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# A Critical View on the Orthodox Neopatristics of the Second Half of the Twentieth Century. Consequences and Insufficiencies

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## Abstract

A critical view on the Orthodox neopatristics of the second half of the twentieth century. Consequences and insufficiencies. The neopatristic synthesis can constitute the paradigm of the repositioning of the contemporary orthodox theology on the line of the Church Tradition. The neo-patristic current presupposes the appropriation and not the abandonment of the spirit of the Fathers. This synthesis is still in its beginning and its development will depend on how the Orthodox theologian will understand and relate to the concept of Church Tradition, in order to remain faithful to the thinking of the Holy Fathers and effectively contextualize their teaching. In this study I am going to present, from a critical perspective, the consequences and the insufficiencies of the neopatristic movement in the second half of the twentieth century. These would be: neglect and depreciation of the study of Holy Scripture, an anhistorical approach to patristic theology and a subsequent exaltation of traditionalism, tendency to introvertism and non-involvement in major trends and theological issues of the twentieth century, the obsolescence of Byzantine theology, cultivation and consolidation anti-Western and anti-ecumenical spirit, an insufficient theological response to the challenges of modernity. In the second part of the study, the main current challenges of Orthodox theology will be exposed and some of the achievements of neopatristic theologians will be presented.

## Keywords

neopatristic synthesis, Tradition, Church Fathers, traditionalism, Holy Scripture, modernity, byzantinism.

## I. Introduction

At the first Congress of the Faculties of Orthodox Theology in Athens, in the year 1936, Father Georges Florovsky denounced the Western captivity of Orthodox theology, one felt not only by method, but in many cases, also in content<sup>1</sup>.

Beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, the neo-patristic movement became the main direction to follow in Orthodox dogmatic theology. The neopatristic synthesis can constitute the paradigm of the repositioning of the contemporary orthodox theology on the line of the Church Tradition in the context of the current challenges. It is about expressing a renewed theology, but a theology unchanged in content. The neopatristic method involves the elaboration of a theology updated through the recourse to Tradition, and it is faithful to the apostolic faith and, at the same time, it is dynamic and creative in its contextual manifestations. The realization of such a synthesis, anchored in Tradition and updated creatively for contemporaneity is still in its infancy and its development will depend on how the Orthodox theologian will understand and relate authentically to the content of the Church Tradition, so as to remain faithful to the thinking of the Holy Fathers,- and effectively develop their theaching. In addition to the praise of this initiative, in this study I am going to try to present some shortcomings or dangers of the neopatristic method in Orthodox theology. I will also seek to identify the main challenges of Orthodox theology in the context of the 21st century world and some of the achievements of the neopatristic theologians.

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the Western influence in the content of Orthodox theology, Father Proffesor Cristinel Ioja gives us several examples: between form and matter in Mysteries, the problem of grace. In general, Orthodoxy reacted by delimiting itself from Roman Catholic theology in terms of the four Florentine points. We also encounter this reaction in School Dogmatics. In other respects, in general, he unconsciously assumed, through the dogmatic syntheses of the textbooks, the accents of Western Catholic or Protestant theology, depending on the context". See: Cristinel IOJA, *Dogmatică și dogmatişti. Prolegomena privind aprofundarea Teologiei Dogmatice Ortodoxe în România în a doua jumătate a secolului al XX-lea și începutul secolului al XXI-lea*, Editura Doxologia, 2017, p. 22.

## **II. A critical approach to the concept of neopatristic synthesis**

### **II.1. Neglecting and depreciating the study of Holy Scripture<sup>2</sup>**

With the advent of the Protestant movement and the exacerbated use of the Holy Scriptures to the detriment of the Holy Tradition, Orthodox theology shows a depreciation of the study of the Holy Scriptures and a characterization of this method as Protestant.

