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# Patristic Fundamentals of the Dogmatic Thought of Father Justin Popovitch

Vicențiu Românu

## Vicențiu Românu

Orthodox Theological Seminary “*Bishop Ioan Popasu*” Caransebeș  
E-mail: vicentiuromanu@yahoo.com

## Abstract

In this study I have tried to show that the message of Father Justin’s theological life and work is that of preaching the gospel of the Incarnation of God’s Word into the divine-human person of Christ, his whole thought being the theological gift to the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ; In his writings, the erudite Serbian theologian strived to find biblical, patristic, and hymnological language that would attest the true Christianity of the Church, developing the profound and original thinking of Father Justin Popovitch, who assimilated the entire Living Ecclesial Tradition of Byzantine Orthodoxy. The core of his writings is the dogma of Chalcedon, a dogma that represents the quintessence of the entire later Patristic dogmatic analysis, and which recommends Father Justin as a neopatristic theologian who is totally connected to the biblical, patristic and liturgical sources of the Church, representing one of the deepest voices of contemporary theology.

## Keywords

biblical exegesis, dogma, neo-patristic interpreter, ecclesiastical tradition

## I. General considerations

The personality of the erudite Serbian theologian Justin Popovitch (1894-1979) is huge, and the attempt to analyze the work of this prominent theological figure is susceptible to the risk of fragmenting and relativizing the thinking of the illustrious theologian. Father Justin Popovitch writes the most beautiful pages of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and today Serbian Orthodoxy can not be understood without the theological work of the erudite dogmatist professor, who through his life and writings intertwined himself in the life of the Serbian Church, which determined the theologian Greek Ioannis Karmiris to call him “*the hidden conscience of the Serbian Church, but also the martyr of Orthodoxy in general*”<sup>1</sup>.

The theological writings of Father Justin are impregnated by the characteristic of patristicity, and by this we do not necessarily mean that the Fathers of the Church are the “*object*” of these writings, but in a sense their “*subject*”, which means that the Serbian theologian “*do necessarily study the Fathers, but in communion with them, he study what they have also studied: God and his age ... which makes his theology a patristic theology, that is, an ecclesial service and an expression of life in Christ*”<sup>2</sup>. The Serbian theologian emphasized an elementary truth in Orthodox theology, meaning that in order to be “*new*” in theology, it must first be “*old*”, turning to the holy Fathers and their theological model, because “*in spiritual life, whoever wants to go forward must return to Tradition*”<sup>3</sup>.

The most important methodological principle used by Father Justin for the patristic foundation of his dogmatic theology is the so-called “*svetootački*” used by the Serbian exegete as a transmission of the theology of the saints to the Fathers; for him, patristic tradition is the authoritarian principle in the elaboration of the theological concepts of his Dogmatics,

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Karmiris, *Ascète, théologien, patrologue*, in “Le Messenger Orthodoxe”, 88, Paris, 1981, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> P. Nellas, *Omul și Dumnezeu-om - o carte pătrunzătoare pe o temă nevralgică / Man and God-Man - puzzling book on a neuralgic theme*, in “Ortodoxia - divino-umanism în acțiune” / “Orthodoxy - divine-humanism in action”  
, trans. by pr. prof. Ioan Ică sr., ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 2003, pp.71-72.

<sup>3</sup> Ioan I. Ică, “Părintele Iustin Popovici: lupta cu Protagoras sau criteriologia filozofiei ortodoxe a Adevărului / Father Justin Popovici: The struggle with Protagoras or the criterion of the Orthodox philosophy of Truth”, in arhim. Iustin Popovici, *Omul și Dumnezeu-Om / Man and the God-Man* p. 27.

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because remaining in the theological tradition of the saints Parents is to remain in the Church. The erudite dogmatist does not create new theological ideas but resumes the teachings of the Tradition of the Church, as he confesses in the introduction to the first volume of his Dogmatics in 1932, repeating the principle stated by St. John Damascene: “*I will say nothing of myself, but I will briefly present what the holy men of God said*”<sup>4</sup>.

The importance of the patristic principle is that Father Justin attempts to argue his theological teachings always with quotes from scriptural writings, with patristic texts and sources of the liturgical cult of the Church. A research of patristic testimonies used by the Serbian theologian shows us which authors have been quoted above all<sup>5</sup>, but especially what Father Joseph uses when he appeals to the writings of the holy Fathers. For example, when quoting St. John Chrysostom, he exclusively uses his exegetical works, for the most part, the comments on the Pauline epistles; of course, we can not necessarily fix a particular principle used by Father Justin regarding the quotes used, but rather, he leads us to the observations he builds around patristic texts. First of all we can see that the erudite theologian does not comment on or critically discuss the patristic quotations he uses when he wants the theological argumentation of some theories on theology, pneumatology or ecclesiology, but simply uses them as theological authorities; for Father Justin the use of theological works of the holy Fathers to substantiate his theological ideas is ultimately the teaching of the Church. The abundant patristic texts with which he relate theological argumentation are long, taking the patristic quotations word by word or paraphrasing them. He does not use any of his own arguments to patristic

<sup>4</sup> Sfântul Ioan Damaschin, *Dialectica*, in PG 94, 533 A.

