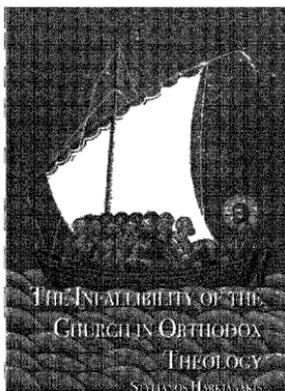


BOOK LAUNCH



(Archbishop) Stylianos Harkianakis, *The Infallibility of the Church in Orthodox Theology*, translated by Philip Kariatlis, Adelaide, Sydney: ATF Press, St Andrew's Orthodox Press, 2008, 278 pp., ISBN 9781920691981.

Tonight¹, it gives me great pleasure – and indeed, it is a great honour for me to have been invited – to introduce the translation of the doctoral dissertation of the distinguished Orthodox theologian, His Eminence Archbishop Stylianos (Harkianakis) of Australia. This thesis was first written in Greek and submitted to the Theological Faculty of the University of Athens in 1965 under the title of *The Infallibility of the Church in Orthodox Theology*. Right from the outset, it has to be made known that this ground-breaking work – written by a man who was only thirty years of age, whilst pursuing post-graduate studies in Systematic Theology and Philosophy of Religion in Bonn – was unanimously and unreservedly accepted by the Faculty of Theology in Athens for its profound scholarship and originality. Indeed, one of the Faculty Examiners of the time, Professor Moraitis had stated that, up to this point, he was unaware that infallibility constituted an official article of faith of the Orthodox Church – these remarks can be found in the official minutes of the Faculty Board of the time. The importance of this work alone, but also the fact that it has now

¹ This book was launched in Sydney, 1 April 2008 and in Melbourne, 8 September 2008.

been published in English for the first time, will provide the opportunity for the Archbishop's contribution to ecclesiology to be more fully appreciated and critically appropriated, allowing its contemporary readers, in this way, to discover the insightful ecclesiological vision of this most perspicacious Orthodox theologian and hierarch of the Church.

For this reason, it would be beyond dispute to say, that although there have been several Orthodox theologians who significantly influenced the development of ecclesiology in the twentieth century, His Eminence's contribution remains, without doubt, a landmark in the history of Orthodox ecclesiology today. His theology continues to rest at the forefront of any Orthodox ecclesiology of the twenty-first century, especially on account of its genuine concern to address critically the extent to which the Church today has continued to reflect concretely and practically the theological vision of the Church as intended by God.¹ In this, his ecclesiology has been far removed from much of the rarefied academic or speculative theology that dominated the Orthodox Church in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, his intense desire to remain in sustained engagement and constant vigilance with the historical experience of the Church has made him, very often, a lone voice crying out in the wilderness. In all this, one cannot help but detect a hidden fire, an all-consuming love for the Church; indeed, it has been the Church that has continued to stand at the centre of his entire theological vision. For this reason, when the writings of Archbishop Stylianos are understood and deciphered, he will truly remain, for future generations, not only a prophetic ecclesial thinker, but more importantly, a genuine father of ecclesiology.

Essentially, His Eminence's consideration of the Church – as discerned in all his writings, together with his doctoral dissertation presented tonight – is that of a most intimate and graced communion not only of human persons but also of the entire created cosmos bonded together in a wondrous relationship with the uncreated God. Throughout his entire life, His Eminence has continued to express a remarkably inclusive and comprehensive vision of the Church within history. A peerless teacher and communicator, able to make difficult issues readily understood, Archbishop Stylianos, in his lectures on ecclesiology delivered to students of

St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College, has defined the mystery of the Church as follows: the Church, he underlines is 'a graced communion between the Uncreated and the created for the glory of the Uncreated and the salvation of the created [ἡ ἐν Χάριτι κοινωνία κτιστοῦ καὶ ἄκτιστου, πρὸς σωτηρία τοῦ κτιστοῦ καὶ δόξαν τοῦ ἄκτιστου].' This definition of the Church has unquestionably encapsulated a radical inclusiveness by moving beyond the usual boundaries of the Church to include the whole created realm in God's communion. Indeed, throughout all his writings – not just his seminal work being presented tonight – one senses a profound sub-text; that it is precisely the power of far-reaching inclusion that becomes the chief criterion of truth. The Church, for Archbishop Stylianos, is that miraculous mode of life, in which God pitches his tent amongst his people and remains with them; and will indeed continue to do so until such time when he will establish an even greater and more profound unity and relationship of *koinonia* with the world and his people in his eternal Kingdom.