A first insufficiency of the neo-patristic movement may be precisely the depreciation of the study of Holy Scripture, because within this movement, the rediscovery of Tradition and implicitly of the writings of the Holy Fathers, is considered the authentic Orthodox method. Secondly, there is the question of the role of the Holy Scripture in the elaboration of a neo-patristic synthesis, in the context in which, in the second half of the twentieth century, in the Orthodox diaspora - but also in traditional Orthodox countries,- the study of the Fathers takes off- increasingly, especially in asserting the main features of the identity of the Orthodoxy. Also, influenced by the Protestant principle of the objective authority of the text, we replace the authority of sola scriptura with the authority of consensus patrum. In practice, the authority and study of patristic texts, although containing essential interpretations of Scripture, has become more important than the biblical text itself. We also forget that all the great Fathers of the Church theologized with the Bible in hand. Patristic theology is at the same time biblical; Orthodox tradition and theology are biblical and patristic at the same time - they are patristic and orthodox insofar as they are biblical. Between Scripture and Tradition, the interrelation of mutual completion must be preserved in the ecclesial context, and this in the actual way of doing theology and not just declarative.

The neopatristic synthesis proposes as a method the recourse to the data of Revelation, which includes both Scripture and Tradition and is preserved by the Church. The Church is Apostolic and at the same time patristic, the Church Fathers bearing witness to the Apostolicity of its Tradition. The tradition of the Church, through the voice of the Holy Fathers, offers us

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<sup>2</sup> Pantelis KALAITZIDIS, "From the «Return to the Fathers» to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology", in: *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 54:1, 2010, pp. 5-36, here p. 15.

the most authentic interpretation of Scripture. Current biblical theologians recommend the assimilation of the historical-critical method of Western biblical science, not for the purpose of returning to the Western method of theology, but for a better understanding of the biblical text that the Fathers interpreted under the assistance of the Holy Spirit<sup>3</sup>.

## II.2. An unhistorical approach to patristic theology and a subsequent exaltation of traditionalism

In the opinion of the Greek theologian Pantelis Kalaitzidis, patristic theology was taken out by neopatristic synthesis from its historical context. The writings of the Fathers were elaborated in certain historical circumstances, they were in continuous dialogue with the philosophy and sciences of the time and for the formulation of the true teaching they took elements foreign to the faith, which they put in the service of theology, by Christianizing them. It is necessary to know how the Fathers managed to assimilate and incorporate in theology the concepts of Greek philosophy such as homoousios, hypostasis, logos, nous,- etc<sup>4</sup>.

The consequence of an unhistorical or decontextualized approach to patristic theology must be seen as a betrayal of the spirit of the Fathers, because it is devoid of the essence of their thinking and their way of theologizing. Also, the constant invocation of the authority of the Fathers for problems which did not exist in their time, leads to the objectification of patristic theology and to an unclear patristic fundamentalism.

The Fathers are quoted and authoritatively invoked in a prefabricated discourse, closed in theological clichés and incapable of being understood and assimilated in theological educational institutions, in today's society and culture<sup>5</sup>.

The unhistorical approach to patristic thought leads to ignoring the contribution of Western theology in the Rediscovery movement of the Fathers. Western theology also went through a period of renewal in the

<sup>3</sup> See: Alexander GOLITZIN, *Mistagogia, experiența lui Dumnezeu în Ortodoxie. Studii de teologie mistică*, translated by Ioan Ică jr, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1998, p. 12 and Ciprian Iulian TOROCZKAI, "Canonul și canoanele creștinismului apostolic", in: *Canonul Ortodoxiei*, vol. 1, Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> See Pantelis KALAITZIDIS, *Orthodoxy and Modernity: An Introduction*, Indiktos Publications, Athens, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Cristinel IOJA, *Dogmatică și dogmatişti...*, p. 23.

twentieth century, in which its representatives resorted to the theology of the Church before the Schism and sought dialogue with the modern world.

### **II.3. A tendency towards to introvertism and non-involment in the main theological issues of the twentieth century**

Focusing in the neopatristic movement on the liberation of the theology from Western influence and on asserting one's identity — which has become one of the basic priorities — with few exceptions, the Orthodox theology has been absent from major theological discussions worldwide, wich took place in the twentieth century.