<sup>5</sup> In the chapters on ecclesiology and pneumatology of the Dogmatics, Father Justin uses more than 830 patristic texts summed up from 34 Saints Parents. A statistical breakdown of these texts shows that almost a third of them (approximately 260, which is about 32% of them) belong to St. John Chrysostom. Then the frequency of the patristic texts used is the writings of Saint Maxim the Confessor, from which 66 texts are quoted, Saints Theodor Studite and Simeon The New Theologian, 64 and 61 quotes, Saint Gregory of Nazianz, 46 quotes. Other Patristic authors cited are: Theophilus of Ahrida, Athanasius the Great, Theodoret of Cyr, Vasile the Great, John Damascene, Gregory Palamas, Gregory of Nyssa, Irineu of Lyon; some Latin authors such as Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Ciprian de Carthage, Augustin and John Cassian, cf. Thomas Bremer, *Ekklesiale Struktur und Ekklesiologie in der Serbischen Orthodoxen Kirche im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Östliches Christentum N.F. 41, Würzburg, 1992, pp. 167-168.

texts, and the passage from one Father to the other makes it through an introductory sentence<sup>6</sup>. It can be easily observed that most of his theological theses, Father Justin argue through his appeal to Patristic Tradition, and the texts of the holy Fathers he uses do not analyze or comment on them, most of the time<sup>7</sup>. For the Serbian exegete, Orthodox theology always finds the way to apostolic faith through the appeal to Patristic Tradition; Father Justin is the first Serbian theologian who shows that the adaptation of patristic criteria to contemporary theology should not be reduced to the dry and unproductive quoting of the comments of the holy Fathers; it is interesting that the Serbian theologian quotes in his dogmatic and exegetical work the Holy Fathers only to Saint Gregory Palamas and certain Russian abbots, but no contemporary theologian, which may give the impression that he has a certain reservation over contemporary theology without showing an explicit interest in it or towards the influence of Western theology. The German theologian Thomas Bremer argues that three factors influenced

<sup>6</sup> For example, when he speaks of the divinity of Christ in the dogma of hypostatic union, Father Justin makes the passage between patristic texts by sentences such as „... *the direct descendant of the holy Apostles, the fiery witness of faith in Christ, Saint Ignatius Theophorus, recommends to Christians not to separate from Christ ...*” or, when making the passage to Saint Justin the Martyr and the Philosopher says: „... *the wise apologist of Christianity, St. Justin, bases the plea for faith ... on the argument of the Old Testament proofs, showing that Christ is Lord, God and Son of God ...*”... or: „... *the great zealous of the apostolic tradition, Saint Irenaeus, bases his faith on the deity of Christ ...*” ,cf. Père Justin Popovitch, *Philosophie orthodoxe de la vérité*, tome premier, pp. 54-55.

<sup>7</sup> Another eloquent example characterizing the patristic method used by Father Justin is on the text of Co 1, 20: „*and through him all things to reconcile with themselves, or those of the earth, or those in heaven, making peace through the blood of his cross*”, which first commented on it, quoting from the third homily of St. John Chrysostom to the Epistle to the Colossians, and then gives his own interpretation, in which he explains that Christ could have saved us otherwise in the cross, but then He would have shown more His omnipotence than His divine love for man, for that the men in their turn to desire salvation from sin and death through love for their Savior; therefore, the death of the Savior is important, because, beyond it, neither resurrection nor victory over death, nor the Kingdom of Heaven, would be possible. Saint John Chrysostom remains faithful to the biblical text that comments upon verse by verse and emphasizes its importance, pointing out that the salvation of men is not accomplished only by words, but by death on the cross. De facto, both interpretations of the biblical text are identical; Father Justin's commentary does not bring anything new, because once again, it is said, for him that the appeal to Tradition is the most important and central purpose of the patristic texts that the Serbian exegete brings to question.

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the theological thinking of Father Justin Popovitch: the 19th century Russian theological school, through prominent representatives such as the Metropolitan Macarie Bulgakov, Filaret and Bishop Silvestru de Canev, Father Justin contacting with their theology not only during his stop in Petersburg but also through contact with Metropolitan Antonie and other Russian emigrants in Yugoslavia<sup>8</sup>; the theology of Russian emigration, which was based on the Russian theological tradition of the nineteenth century but developed independently of it, and then the classical Greek theology, which has become increasingly important since the mid-nineteenth century, and with which Father Justin came in contact during his studies in Athens<sup>9</sup>.

What can be noticed, however, is that

*“the theology of Russian emigration had a significant influence on Popovitch and literal concordance is an indication in this sense; the decisive here is the emancipation of Orthodox theology under Western thought and the consciousness of returning to the patristic roots of Orthodox theology”*<sup>10</sup>.

Father Justin succeeds in experiencing this vivification Tradition of the Holy Fathers and experience it through personal, ecclesial and contemporary issues, constantly updated for the evangelical man created in the image and likeness of God, fallen but real handed through Jesus

<sup>8</sup> Here Nicholas Afanasiev (1893-1966), the founder of the „*eucharistic ecclesiology*”, who stayed in Serbia between 1921-1929; of course, Afanasiev had not yet developed his ecclesiological theses so that his influence over Father Justin cannot be relevant.