Accordingly, the mystery of the Church, for His Eminence, is inconceivable apart from the mystery of the Trinitarian God since it is the communal life within the Trinity that provides the basic and inherent mode of the Church's existence. It is precisely for this reason that the Church, for His Eminence, has never been something that is merely described or approached in curiosity, but is rather, a mystery – and a miracle at the same time – which is venerated with awe, experienced in gratitude and enjoyed with a spirit of 'sober drunkenness' about which only mystic theologians of old spoke. Therefore, it follows from all this that the Church, being unconfusedly and indivisibly united with the Triune God, also enjoys and rightly proclaims the *truth* – quite simply, that the Church is infallible. To appreciate why His Eminence should have regarded the Church as infallible, it is necessary to recognise his firm conviction that the Church, throughout all time, but especially from the incarnation of our Saviour and the day of Pentecost, has been genuinely and inextricably linked to God, and as such cannot but rightly give authentic witness to the truth of God, for the salvation of the world and the glorification of his name. That is to say, his belief that the Church is infallible is simply an affirmation of the miraculous presence of God in the Church.

Based on his conviction that the Church ‘images’ the Trinitarian communal life, His Eminence has quite simply, yet insightfully affirmed in his book, that the Church contains and proclaims the truth in matters pertaining to faith and morals – that is, the practical application of the faith. It is by virtue of God’s communion with His *ekklesia*, that the Church possesses the assurance that it is true or, as the author described it, infallible. In his analysis of the infallibility of the Church, His Eminences highlights the etymological synonymity between the notions of ‘truth’ [ἀλήθεια] and ‘infallibility’ [ἀλάθητον]. He observes that, in the Greek, both words are derived from the alpha privative and the verb ‘to lay hidden’ – namely [α] + [λανθάνω]. Consequently, infallibility essentially means God’s truth that has been revealed in the Church and is, therefore, no longer hidden. This leads His Eminence to draw a further relationship between ‘infallibility’, ‘truth’ and ‘revelation’ [ἀποκαλύψις] – namely, that which was formerly hidden and is now exposed or uncovered. From this, it becomes clear that any pejorative echoes of the term ‘infallibility’ interpreted in terms of perfectionism are thus dispelled from the very beginning since infallibility essentially denotes truth, specifically, God’s truth revealed to the world in the Church.

Having discussed the notion of infallibility as an essential element of religion in general in the book, the author turns his attention to infallibility as an attribute of the Church. Right from the very beginning of his doctoral dissertation, he defines infallibility in the following way:

Infallibility is that attribute of the Church which, by the power of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, safeguards the faith entrusted to it from every error, and rightly teaches the word of truth.²

The Archbishop’s definition identifies two aspects of infallibility within the life of the Church, both resulting from the Holy Spirit’s action towards the Church. These two aspects include what one could call an active and passive action of the Holy Spirit: firstly, as an active or positive quality, infallibility is described as an act of divine grace which bestows upon the Church the irrevocable assurance that it can rightly declare the saving truths of God. The second aspect of infallibility affirms that the teaching entrusted to the Church will be safeguarded from all possible error. Fundamentally,

the author insists that, in its historical journey the Church's claim to infallibility lies in its intimate communion with Christ and the Holy Spirit leading it back to God the Father. Therefore, the affirmation of the infallible quality of the Church by His Eminence is nothing other than a foundational insight into the Church's communal mode of existence – a communion between the 'uncreated' Trinitarian God and the 'created' world.

