to work, according to struggle, according to podvig. This isn't given immediately, it can't be quick. In schools and academies one has to go through the course. One has to take tests, one has to know what's on the syllabus. But the syllabus is never fully carried out, and even if it is carried out, it's unlikely there will be a result. Self study is essential. Human life is such that one needs to be careful, hard working, and one must struggle. In general, nothing is given just like that, and glory to God! As the Fathers said, God will take no more naive Adams into paradise. One must undertake a great struggle. But theology is necessary, my dear ones, don't forget that theology is necessary. But theology is not something abstract, as if one someone simply read books and becomes wise. St Maximus said this about what theology means. God said to Adam: till the earth and eat of the bread of the earth. This is our being -- the soul and the body. This is our earth. Cultivate yourself in order to eat the bread of theology -- this is what St Maximus said.