<sup>9</sup> In the article dedicated to Father Justin’s memory titled *Ascetic, theologian, patrologue*, Professor Ioan Karmiris of the University of Athens, calling him „*the hidden conscience of the Serbian Church, the martyr of Orthodoxy in general*”, underlined the durable connection that the Serbian theologian had with Greek Orthodoxy; first by the fact that he was a doctor of the Faculty of Theology in Athens, Karmiris himself, „having the honor to get acquainted with Justin in 1926” (as he confesses himself), which he helped, from a linguistic point of view, to draft the doctoral thesis, and to preach, in 1969, the Greek edition of the collection of theological texts, called „Man and God-Man”; „*Beyond that, confesses the Greek professor, I can say that the brotherhood with this great theologian has remained intact and uninterrupted until his death.*” The profound admiration of Father Justin for the Greek Fathers he had studied so deeply emerges in a spiritual testament that the Serbian theologian leaves to his disciples: „*You love the Greek Fathers, because they have brought us to the faith in Christ and they guard the Patristic Tradition of Orthodoxy; always be spiritually united with them*”, cf. Jean Karmiris, *Ascète, Théologien, Patrologue*, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Bremer, *Ekklesiale Struktur ...*, p. 247.

Christ and glorified in the Church in the theandrical communion with the God-Man through the glory and uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit. This recommends the Serbian theologian as

*“a disciple and an authentic successor of the great apostle Paul and most of the Fathers of the Orthodox Orient, Saint Athanasius the Great, the Cappadocians, St. John Chrysostom, Saint Gregory Palamas; St. Apostle Paul was a model of life for him, an example and inspirer for the preaching and living of the gospel of Christ, reason for that he named his remarks in the epistles of the blessed Apostle under the general title: Through Life with the Apostle Paul”*<sup>11</sup>.

Through his *“ascetic, profoundly spiritual life, through the exemplary intransigence of his dogmatic consciousness and his profound and renewed work”*, Father Justin Popovitch is not only a famous theologian in the Serbian Church, but a true patristic figure of the 20th century. Moreover,

*“it was said that from St. Nicodemus the Aghiorite, the Orthodox East did not yet know a figure at the same time spiritual and theological of the extent and the breadth of Father Justin Popovitch ... being one of the most prominent exponents of the neo-patristic direction of contemporary orthodox theology”*<sup>12</sup>.

After the 19th century, scholasticism was also imported into Greek and Russian theology, dogmatic theology begins to experience the greatest crisis in the Orthodox Church, as the Russian theologian George Florovsky expresses, namely that *“the intellectual break with patristic Byzantine was the cause of all the failures of theological development in Russia”*<sup>13</sup>. However, this crisis was not Russia's own; in Greece, after the Ottoman occupation liberation warfare, the Russian and Anglican model of subordination to the Church had been applied with the same consequences as in Russia: the suppression of monasticism<sup>14</sup>, the liturgical decadence, the appearance of a clergy and the use of scholastic theology.

Exceeding these tendencies and accents of Russian and Greek theology, Father Justin delimits themselves and points out that the appeal

<sup>11</sup> Père Justin Popovitch, *Philosophie orthodoxe de la vérité...*, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Patric Ranson, *Introduction à la Père Justin Popovitch, L'Homme et le Dieu-Homme*, p. 23; see also Ioan I. ICĂ, „Părintele Iustin Popovici: lupta cu Protagoras ...”, p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> George florovski, *Ways of Russian Theology*, p. 17

<sup>14</sup> A. Delembase, *Aux origines de l'oecuménisme dans l'Eglise grecque*, in “La lumière du Thabor”, no. 11, Paris, 1986, p.63-89.

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to patristic theology - both in Greek and Latin - is absolutely necessary in any contemporary theological approach. However, this theology can not be learned simplistically, in a bookish and outward or speculative form in the form in which scholastics understands it, but must be impregnated in a living way by the prophetic, apostolic and patristic spirit. Orthodox patristic theology has the unique character of not being the product of any speculation but of experience, thus excluding any philosophical method, particularly metaphysical, as useless; the theologians of the saints Parents treat dogmas, but these are not abstract conceptual truths, but the living expression received by the Church of over-intelligible, supra-discursive truths, experienced in an ineffable way by prophets, apostles and saints who could not speak about God only when they have been spiritually purified for God, being enlightened and glorified for Him, and having protected the divine experience by words.

## II. Patristic Fundamentals of the Christological Directions of the Theological Work of Father Justin

At the centre of his theological doctrine, Father Justin puts the Scriptural and Patristic foundation on the Mystery of the Son of God who becomes at “*the fullness of the age*” ( Ga 4, 4 ) the Son of Man and includes “*all the mysteries of heaven and earth*” especially the Mystery of the Church, His theandrical body:

*“All the mystery of the Christian faith lies in the Church, and all the mystery of the Church is in the God-Man; all the mystery of the God-Man lies in the fact that God has become flesh and dwells in him all the fullness of his deity, all his divine mercies and perfections, all the Sacraments of God”*<sup>15</sup>.

In continuing the theological development of this divine truth, the dogmatist erudite goes on the patristic trace of the meaning and purpose of incarnation of the Son of God, synthesized by St. John Damascene, who designated the mystery of incarnation as “*the only new thing under*

<sup>15</sup> Justin Popovitch, *Biserica ortodoxă și ecumenismul / Orthodox Church and Ecumenism*, translated by Adrian Tănăsescu, editura Sophia/Fundația Iustin Pârnu, Mănăstirea Sfinții Arhangheli - Petru Vodă, 2012, p. 8.