Having defined and analysed infallibility, the second part of the book is dedicated to providing a synthesis and exposition of the Orthodox teaching on infallibility. At a time when modern scholastic theology had often overlooked the proper and diverse ministries of all baptised members of the Church – and indeed, sometimes rendered them suspicious – concentrating instead on the special ministry of the priesthood, His Eminence clearly states that the entire body of the Church – both clergy and laity – are responsible for preserving and protecting the teaching of the Church unadulterated and integral. For His Eminence, every committed member of the Church is called to be a 'bearer' of the Church's infallibility. This is nothing other than the scriptural truth that the Apostle Peter reveals in his letter, in which he addresses *all* Christians saying:

like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.... You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. (1Pt 2:5, 9-10).

According to this vision, all of God's people together, and in communion, are called to bring their unique gifts of the Holy Spirit for the 'common good' (1Cor 12:7) and 'for building up the body of Christ.' (Eph 4:12).

Now, even though all faithful are responsible for upholding the truth of the Church, it is the bishops who, as the successors of the apostles, are the 'organ' or 'mouthpiece' of the Church's infallibility. In his book this truth is expressed in the following way:

Just as the physical body of a human organism, the bearer of every vital need is the entire body, while the mouth alone is the instrument of the expression of that need, so it is in the Church.... [p. 81].

Reflecting upon this, it becomes clear that the bishops, especially within the synodical context, are divinely appointed to exercise the Lord's authority in the Church, by *defining*, *formulating* and *proclaiming* the Church's truth in crystallised form. And so, it belongs to the unique ministry of the bishop to preserve the identity and integrity of the apostolic faith by authoritatively teaching the truth of the Gospel. In this way, not only is the genuine apostolic faith maintained, but also the unity of the Church is preserved intact, especially in the face of the growing danger of divisions and schism. Already, in the New Testament we find the call for the ordination of responsible leaders who not only exhibited the appropriate moral qualities befitting a leader (cf. 1Tim 3:1-7; Tit 1:5-9), but who were also gifted and authoritative teachers, 'faithful people... able to teach others' (2Tim 2:2), as well as 'rightly explaining the word of truth.' (2Tim 2:15). From this it is clear that the episcopacy and teaching office, as noted by His Eminence, came to be identified since witness and fidelity to the apostolic faith was of paramount importance for maintaining the unity and *koinonia* of the Church – that is, Christ's organic and integral presence amongst the faithful.

In all this, however, the book makes it very clear that the episcopate does not stand above or detached from the remaining body of the Church. Whilst all the faithful members of the Church – clergy and laity – as 'bearers of truth' are empowered for the Church's mission to witness Christ within the world, it belongs to the specific domain of the episcopate to formally *define* the truth of the Church – as we noted above – in response to the specific historical circumstances arising from time to time which would want to undermine the unity of the Church. From all this, it becomes clear that His Eminence sees Church as an ordered or structured communion led by the Spirit within which the various ministries necessarily co-exist and function. In accordance with the New Testament understanding of leadership, His Eminence, in his more recent articles, has described the Church as an ordered communion according to the model of concentric circles which include the various ministries among the people of God. His model of concentric circles not only situates the ministry of the Church in the broader context of the whole community, but at the same

time recognises the reality of the different degrees of responsibilities within the Church. In this way, the Church, according to His Eminence, remains infallible to the extent that it upholds its communal being, and only as a communion of believers united to God is the Church infallible.

Page after page of this brilliant book, our assumptions are challenged as we are led back to the most profoundly significant dimensions of the Christian Church. Therefore, few will read this book without sensing that they have been invited to rediscover the Church itself in its richest traditional form. This is an outstanding book, therefore, and a converting one, fundamentally important for offering a comprehensive vision of the Church in all its integrity. Here is a voice that needs to be heard. And so, it is with great pleasure that I officially declare the book launched!

By Philip Kariathis

¹ Cf., for example, his article entitled, 'The "Positives" and "Negatives" of Orthodoxy in the New World', *Phronema* 10 (1995): 5-22.

² S. Harkianakis, *The Infallibility of the Church*, 10.

