

THE DOGMATIC FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

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As we can see, the general theme of this Conference has two parts. On the one hand, it contains the central question of ‘identity/diversity’ and, on the other hand, it has to do with the framework in which we shall study the topic.

The framework of our topic is pluralistic society, as we are experiencing it today on an international level.

In the address of Professor Christos Yannaras, we shall have the opportunity to hear how carefully the main features of today’s pluralism are analysed. In fact, we could already say that the truly insightful analysis of the Professor shows, through concrete examples, the negative climate that modern pluralism has imposed on the world – as a radically subversive ideology and practice – in terms of all forms of institutions and traditional values.

This address – without any prior arrangement with my friend Professor Yannaras – has not placed emphasis on the framework (namely pluralistic society), but rather on the individual conscience, which is the starting point and tribunal for any discussion.

It is obvious that, no matter what the issue or problem, one must give a moral and cognitive account to one’s own conscience, before encountering society’s prevailing mentality with its changing emphasis at any one time.

In other words, the thinking person will continuously ask themselves the following three basic questions:

- Who am I and how am I?
- What did I do and what did I neglect to do, either intentionally or subconsciously?

- What should I have acted on or ignored, in accordance with my ancestral and broader cultural presuppositions?

This triple question was, as we know, also what the members of an ancient Greek philosophical school would ask themselves on a daily basis.

However, such a daily examination would naturally prove even more demanding when it is conducted within the context of Christian spirituality. Above all, however, this test cannot take place in an abstract way or in a vacuum. On the contrary, the point of comparison is always the Other. Indeed, the Other is one's fellow human being and, infinitely greater than this, God Himself, as creator, provider and saviour.

We are therefore invited by this address to examine the task of identity and diversity as the pre-eternal and timeless Cross of the vigilant human person. For, the Cross is literally any form of encounter with the Other when, according to the divine will, you are obliged to love that person 'as yourself' (Mk 12: 31). In this demanding search, we shall attempt to find:

Firstly, what are the defining features of our spiritual identity – that which is more accurately and correctly described today as *idioprosopia* (idiosyncrasy).

Secondly, we must pinpoint the regulative values (religious, ethical or social) which have contributed decisively to a particular personality, so that we are then able to speak of a stable identity. In so doing, we shall obviously avoid all possible dangers of subjectivism, which in our times increasingly becomes a vague and uncertain ground.

Thirdly, we must conclude from the above – and with every possible astuteness – the mystical boundaries of our identity. This of course means we are to see the extent to which we can in good conscience embrace, and creatively adopt diversity. On the other hand, we must also see the boundary beyond which we are obliged to firmly resist whatever may falsify or disfigure our spiritual identity, which has been formed throughout many centuries. This identity has of course been formed not only by human efforts, but also by the providence of God.

In our times, multicultural societies are a daily reality in even the most remote regions of the earth. Needless to say, they do not only impose an ever-increasing pluralism as a disdainful ideology. These societies also give the opportunity to today's active citizens to have a deeper self-understanding, as well as a more dynamic development of both their natural and acquired qualities on a world scale. This was the ecumenical ideal of the ancient Greeks and, to an even greater extent, the almost unattainable ideal which the Apostle Paul described and preached so characteristically as 'the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Eph 4:13).

In other words, our Christian optimism should not allow us to 'fold our arms' or to be driven to despair or defeatist attitudes. No matter what the challenges of the economic hunger called globalisation are, and no matter how justified our indignation may be due to the way pluralism is overturning so many things, even to the point of nihilism, we Christians must recognise that the foundations of our identity are unshakeable and inviolate. And these foundations are secure and inviolate only when we ourselves do not betray them, by forgetting how many gifts the grace of God had bestowed on us throughout the centuries, as we remained faithful to our sanctified traditions.

It is precisely these foundations that will be investigated in the second and major part of this address. Before that, however, it is necessary to underline several parameters of geography and time, which give us the stigma of our present times, especially in our own case.

The parameters of geography and time

There were many reasons for choosing the theme *Spiritual identity and diversity in a pluralistic society* as the general platform upon which it would be possible to concentrate the discussions on the relevant topic of the 8th National Youth Conference of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia.