*the sun*<sup>16</sup> united in the mystery of man in an inseparable way, and made a mysterious mystery,

*“because the God-human iconomy is meant to cleanse everything from sin, to logosify everything, to sanctify everything, to make all the members of the human-divine body of the Church, and thus to turn them to the word and logotic unity”*<sup>17</sup>.

Father Justin points out in his Dogmatics that divine providence has accompanied man in all his deadlocks and failures recorded due to evil and sin, and brought to him the supreme and perfect Good in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ, *“the incarnation of God’s single Son representing the sign of the providence of God for the love of man”*<sup>18</sup>.

In this sense, Father Justin appeals to St. Athanasius the Great says that by assuming our humanity in His divine Hypostasis, God has shown us the greatest work of caring for His creation:

*“seeing the reasonable lost race and death reigning to him by corruption ... seeing that he had no meaning to lose what He Himself had created ... Merciful to our people ... and descending to our corruption and not holding the dominion of death ... He takes a pure body that is not alien to ours ... from the immaculate Virgin ... and makes him his own living in him”*<sup>19</sup>.

Just as creation and providence is the work of the Holy Trinity, so the salvation of the world through the incarnation of the Son is the sign of the Trinitarian love, says Theodoret of Cyrus<sup>20</sup>; and indeed, the greatness

<sup>16</sup> PG 94, 984 B.

<sup>17</sup> Justin Popovitch, *Biserica ortodoxă și ecumenismul / Orthodox Church and Ecumenism*, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Père Justin Popovitch, *Philosophie orthodoxe de la vérité...*, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Saint Atanasie cel Mare, *Tratat despre întruparea Cuvântului / Treated on the Incarnation of the Word II*, 8, în PSB 15, trans., introd. and note by pr. prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1987, p. 99. See also St. Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Răspunsuri către Talasie 22 / Answers to Talasie 22*, in “Filocalia sfințelor nevoițe ale desăvârșirii”, volumul 3, trans., introd. and note by pr. prof. dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, editura Humanitas, București, 1997, pp. 84-86.

<sup>20</sup> „After the first man was created not only by the Father, and by the Son and by the Holy Spirit, so the three Persons take part in the new creation, that is to salvation”, in PG 83, 457 CD. Salvation as a Trinitarian work explains it as well St. Grigorie de Nyssa, *Quod non sint tres Dii, ad Ablabium*, in PG 45, 125 BC and St. Ioan Casian, *Despre întruparea Cuvântului / About the Incarnation of the Word VIII*, 17, in PSB 57, translated by prof. Vasile Cojocaru și David Popescu, Editura Institutului Biblic și



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of this mystery lies in the fact that in Christ all the mysteries of God and man come together and unite to form the greatest mystery: God-Man, because only in the one Person of Christ, the God-Man, our humanity can participate in eternal happiness and the immortal blessing of communion in love with the Holy Trinity. Christ has anointed our human nature by uniting with His divine nature, manifesting it without sin and in this mysterious union, says Saint Gregory Palamas, our humanity has become like God<sup>21</sup>. Only in the God-Man, our Saviour, the human nature has found the eternal purpose and aim, its divine model that has been disfigured and amputated by sin, because in Christ the man finds the whole of God; therefore, Father Justin points out that the Father's incarnate Son through the work of the Spirit of a being has proved that God is not an anti-natural thing for man, but the ontological necessity of the human being, but a free necessity and no volitional constraints, because He responds perfectly and plenarily of the infinite freedom and aspiration of the human soul to his original Archetype<sup>22</sup>:

*"the appearance of God-Man in the world of human realities is not something unexpected for human nature from an ontological point of view, neither psychologically nor historically; on the contrary, this show has satisfied the fundamental aspirations and essential needs of the human being ... because God is not unnatural and unnecessary to man. Why? Because He has resolved the problem of God and man in a most perfect way ... by showing Himself in God, the Absolute Truth"*<sup>23</sup>.

The infinite longing and thirst of human being for truth and eternity find their fundamental answer only in the God-Man; thus, the Serbian dogmatist notes:

*"God's image of human nature has an ontological and theological sense: ontological, because in the image of God as the gift lies the essence of the human being; and theologically, because*

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de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1990, p. 868.

<sup>21</sup> St. Grigorie Palama, *Homilia XIV In Annuntiationem immaculatae Dominae nostrae Deiparae semperque Virginis Mariae*, in PG 151, 166 A.

<sup>22</sup> Père Justin Popovitch, *Philosophie orthodoxe de la vérité. Dogmatique de L'Eglise Orthodoxe*, tome deuxième, p. 13. Excellent theological considerations about chip-archetype binomial we find at P. NELLAS, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit / Man - a deified animal*, trans. by arhid. Ioan I. Ică jr., editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1994, pp. 7-24.

<sup>23</sup> Arhim. Justin Popovitch, *Valoarea supremă și criteriul ultim în Ortodoxie / The supreme value and ultimate criterion in Orthodoxy*, p. 120.

*through this God was established as the purpose of man's life with all his divine perfections ... in other words, man is created as a potential divine-human being who has the duty to totally resemble God and, in this way, to become a divine-human being in the act, united in perfect form with God"*<sup>24</sup>.

