EARLY CHRISTIAN CENTURIES: A CONFERENCE TO REMEMBER

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From 3-5 October the Very Revd Dr Doru Costache, Senior Lecturer in Patristic Studies, and I represented St Andrew’s at the Early Christian Centuries I conference, hosted by the Centre for Early Christian Studies, in conjunction with the Asia-Pacific Early Christian Studies Society, at the Australian Catholic University, Melbourne.

The conference was on the theme of ‘Men and Women in Early Christianity,’ yet it covered additional topics including Patristics, Hagiography, The Byzantine Church, Byzantine Architecture, Asceticism, etc. With no less than three keynote addresses by Professors Elaine Wainwright (University of Auckland), Mathijs Lamberigts (KU, Leuven), and Claudia Rapp (ÖAW, Vienna), and a plenary address by Professor Andrew McGowan (Trinity College, University of Melbourne), the event was well attended by exceptional scholars in the fields of late antiquity, Byzantine studies, patristic studies, and other disciplines.

Especially significant for Fr Doru and I was the welcoming presence of several friends and supporters of the College. It was a great joy to be able to converse again with Professor Pauline Allen, FAHA (ACU, Brisbane), keynote speaker at this year’s Patristic Symposium. Professor Allen’s paper at the Early Christian Centuries I conference was entitled: ‘How, if at all, to write to a woman in Christian Late Antiquity?’ Equally enjoyable was to meet Dr Bronwen Neil, FAHA (ACU, Brisbane), programme director for the Early Christian Centuries conferences. Dr Neil was keynote speaker at our 2011 Symposium on St Gregory of Nyssa and will offer another keynote at our upcoming 2014 Symposium. Her paper at this conference was entitled: ‘Dreaming of men and women in Gregory the Great’s Dialogues and a Byzantine dream key manual.’

Another friend of St Andrew’s who welcomed us was Dr Adam G. Cooper (JP II Institute, Melbourne), who gave a keynote paper at our 2012 Symposium and will be co-convening the 2014 Symposium together with Fr Doru. His paper at this conference was entitled: ‘Nuptial mystery or sacrament of sin? Maximus the Confessor on marriage and sexual intimacy.’ Last but not least, it was a great pleasure to meet again Dr Anna M. Silva, FAHA (UNE, Armidale), who gave keynote presentations for St Andrew’s 2010 and 2011 Symposia. Her paper at this conference was entitled: ‘Basil of Caesarea, his silence about Macrina and his attitude to women.’

After the plenary address on day one of the conference, Fr Doru chaired the short paper session on ‘Patristic Exegesis on the Creation of Male and Female.’ During the lunch-break, Dr Cooper and Dr Silvas generously invited us to the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family for a coffee, where enlightening conversation ranging from patristics to scriptural exegesis ensued. In the afternoon, I presented my paper on ‘The Christocentricity of ecclesial art in Early Byzantium’ in a session on ‘The Byzantine Church.’ A highlight for Fr Doru was a conversation with Professor Hubertus R. Drobn (Theologische Fakultät Paderborn), whose critical edition of St Gregory of Nyssa’s Apology for the Hexameron he used in the publication of two recent Phronema articles. Likewise, I was thrilled to meet Professor Claudia Rapp, who made some important suggestions for my current PhD research on the city of Constantinople.

Continuing this note, on day two of the conference we were overwhelmed to meet the erudite and humble Revd Professor Angelo Di Berardino, Director of the Institutum Augustinianum in Rome. Fr Doru recounted with joy the fact that he uses Professor Di Berardino’s monumental Patrology: The Eastern Fathers from the Council of Chalcedon to John of Damascus in his patristic studies units at St Andrew’s. The Professor also shed light on some questions pertinent to my thesis topic, spending the one hour lunch-break with Fr Doru, Dr Adam Cooper, and myself, much to the enrichment and gratitude of all. After lunch, Fr Doru delivered his paper entitled ‘Saintly perceptions of gendered humankind: Ambigius 10 and 41’ in a session on ‘Byzantine Perspectives on Gender and the Will’ chaired by Dr Cooper. At the end of the session, Fr Doru was invited by Professor Mathijs Lamberigts and other attendees to further expand on aspects pertaining to the wisdom of St Maximus the Confessor; this resulted in a very lively conversation.

The conference was tremendously successful, and congratulations must be extended to all involved; organisers, presenters, and delegates. As a final note, for Fr Doru and I this conference reinforced the significance of such events for academics who, in the presence of their esteemed peers and in a spirit of mutual learning, are made to feel part of a community that is truly making a difference to our intellectual, and why not spiritual, culture.