Of these many reasons, we shall mention indicatively only several of the major ones, so as to show not only the significance of the theme of identity in general – in all times and places – but also its great

timeliness, as well as the urgency with which we should constantly study this topic.

First of all, for us who are residents and citizens of the fifth continent, the issue of identity is the number one priority for each person individually, but also for entire ethnic and cultural groups or communities. This is due to the overwhelming fact that the old Anglo-Saxon monopoly in Australia has ceased since long ago. Up until 30 years ago, the entire psychology, sociology and politics of social life - whether of white people or coloured - had to submit to that monopoly without objection. However, it was not only the monolithic nature of the Anglo-Saxon model that was abandoned. That, by itself, would have been merely a worthless and unprofitable concession.

To fill the vacuum created by this change, there has been an ongoing and honest attempt over several decades to gradually establish a stable form of multiculturalism and a tolerant form of cultural diversity. This would, on the one hand, offer a balance to the injustices of the past and, on the other, creatively serve the needs of our particularly demanding times, together with the expectations of a doubtful future.

In this new sociopolitical context, all citizens are invited, without exception, to freely and consciously select the benefits of multiculturalism and the enjoyment of equal cultural rights. Yet this cannot possibly be achieved without first having a basic measure of self-knowledge, which in turn will ensure corresponding spiritual and social maturity. Such maturity is necessary in order to make value judgements, that is comparisons and responsible choices, befitting today's enlightened and 'active' citizens.

Following this, it must be observed that studies of the human person, nations and peoples are being increasingly promoted internationally. The findings of these studies can undoubtedly lead to better familiarisation, and further pacification, between people. This theoretical and cultural development undoubtedly affects the socio-political expression of human solidarity in the well-known structures of the modern world, such as joint agreements between nations, international organisations and multicultural societies.

Globalisation, on the other hand, makes universal solidarity more imperative, especially as nobody can claim with certainty that this movement truly serves a more just distribution of the world's goods between the super-rich and the super-poor regions of the earth, or worldwide security and peace.

Tied to globalisation of course are the social and economic problems of our times, together with the ecological issue. It should be said, however, that none of these problems will find a proper solution, if they are examined purely on the basis of material balance and comfort, together with ecological stability, simply for the sake of secular prosperity.

On the contrary, the radical solution to the whole network of ecological, economic, social and ethical problems of recent times, is ensured only when we see the human person – and the entire surrounding creation – in terms of the original sacredness and the inviolate integrity given to them by God, who created everything “very good” (Gen 1:31) since He created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).

Apparently, it was precisely this integrity which the crowds of demonstrators against economic globalization instinctively seek with indignation, both in the United States (Seattle and elsewhere), and in Europe, which is still undergoing a unification process (Goteborg, Sweden and Genova, Italy etc.).

All of these things naturally made it necessary (*conditio sine qua non*) to analyze the structure and function of the human person, and especially its expression in a stable ‘identity’.

Recently, we have also been confronted with the various issues of so-called bioethics through the remarkable progress made in biology and, more specifically, in genetics. Lately a climax was reached with the triumph of de-coding and ‘mapping’, so to speak, the complete ‘code’ of the human gene.

It is clear from these issues that human knowledge must directly depend upon moral conscience. In such a case, what we are mainly searching for is the formation of a spiritual identity, seen in correlation to spiritual diversity, which is, under certain conditions, the other side of the same coin!

In our attempt to master this multidimensional and highly ambitious objective, it is obvious that Christians – especially the Orthodox – cannot possibly overlook or underestimate the significance of Faith which has been ‘given once only’ (Jude 3) through Revelation and is handed over from generation to generation.

We do not of course forget that the expression of this Faith is Love, which is of the same essence, and which is practiced in everyday life.

We also do not forget that such love is not only nourished by the ancestral faith which has been bravely witnessed down through the ages, and been sanctified through the shedding of blood. At the same time, the mentioned Faith and Love are strengthened by the expectations included in the Christian conscience in the form of Hope. This Hope is precisely what is meant by St Paul, when he speaks of the glory which will be revealed to us after the “sufferings of the present time” (Rom 8:18).