Through His incarnation, Christ entered the most obvious manner in the matrix of human life, and any miracle had occurred before the descent of God in our time, no doubt that this cosmic event that changed the turning point of history would have been diminished and that is why the presence of God-Man in the history of creation was imperative, because *"the most essential ontological requirements and needs of the human being were satisfied once and for all in the Person of the God-Christ"*<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, Father Justin, in the New Testament light of the Ioanic Epistles (1 In 4, 3) and the Chalcedonian testimony, states that the test stone of Christianity is Christian confession in the Divine-humanity of Christ, Which is the highest value of existence and infallible measure of theology. Otherwise,

*"if Christ is not the God-Man, then He is the most daring man of how exists, because He proclaims Himself Lord and God ... in essence the struggle for God-Man is the struggle for man and not the humanists, but the men of faith and divine-human life are fighting for the true man, the one in the image of Christ"*<sup>26</sup>.

Father Justin highlights an important aspect of the patristic scholar, namely the aspect of deification as the reverse of incarnation, by which man *"is condemned to immortality"*:

*"the ultimate purpose of the incarnation of the Word is precisely to logosificate, to christificate, and to deify the man in all his being: the soul, the body, the thought, the sense, and all that makes man human ... because man is a true man only through and in the God-Man"*<sup>27</sup>, because *"the greatest miracle, says*

<sup>24</sup> Arhim. Justin popovitch, *Valoarea supremă și criteriul ultim în Ortodoxie / The supreme value and ultimate criterion in Orthodoxy*, p. 118.

<sup>25</sup> Arhim. Justin Popovitch, *Valoarea supremă și criteriul ultim în Ortodoxie / The supreme value and ultimate criterion in Orthodoxy*, p. 119.

<sup>26</sup> Arhim. Iustin Popovitch *Valoarea supremă și criteriul ultim în Ortodoxie / The supreme value and ultimate criterion in Orthodoxy*, pp. 137-138.

<sup>27</sup> Arhim. Justin Popovitch, *Raiul meu și iadul meu / My heaven and my hell*, în *"Omul și Dumnezeu-Om. Abisurile și culmile filozofiei / Man and God-Man. The holes and the heights of philosophy"*, p. 62.

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the erudite serb dogmatist, *is that God was neither God-Angel, nor God-Cherubim, nor God-Seraphim but God-Man, exalting man above all angels and Archangels, above all superhuman beings*<sup>28</sup>.

By appealing to the patristic texts for the Christological doctrine he wishes to develop, Father Justin confesses that in the incarnation of His Son God gave the realization of the divine ideal to human beings, and in his theandric body the Church offered us the realization of the divine ideal for a blessed society; the name of the Logos is not only the result of the ineffable love of God for us (cf. In 3,16), but above all, the universal claim of human nature devastated by sin and death; on the trail of Saint Gregory of Nyssa<sup>29</sup>, the erudite Serbian professor shows that no being superior to the created man can save man from the carousel of sin and death, to receive immortality and eternal life, because all beings on this scale of existence from man to God are created and so incapable and powerless to save man and restore the original beauty of his face and immortality. Only God by His incarnation, says Saint Athanasius the Great, can save the humanity by victory over sin and death, because he was not a creature, but

*“His own Word and the image of the Father’s being”<sup>30</sup>, “for it was not possible to make immortal by Resurrection the mortal, who else but the One who was Life ... and to show Himself taller than death, showing His incomprehensible/unbroken body as the ripening of the resurrection of all ... for his body was not broken according to his nature because of the Word that dwelt in him, and thus the death of all was accomplished in the body of the Lord, and death and corruption were abolished in him for the Word which was in him ... therefore the Word, for it was not possible for Him to die-for he was immortal- He took a body that could die to take him to the place of all, and that enduring for all, because of His dwelling in him, he would destroy that one who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver those*

<sup>28</sup> Justin Popovitch, *Biserica ortodoxă și ecumenismul / Orthodox Church and Ecumenism*, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> *De instituto christiano*, în PG 46, 293 A.

<sup>30</sup> St. Atanasie cel Mare, *Cuvântul al treilea contra arienilor / The third word against the Aryans III*, p. 328.

*who the possession of death kept in captivity all his life* (Heb 2, 14-15)<sup>31</sup>.

That is why Saint John Chrysostom dares to assert that Christ, taking the human nature and suffering for us, is a greater act than to bring the world out of existence to the being<sup>32</sup>, because by incarnation he became our brother, he killed death, he gave us the dignity of God's sons and countless goodness, because of His infinite love for us "*because we were the cause of His incarnation and our salvation has been moved by the love of men to dwell in the flesh and to appear in it*"<sup>33</sup>.

