

Knowledge and Understanding by Participating in God

Modern biblical hermeneutics speaks of the need for a bridge through which the historical, cultural, psychological, sociological (and so on) gap that separates the contemporary reader from the age of writing the Holy Scriptures may be overcome. From the point of view of the Orthodox Tradition, once the problem of intelligible communication between God and man is solved, we will have the solution for the problem of communication between people belonging to different epochs or cultures. This is because the hermeneutic bridge that makes it possible to eliminate these distances is the Holy Spirit. From the perspective of spiritual hermeneutics, the correct and full understanding of reality is not a theoretical matter, since truth is not identical with its formulation, but is a matter of life, on which the existential fulfillment of man depends. This highlights the capital significance of the problem of understanding and knowledge and the significance of hermeneutics as such. Understanding God's world actually means participating in God's world. Lack of understanding is equivalent to lack of participation, which in turn brings with it spiritual death, or the death of the soul.

One of the most important consequences of this spiritual hermeneutics is that it eliminates any risk of dissociating Holy Scripture from reality itself, from history, from the unique and unitary reality of the divine world and the created world. Holy Scripture cannot be conceived as a value in itself, autonomous, an absolute authority, since it is not God but is a manifestation of God in human language. In this context, it is not Scripture itself, at the level of the letter, that is the authority, but its correct interpretation, which in turn is dependent on direct experience, on the illumination of the Spirit. In this way the error of those who want to impose Holy Scripture

as the only source of truth is clear, because, in fact, they do not impose Scripture, but their own interpretation of Scripture. We thus understand why the *Sola Scriptura* principle is nothing but an extension at the level of every reader of the idea of primacy and infallibility. The promoters of this principle obviously subordinate the Holy Scripture to themselves, as does any exeget (even orthodox) who in reading and interpreting the Holy Scripture limits himself only to his natural capacities and does not base his own interpretation on that of the Church Fathers which is verified at the level of spiritual experience. If the divine character of the Holy Scriptures is admitted, then we need to have the experience of God's Spirit in order to understand it correctly.

Holy Scripture derives from the living Word, but the word of Scripture is received and understood as a living reality only when it is received as a permanent direct expression of God or as uncreated divine energy. Separated from God and the Spirit of God, the word of Scripture is a dead letter, as is the word of any man which is not received as an expression of a concrete person, but is dissociated from it.

The absolutization of the Holy Scripture is possible only at the level of the letter, which inevitably leads to ideological fundamentalism. This perspective maintains an unbearable and permanent anguish in face of possible contradictions, inaccuracies, inconsistencies that could be discovered - possibly by the omnipotent and infallible science - in a collection like Holy Scripture that includes texts of immense diversity, written over a period of time of more than a thousand years, by dozens of authors, in worlds dominated by different cultures. This is reflected in the unprecedented development of biblical sciences, especially archeology and textual criticism, as well as the science of Bible translation, which have been striving for centuries to provide us with a text as faithful as possible to its original form. But this legitimate desire never became a vital priority and did not cause tension and agitation in Eastern Christianity.

If conventional hermeneutics is looking for a unifying principle, to be applied to any kind of distance or separation, this certainly cannot be found within the created world, because the created world itself has as its support of unity and consistency the uncreated divine energies, the Spirit of God himself. Therefore, only at the level of the spirit can the distances or separations between men be overcome. And the distance between man and God, such as the difficulty of understanding the divine Word of Scripture, can be overcome only in the Spirit of God.

At the same time, understanding or communicating through the Spirit makes the distances between the transmission and reception of information disappear, whatever they may be, since there is no distance of time or space between the two, if they are realized in the Spirit.

Seeing in the Spirit or understanding through the Spirit is the only way of going beyond the dissociative, isolated, non-unitary approach, which has become the norm of scientific research based on the separate analysis of the object to be researched. When one remains outside, at the level of the letter or the perceptions of the physical senses, and does not reach the sustaining and unifying Spirit of the whole reality, the mind cannot have a unitary perception and understanding. The understanding at the level of the spirit is unitary and unifying. An observation of Father Dumitru Stăniloae is telling in this sense: “The mind becomes simple and undivided when it comes to the contemplation of the infinite One. Then she is free from everything that narrows her and from all the need to move from one limited thing to another”¹.