“Dialectical, existential and hermeneutic theology, theology of history and culture, theology of secularization and modernity, «nouvelle théologie», contextual theologies, theology of hope and political theology, liberation theology, mission theology, theology of religions and differences - this whole revolution that had place in the theological work of the twentieth century has barely reached Orthodox theology”<sup>6</sup>.

These theological directions, with the exception of involvement in ecumenical and missionary theology and the concern for patristic renewal, do not appear to be influenced by Orthodox theology<sup>7</sup>. Modern Western theology notes through its theologies the inability of Orthodoxy to express itself in the contemporary context<sup>8</sup>.

### **II.4. The obsolescence of Byzantine theology**

Petru Rezuş in the work *Contemporary Orthodox Theology*, argues starting from the idea of the opposition between the true Orthodox theology, that of the Ecumenical Synods and the false one, that of the theologians of the Byzantine theology from the IX-XV centuries and of the Philocalia,

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<sup>6</sup> Pantelis KALAITZIDIS, “From the «Return to the Fathers»...”, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Gibellini doesn't mention in his *Theology of the Twentieth Century* the contribution of even one of the Orthodox theologians.

<sup>8</sup> Hans KÜNG, *Theology for the Third Millennium. An Ecumenical View*, translated by Peter Heinegg, New York, 1988, pp. 57-59.

the obsolescence of the latter<sup>9</sup>. It speaks of the replacement of cataphatic knowledge with apophatic knowledge, through the irrationality of mysticism and asceticism, identified in hesychastic and palamite theology. This sentimental irrationalism is promoted, he says, by theologians such as Simeon the New Theologian, Gregory of Sinai, Nicholas Cabasila, Gregory Palamas, who tried to continue the activity of the Ecumenical Councils, but the result of their work can not have authority in dogmatics, but only an informative role.

Rezuș wants to strike through this in the orthodox neopatristic movement which, he says, is represented by theologians in crisis of originality, who pass the Ecumenical Synods and consider theologians from the IX-XV centuries, making use of the Philokalia, and their work can be considered at most good to read. Indirectly referring to the Dogmatics of Father Staniloae, he recalls the personal and subjective dogmatics, which by reference to some post-patristic and philocalic writers, move away from true orthodoxy and preach a doctrinal truth, which is not recognized as such by the whole The church<sup>10</sup>.

I have presented here a critique of Orthodox neo-patristicism, although I do not agree with Petru Rezuș's statements. Although we affirm the normative authority of the Ecumenical Synods and the Apostolic Tradition, we do not consider the Static Tradition, concluded with the death of the last Apostle or with the end of the 8th century. If so, the whole Orthodox theology after the synods would be one whose authority is free-optional and whose contributions remain only good to read, not to consider. Palamite theology, hesychasm and philocalism, they represent faithful continuations of the Apostolic Tradition, in accordance with the decisions of the Ecumenical Synods. We can even consider them as methods of appropriating the dogmatic content of synods. The newer Orthodox dogmatic theology, whose spearhead is Father Dumitru Staniloae, expresses the same fidelity to the everlasting Tradition of the Church. There would be no need today for an Ecumenical Synod to adopt the dogmatics of Father Staniloae, because

<sup>9</sup> Petru REZUȘ, *Teologia ortodoxă contemporană*, Editura Mitropoliei Banatului, Timișoara, 1989, pp. 633-642.

<sup>10</sup> See: Ciprian Iulian TOROCZKAI, *Tradiția patristică în modernitate. Ecleziologia Părintelui Georges V. Florovsky (1893-1979) în contextul mișcării neopatristice contemporane*, Ediția a II-a, Editura ASTRA Museum, Sibiu, 2012, pp. 100-101.

he did not compose new dogmas, but only interpreted them patristically and he contextualized those already thought of by the Holy Fathers.

## **II.5. Development in opposite directions of the East to the West; cultivating and strengthening an anti-Western and anti-ecumenical spirit**

The neo-patristic movement contributed negatively to the polarization between East and West, by consolidating an anti-Western and anti-ecumenical spirit. This does not include the critique of Western theology and the discovery of its deviations from the Church's Tradition, nor the identification of its shortcomings. This is the inflexible direction, which sees in Western theology only errors, heresies and betrayals of Christianity and it presents the relationship between the two Churches, Eastern and Western, in a permanent confrontation, no longer considering the thousand of years of common Christian and ecclesiastical life<sup>11</sup>.