Trying to answer the question of why God has not saved us in other ways, by simple will and omnipotence without the need for incarnation, Father Justin responds through the mouth of St. Gregory of Nyssa:

*"Why did God take human flesh? Take God's gifts from man and see that you do not have after you recognize in His man His Creator ... and if God's basic attribute is the love of men, then here is the answer to what you are looking for, that's why God was incarnate ... for our weak flesh needed a doctor ... the one who had lost his life waited for her Giver ... longed for the one lying in the dark ... these things were so small and insignificant that they would not urge God to descend and to search for men, as a doctor examines His sick, especially in the affliction and worthy of mercy in which the human race was found?"*<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> St. Atanasie cel Mare, *Tratat despre intruparea Cuvântului / Treated on the Incarnation of the Word III*, pp. 115-116. Father Justin quotes Saint Simeon the New Theologian who points out that by falling into sin man has fallen into his original health and his nature has become ill, sin becoming his second nature; through His incarnation, Christ has healed the suffering of the humanity, and when man approaches by faith with his Savior, He unites with Him through His healed, renewed and sanctified humanity, cf. Simeon Noul Teolog / Simeon the New Theologian, *Discursuri teologice și etice / Theological and Ethical Speeches 6*, trans. by arhid. Ioan I. Ică jr., editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1998, p. 153.

<sup>32</sup> Jean Chrysostome, *Homélies sur l'Épître aux Hébreux*, traduction par L' Abbé Jean Bareille, tome dixième, Paris, 1873, p. 393.

<sup>33</sup> St. Atanasie cel Mare, *Tratat despre intruparea Cuvântului / Treated on the Incarnation of the Word IV*, p. 93.

<sup>34</sup> St. Grigorie de Nyssa, *Marele cuvânt catehetic / The big word catehetic 14*, in PSB 30, trans. and note by pr. prof. dr. Teodor Bodogae, editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998, pp. 309-310. In this sense, but with a theological emphasis, St. John Damascene answers to the unbelievers that the Son has become man to defeat the victor of the people; Merciful God could have plucked man

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Another aspect highlighted by the Serbian theologian with reference to the incarnation of the Lord is related to the immutability of the Trinity; Father Justin again appeals to the Patristic Tradition, showing that by the name of the Logos there has been no change in the being of the Trinity or in the personal qualities of the trinitarian hypostases; the Trinity does not turn into a fourth, says Blessed Augustine, after the Word takes body from the womb of the Virgin, but remains the Trinity<sup>35</sup>. St. John Damascene warns against the risk of trinitarian relativization and underscores the unity and omousianity of the Trinitarians without any confusion or mixing of their characteristic properties:

*“The Father is a Father, not a Son; Son is Son, not Father; The Spirit is the Holy Spirit, not Father and Son. For the appropriation is immobile, otherwise how could this appropriation emerge if it changes? That is why the Son of God is the Son of Man, so that the appropriation remains immobile. Being the Son of God, He became the Son of Man, incarnating himself from the Holy Virgin, and by this he did not depart from being a Son”*<sup>36</sup>.

In the mystery of the incarnation is also explained the mystery of time, which, by the descent of God in it, is impregnated with eternity; historical events that take place in time have their root in the invisible depths of eternity.

*“The God-Man is the most complete and perfect synthesis of eternity and time, says Father Justin, because time is logotic and it is an introduction to the eternal Logos through divine-humanization, and the one who enters into time, simultaneously enters in the antechamber of eternity”*<sup>37</sup>.

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out of the devil’s hands, but in this case the enemy tyrant could have objected that God healed man by violence, making use of his almightiness; this is why, replies the great John Damascus, God, in His rich mercy and love for men, wishes to overcome by incarnation, so that the likeness is saved by Him, cf. St. John Damascene, *Dogmatica*, trans, introd. and note by pr. prof. Dumitru Fecioru, editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2005, p. 179.

<sup>35</sup> Augustin, *Sermones 186*, in *PL 39*, 999.

<sup>36</sup> St. John Damascene, *Dogmatica IV*, 4, p. 180.

<sup>37</sup> Arhim. Justin Popovitch, *Între două filozofii / Between two philosophies*, in “Omul și Dumnezeu-Om. Abisurile și culmile filozofiei / Man and God-Man. The holes and the heights of philosophy”, p. 47.

God's incarnation in this temporal world is accomplished "*in the fullness of time*" (Ga 4, 4), through His wisdom and love of people, when people were "*in darkness and in the shadow of death*" (Mt 4,16) when sin, evil and death have flourished in the world and have devastated the soul of humanity who aspires to the Saviour to save them from sin and death<sup>38</sup>. Starting from these Scriptural and Patristic premises, Father Justin concludes that

*"the mission of the Church is to create in each member conviction that the normal state of human personality is immortality and eternity, not temporality and death, and that man is a traveller who by death and temporality advances to immortality and eternity"*<sup>39</sup>.

One last aspect emphasized by Father Justin, starting from patristic arguments concerning the incarnation of the Son of God, is the Person's inseparability from his saving work. The Serbian Dogmatist shows that whoever correctly understands the mystery of the incarnation of the Son will not be able to dissociate Him from His saving work in human history and creation, which must be integrated into the mystery of the Person of Christ. The Saviour saves because the work of salvation is in Him and comes from Him as God; without His Divine Person, the teaching of Christ could not save, remaining a barren doctrine, an abstraction without vivifying force. The teaching of the Son of God is eternal and life-giving through Him, God and true Man. Here is the main argument for Father Justin who defines Christianity and Christ of all other religions together with their founders<sup>40</sup>.