From what has been mentioned so far, we can see that the following will focus our attention on the major dogmatic (i.e., doctrinal) truths which the Church has always presented to her faithful.

Without the unreserved confession and acceptance of these truths, one cannot be considered a true member of the Church, that is to say the Body of Christ, no matter what other secular knowledge or abilities a person may have.

It is only natural, then, that these concrete truths form the unshakeable foundations of ‘Christian conscience’ and, consequently, of ‘Christian identity’.

However, it should be strongly emphasised that it is not sufficient for these vital dogmatic truths to be appreciated only because they are contained - even in an implicit form - in the Bible. They must also be appreciated due to their central position in the works of the Fathers, which are the most immediate and authentic commentaries of the Bible within the Church.

A third parameter which must also be taken into consideration here is the consequent elaboration provided by post-Patristic theology on all doctrinal truths in their binding significance for today, as well as for eternal salvation.

Let us now see a little closer some of the dogmatic truths that are directly related to our theme.

The most prominent dogmatic truths that determine Christian self-understanding

The creation of the human person 'according to the image and likeness of God'

As a particular science, Biology is obliged to look at the human person as the result or product of physical and chemical processes. These are manifested collectively in a characteristic 'gene'. Regardless of this, the moral personality and its spiritual nature are predominantly found in a dynamic 'code' of unfathomable sacredness, which Holy Scripture calls 'the image and likeness of God'. In other words, just as the chemical makeup of water is consistently given as H₂O, so it is that the human being is defined, in the Judeo-Christian tradition at least, as the 'image of God'.

This teaching concerning the origin of the human person is formulated clearly enough – even if only as an overview – in the Old Testament (Book of Genesis). Be that as it may, we should further state that the essential truths defining the Biblical anthropology, are given almost exclusively in the New Testament and, more precisely, in the Epistles of the Apostle Paul.

In the Book of Genesis, we do in fact find the definition of man as the "image of God", but not the complete elaboration of this astonishing definition in its deepest dimensions, which would give rise to the highly dynamic, and previously unknown, Christian anthropology.

Therefore, in addition to the mentioned definition found in Genesis, we should also look at the relevant passages of the Old Testament containing the 'seeds' of the teaching about the Holy Trinity. Such a parallel study is unavoidable and logically imperative, given that we cannot understand, or even approach, the 'image' without first of all having basic information about the 'original'.

The Jewish people could not manage to go beyond their narrow and primitive notion of monotheism (perhaps here we could use the phrase 'one-dimension-God', similar to the 'one-dimension-man' denounced by

H. Markuze). In their view, the Old Testament is considered to be the *antipode*, the opposite, of the Christian teaching on the Holy Trinity. Yet for us Christians, reading the Old Testament retrospectively, that is, in light of the New Testament, the understanding of the Holy Scriptures as a single and indivisible Revelation is in fact much broader and deeper.

This is perhaps the reason why we can approach the revealed mysteries of God with greater familiarity and trust.

It is however clear that this familiarity and trust towards the revealed mysteries of God cannot be grasped solely with secular wisdom. All relevant writings, monuments or events must be studied with respect to the organic connection between them, that is to say with the necessary 'contextualization'. As is well-known, this exegetic principle is a key notion for all apocalyptic literature.

Only in this way do all the 'pre-dictions', 'pre-figurements' and 'enigmas' of the Old Testament acquire meaning and become verified in the historical life of the people of God.

Things which were previously incomprehensible and enigmatic now become obvious and constant signs of the pre-existing divine Economy which, as we know, by no means works towards the destruction of the world, but rather to its perfection, transfiguration and salvation.

After all these necessary clarifications, let us now look more closely at the two major passages of the Old Testament which define the human person as the 'image of God'. In Genesis we read:

so God created humankind in His image, in the image of God He created them, male and female He created them (Gen 1:27)

In Genesis we also read:

then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (Gen 2:7)

The first observation we would make about these passages is that they allow us to witness two major characteristics of human nature.

Firstly, that it is made up of the "dust of the earth", which God made into a "living being" through one uniquely beneficial act ("breathed the breath of life"). Secondly, that human nature is not to be considered complete without the two equal genders, 'male' and 'female'.