Spiritual hermeneutics is characteristic of Eastern patristic theology and the life and spirituality of the Orthodox Church. This could help our school theology get free from the influences of scholasticism.

If recognized as a faithful expression of the tradition of the Eastern Church, spiritual hermeneutics will lead to a change in the method both in terms of biblical studies as a whole and in terms of the use of Holy Scripture by representatives of any field of theological research. As unbelievable as it may seem, hermeneutics is crucial to the way we do theology. Regarding biblical studies, it is unfortunate that in the Orthodox space, even in Romania, there is an ongoing process of elaborating works based on the principles of Western “scientific” autonomous hermeneutics, from which the Spirit of God is absent. Not to mention that imitation is the most obvious expression of the dead, lifeless, spiritless word.

Spiritual hermeneutics eliminates any kind of fanaticism and even the certainty with which some theologians claim that they express only pure truths, devoid of any heresy, and proclaim themselves defenders of Orthodoxy. It seems, however, that what they are defending is far from the Orthodox understanding of things. No one can claim to fully express the

¹ *Filocalia*, vol. 8, translation, introduction and notes by Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1979, p. 275, n. 568.

full truth, because, even in the divine or spiritual view, when knowledge through participation happens, this is only partial and only a part of what is experienced can be expressed. Fanaticism and certainty come from the hermeneutics of the letter, not of the Spirit.

The obsession with knowledge through learning, cultivated by exclusivistic rationalism and self-sufficient science, must be abandoned or at least attenuated, with the belief that the true path to knowledge is that of experience, of a living relationship with the person or object to be known by sharing or communion. It is time for academic theology to take important steps in this direction.

If the Holy Spirit is the only path to understanding and knowledge, then the only criterion of truth is spiritual experience. And if the spiritual experience is the only criterion of truth then it means that we cannot speak of any institution or authority, individual or collective, as *a priori* infallible. No human authority can declare itself *a priori* to be a criterion of truth. For rather pedagogical reasons, God keeps for Himself the monopoly of truth. Any attempt by any human institution to claim *a priori* for itself the right to infallible pronouncement, even on the basis of the illumination by the Spirit, becomes a factor of pressure on God himself and is a luciferic reflex. In the Orthodox East such a tendency did not exist. In the Orthodox Church there was and is no institution *a priori* invested with the attribute of infallibility. In fact, the very word infallible is inappropriate for the Orthodox language. Not even the Ecumenical Councils have been and are not *a priori* recognized as infallible authorities. Some were summoned as ecumenical and ended up being “thievish”. The Ecumenical Councils become infallible authorities *a posteriori*, after receiving from the Church the confirmation of the truth expressed in their decisions. The invocation of the Holy Spirit is present in all our attempts to find out the truth, but God’s freedom makes the presence and work of the Holy Spirit neither determined nor limited to the boundaries of institutions. Not coincidentally, both in the Old and New Testament history, those through whom God made his will known were prophets and saints, that is, people who, in this capacity, were not dependent on any organizational structure, be it Jewish or ecclesiastical. Prophets and saints or spiritual people are consequently criteria of divine truth, but not by virtue of belonging to a structure or institution. It is obvious that neither the work of the prophets nor of spiritual people or saints has been and will never be institutionalized

or strictly defined, precisely because through them the living God speaks freely, according to his own, not others' will.

In light of the above, we understand why the criterion of truth and correct understanding is the Holy Spirit, and the human subject can become a criterion of truth only insofar as he becomes a "vessel" of the Holy Spirit or is filled with the Holy Spirit. God has kept for Himself the monopoly of truth not selfishly and maliciously but to secure the truth of His own creation, according to which man's access to God is possible only by participation, by sharing in God's gift or grace. Only in this state is both the freedom of God and of man preserved.

Rev. Adrian MURG