Father Justin resorts to all these patristic steps to substantiate his Christology, showing that

*"the Apostolic Orthodox Church sums up all Christianity in the life-making Person of the God-Christ, who is her highest value and treasure ... that's why, Christianity is not Christianity except through the God-Man, Who has been left in the world as a Church ... How does the Church preserve its greatest treasure - the most*

<sup>38</sup> Arhim. Justin Popovitch, *Misiunea internă a Bisericii noastre / The internal mission of our Church*, in „Omul și Dumnezeu-Om. Abisurile și culmile filozofiei / Man and God-Man. The holes and the heights of philosophy”, p.73.

<sup>39</sup> Arhim. Justin Popovitch, *Misiunea internă a Bisericii noastre / The internal mission of our Church*, p. 75.

<sup>40</sup> Père Justin Popovitch, *Philosophie orthodoxe de la vérité...*, p.28.

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*holy Person of the God-Christ man? Through its unique, holy, Catholic, and apostolic beliefs, in which it constantly preserves not only the divine-human, apostolic-Catholic and ecumenical truth of Christianity, but also the divine-human methodology of Christianity, the holy Fathers and the ecumenical synods*<sup>41</sup>.

The divine revelation announces and shows us that through the incarnation, the Son of God, homosianic to the Father and the Spirit, according to divinity, becomes a true and perfect man, like us, but distinguishable from all other people by being born of Virgin and through the work of the Holy Spirit in a way that goes beyond any material and biological reality of birth. Father Justin appeals to the Tradition of Fathers who, rooted by their own perception in the holy, catholic and apostolic conscience of the Church, carefully guarded the divine revelation of the truth of the human nature in the Son of God incarnate, confessing this truth especially when the danger of heresies they denied the humanity of Christ<sup>42</sup>.

Father Justin notes that the two expressions of the Church's faith about the divinity and humanity of Christ converge to the only dogmatic truth embodied in the Person of the Savior, the God-Man. The two different infinite and immeasurable natures are hypostatically united in the theandrical mystery of the pre-existing Person of the Logos, the Image of the Father, who becomes the Son of Man. The Church has always taught this blessing teaching about the divine-humanity of Christ; guarded it holy and immutable, and expressed it in the old symbols of faith of the Apostolic Church in Jerusalem, Rome, Antioch, Alexandria and then definitively and

<sup>41</sup> Arhim. Iustin Popovitch, *Valoarea supremă și criteriul ultim în Ortodoxie / The supreme value and ultimate criterion in Orthodoxy*, p. 127 and 130.

<sup>42</sup> A true chorus of patristic voices is invoked by Father Justin to expose the Tradition of the Church with reference to the dogmatic truth about the real name of the Son of God, cf. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Către Tralieni 10, / To Tralieni*, p.172, Tertulian, *Contra Marcionum / Contra Marcionum III*, 8 in *PL* 2, 359; Augustin, *Questions 14*, in *PL* 40, 14; Irineu, *Contra ereziilor / Against heresies II*, 22; St. Atanasie cel Mare, *Epistola ad Epictetum 7*, in *PG* 26, 1061 AB; Sfântul Chiril al Ierusalimului / Chiril of Jerusalem, *Cateheza / Catechesis IV*, 9, p. 54; St. Grigorie Teologul / Gregory the Theologian, *Epistola 101*, in *PG* 37, 181 C-184 A; sfântul Chiril al Alexandriei / Chiril of Alexandria, *De incarnatione Verbi Dei Filii Patris 17*, in *PG* 75, 1445 C; Ioan Damaschin / John Damascene, *Dogmatica III*, 6, pp. 125-126; Simeon Noul Teolog / Simeon the New Theologian, *Discursuri teologice și etice / Theological and Ethical Speeches 58, 1* p. 234.

unchanged in the Nicene Constantinople confession. The holy Fathers of the Fourth Ecumenical Council commented on this ecclesial truth in the dogmatic *horos* of the synod, underlining that the two beings are united in Christ in *unmixed, unchanging, unshared, inseparable*<sup>43</sup>. Father Justin shows that in all these confessions of the Church, it is highlighted that in the divinity-humanity of Christ it is not only the mystery of God, but also the human problem that has been resolved forever, because man, only in his simple humanity, can't exist by itself and not fulfill its potentials to its extreme limitations, but only in the God-Man can be renewed, sanctified and transfigured, and that is why "*divine-humanity of Christ is the keystone of Christianity, The God-Man being the starting point of historical Christianity revealed in the Son of God incarnate*"<sup>44</sup>. The two hypostatic united natures in Christ are in full plenitude and distinction, with their specific peculiarities, and this truth is testified by a multitude of holy Fathers whom Father Justin uses in abundance<sup>45</sup>.

The Serbian dogmatist also describes the dogmatic consequences of the hypostatic union of the two beings in the Divine-Human Person of Christ the Saviour through the substantial texts of the Patristic Tradition of the Church: communicating the appropriations of the two natures by virtue of the unity and uniqueness of the Hypostasis, impeccability and absolute

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<sup>43</sup> Mansi, *Sanctorum Conciliorum et Decretorum collectio nova seu Collectio Conciliorum VII*, 115 A-C.

<sup>44</sup> Père Justin Popovitch, *Philosophie orthodoxe de la vérité...*, p. 91.