These two 'structural' characteristics of human nature clearly imply two fields of tension, a physical and a spiritual one. Both become more and more evident according to the degree of physical and spiritual maturity of the person.

The first field of tension develops on the basis of gender (male-female). The primitive myth of an 'androgynous' being (i.e., a being of both sexes) in nearly all ancient civilisations, is sufficient proof that gender is not determined simply by genetic presuppositions and corresponding distribution of hormones, no matter how important these elements may be for human gender.

Even the phenomenon of an unfortunately increasing rate of homosexuality testifies to the fact that education and upbringing, social and professional environment and one's 'inner state' also play a certain role.

The second field of tension is developed on the basis of the dual aspect of human nature, namely the joining of both the spiritual and material elements within it. The material aspect is the directly biological bond which unites the human being not only with all other living creatures, but also with the entire material universe.

The spiritual aspect is the privilege uniting the human being with the so-called 'knowable' world, namely God Himself who is pure Spirit and His logical creatures, such as the Angels.

We must pay particular attention to the fact that the two fields of tension in the structure of human nature do not arise from enmity or substantial opposition, but only from the variation between the contrasting elements (male/female – material/spiritual). This is precisely the deeper reason that makes the tension between male and female, or material and spiritual, a true 'con-celebration' of praise towards the Creator. This, then, is also the deeper reason for which the ecstasy of identity is expressed to the furthest possible points of diversity, as the highest task of the human being in this world.

This dynamism, strictly speaking, characterises the divine nature alone, which is why the philosophers in Medieval Christian times dared to describe God as the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

Yet, it is neither hubris nor blasphemy to see the human person in the same dynamism, since it received the ‘image of God’ and the expressed command to develop this into the ‘likeness of God’, namely deification by grace.

According to the mystical anthropology of St. Paul, the human person – by being potentially in the person of the divine Logos – precedes and therefore lies above the whole universe. If we take this seriously into consideration, then it is not impossible for one to go beyond identity into a creative diversity.

However, in order to properly appreciate the optimistic outlook of St Paul’s anthropology – which at first glance seems extremely ‘theoretical’ – we must look at the development of Christian self-understanding in its specific historical ‘footsteps’.

The first step in recording and verifying the dynamism of Christian identity is already given in the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount (Mat 5:7). The distance which separates the Ten Commandments of the Law of Moses from the Gospel of Christ and the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, is equivalent to the distance which divides the earth from heaven. And yet, Christ demands this in a totally peaceful way, with the simple phrase “you have heard that it was said to those of old, but I say to you...” (Mat 5:21-22).

A second step in this regard is the brave and highly philanthropic theory of the so-called seminal word (*ratio seminalis*), which the early Christian Fathers developed in order to bridge the gap between humanity which lived before Christ and after Christ. Yet, such a gap could not possibly be bridged with diplomatic maneuvering and verbal assurances. It had to be dealt with through the confession of a substantial relationship, if indeed this existed.

According to this theory of the seminal word, the Christian Fathers taught that the truth of God was from the beginning spread out into the consciences of all people, but as fragments or ‘sperm’. Thus, every truth taught by wise people before the Biblical Revelation was not considered by the Christians to be foreign to the Bible. On the contrary, it was appreciated as a portion of the total treasure of divine wisdom, ensured

by the love of the one God for all people. For, the central teaching is always that God “wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4).

The third and final step of Christian self-understanding is intensely characterised by all truths concerning the ‘last things’. And there can be no doubt that all these truths come together into one confession: that all children of God are connected through a deep relationship.

These doctrinal, confessed and lived truths go beyond any historical differentiations of ideologies and religious belief, as long as these do not contradict each other in a radical and absolute way.

In concluding, then, we should say that every honest and conscientious Christian is obliged to recognise that the ‘opening’ and the ‘breadth’ of one’s spiritual conscience depends upon the degree to which one accepts and experiences the central doctrinal truths of one’s Faith.

And these truths cannot possibly be appreciated in each instance through the use of our subjective judgement. The sole criteria for this are always the word of divine Revelation, as well as the commentary on this sacred word by the Fathers of the Church. It is their voice that theologians, and the faithful in general, should re-appreciate in all times.



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