<sup>45</sup> Tertulian, *Adversum Praxeam*, in *PL* 2, 214 D - 215 D; Origen, *Peri archon II*, 6, 2, in *PSB* 8, trans. by pr. prof. Teodor Bodogae, editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1982, p. 142; St. Atanasie cel Mare Athanasius the Great, *De incarnatione Domini nostri Jesu Christi contra Apollinarium I*, 4, in *PG* 26, 1097 C; Chiril al Ierusalimului / Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cateheze / Catechesis 12, 1*, pp. 161-162; Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Epistole 262*, in *PSB* 12, trans. by. prof. Teodor Bodogae, editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1988, p. 541; St. Grigorie de Nazianz / Gregory of Nazianz, *Epistola I ad Cledonium*, in *PG* 37, 180 A; St. Grigorie de Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, in *PG* 45, 548 B; St. Ioan Hrisostom, *Im Epistolam ad Caesarium*, in *PG* 52, 757 A; St. Chiril al Alexandriei / Cyril of Alexandria, *De incarnatione Unigeniti*, in *PG* 75, 1220 CD; St. Ioan Casian / John Casian, *De incarnatione Christi I*, 5, in *PL* 50, 25-29; Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul / Maximus the Confessor, *Epistolae 15*, in *PG* 91, 565 B; St. Ioan Damaschin / John Damascene, *Expositio accurata fidei orthodoxae IV*, 5, in *PG* 94, 1109 C. As far as the teaching of the Church about the two works and wills of Christ, the God-Man, Father Justin uses whole pages of the theological works of Saint Maxim the Confessor and Saint John Damascene.



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holiness of Christ, the deification of the human nature in the person of the Incarnate Logos, the unchallenged worship due to the Lord, the Mother of the Saviour is the Mother of God, the Ever-Virgin. The blessed patristic testimonies describing the divine truths revealed through Holy Scripture about the mysterious and wonderful communication of the idioms of the two beings in the unity of Christ's Hypostasis are listed by Father Justin to emphasize the "*importance of this teaching that makes us understand this truth more as is conceived and explained in prayer by these philosophers who are our holy Fathers*"<sup>46</sup>.

The thought of Father Justin has very deep patristic and scriptural roots which cannot be easily schematized, and the necessity of knowing and studying the work of the Serbian theologian is related to the fact that Father Justin Popovitch is remarkable as one of the outstanding representatives of the neo-patristic direction who connected contemporary theology at the patristic springs and adopted a new method of doing theology by re-reading and capitalizing on the patristic treasure.

Concluding, we can say, in the words of Father Ambroise Fontrier, that the erudite Serbian dogmatist and exegete was

*"no doubt a patristic figure, spoke the language of the Fathers in new words dictated and inspired by his profound and authentic experience of Orthodox dogma ... his immense science, his erudition, his profound knowledge of Scripture, patristics, and profane philosophy are found qualitatively and quantitatively in his work"*<sup>47</sup> and his work represent, as Patrick Ranson notes, *"the theological expression of scriptural and patristic unity and teandric plenitude, who made him a theologian, monk,*

<sup>46</sup> Père Justin Popovitch, *Philosophie orthodoxe de la vérité...*, p. 171. Concerning the dogmatic consequences of the hypostatic union, Father Justin commented on them through the voices of the holy Fathers, such as Origen, Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, and John Damascene ( in regard to the holiness of the Lord ), Athanasius the Great, Gregory of Nazianz and John Damascene of the deification of his human nature ), Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria and John Damascene ( referring to the worship of the incomprehensible Word ), as well as Ignatius Theophorus, Origen, Dionysius the Areopagite, Athanasius the Great, Gregory the Theologian, Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor, Lerin and John Damascene, who, in unison, call her "The Mother of God and the Purple-Virgin", cf. Père Justin Popovitch, *Philosophie orthodoxe de la vérité...*, pp. 202-212 and 222-239.

<sup>47</sup> Patrick Ranson, *Introduction at Père Justin Popovitch, L'Homme et le Dieu-Homme, L'Age d'Homme, Lausanne, 1989, p. 20.*

*priest, giving, like his previous Fathers, his thoughts all forms transmitted through the ecclesiastical tradition and playing the role of a living conscience for the Church of Serbia and for the entire Orthodox Church”<sup>48</sup>.*

The theological work of Father Justin represents for us a spiritual testament in which this erudite theologian taught us that

*“Orthodoxy is Orthodoxy through holiness, and holiness is life in and through the Holy Spirit, because there is no authentic faith outside of holiness and without the presence the divine Spirit. In our human world, holiness is the measure of the authenticity of Orthodoxy, because an authentic Orthodox is pneumatophor; authentic theology is the only evangelical theology, because it is from the Holy Spirit, the pneumatophores and the Holy Fathers”<sup>49</sup>.*

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<sup>48</sup> Patrick Ranson, *Le père Justin Popovitch ou la vision de L'Eglise*. Introduction à Père Justin Popovitch, *Philosophie orthodoxe de la vérité. Dogmatique de L'Eglise Orthodoxe*, tome premier, p. 22.

<sup>49</sup> Justin Popovitch, *Le problème du salut selon l'enseignement de S. Basile le Grand*, in “Bogoslovije”, nr. 3-4 (1937), Belgrad, apud Bernard le Caro, *Theologie orthodoxe et catholique de l'Eglise selon le Père Justin Popovitch*, p. 31.