Father Georges Florovsky, when talking about the catholicity of the church, shows that it includes both the Eastern and the Western Church. Faithful to the patristic teaching and to the Orthodox Tradition, he did not reject, but he entered the dialogue with the great representatives of Western theology, such as Barth, Harnack, Brunner, Congar, Henri de Lubac, Bouyer, Bultmann, Kittel, Gilson, Tillich, etc. He was also inspired by the elaboration of his ecclesiology from Latin Fathers, such as Blessed Augustine, and in the ecumenical movement he spoke of the Catholicism of the Church, which has two lungs or two twin brothers, East and West<sup>12</sup>.

Vladimir Lossky in the elaboration of his fundamental work, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, was in a permanent dialogue with the Western tradition, being creatively inspired by the patristic renewal movement, which took place at the same time as the Roman Catholic did<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Pantelis KALAITZIDIS, "From the «Return to the Fathers»...", p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> See: Georges FLOROVSKY, "The Legacy and the Task of Orthodox Theology", in: *Anglican Theological Review*, 31, 1949, pp. 65-71; Georges FLOROVSKY, *Ecumenism II. A Historical Approach*, Collected Works, vol. XIV, Nordland Publishing Company, Belmont, 1989, pp. 209-210; Georges FLOROVSKY, *Aspects of Church History*, Collected Works, vol. IV, Nordland Publishing Company, Belmont, 1989, pp. 202-204.

<sup>13</sup> John MEYENDORFF, "Lossky, le militant", in: *Contacts*, no. 106, 1979, pp. 208-209.

We can also say about Father Dumitru Staniloae that he was the theologian of dialogue, a non-discriminatory and unabusive dialogue. Although he always maintained the importance and reality of the centrality of Orthodoxy among other Christian faiths, he remained open to the traditions of other Churches, entered into dialogue with their theologians, appreciated some, criticized others, but presented the balanced fullness of Tradition to all Orthodox.

However, there is a risk of making the neopatristic synthesis the theological program of an orthodox antithesis and an alternative to Western theology. In any case, we must not forget that the renewal movement in Orthodox theology has developed both in the diaspora and in traditional Orthodox countries in an environment of dialogue with the Western theology, in an environment of ecumenical dialogue and openness to dialogue, and not through parish introversion and self-sufficiency<sup>14</sup>.

Orthodox fundamentalism - which often flourishes in monastic and pro-monastic circles, and which considers anti-Westernism and anti-ecumenism as constituent elements of Orthodox self-consciousness and the most defining features of patristic theology, is stubborn to deny these truths<sup>15</sup>. For the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, modern Western theology remains unknown to most Orthodox countries, once due to its lack of accessibility - due to a relatively small number of translated studies - and later out of ignorance.

## **II.6. An insufficient theological response to the challenges of modernity**

For a creative and new interpretation in the spirit of the Fathers and the elaboration of a neopatristic synthesis, we must admit that the return to the Fathers is essentially seen as a conservative choice, insofar as we refer more to the past of theology than to the present and future. On the contrary, the real purpose of this movement is precisely to take Orthodox theology out of its fundamentalism and to introduce it into dialogue with the contemporary world. Orthodoxy does not participate organically in the phenomenon of modernity, as it has not experienced the renaissance, the

<sup>14</sup> Joannis D. ZIZIOULAS, "Ortodossia", in: *Enciclopedia del Novecento*, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, vol. V, Roma, 1981, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Pantelis KALAITZIDIS, "From the «Return to the Fathers»...", p. 23.

reform or the counter-reform, the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, the human rights or the concept of political correctness of states. The minimal impact that current theology has on society it is noticeable, as if the Church does not know what to do with theology, or how to apply it in the lives of its believers<sup>16</sup>.

The question arises: does not the return to the Fathers, as it is understood, become a bastion against modernity? Has this not hindered God's Word in His incarnation and revelation in every particular social and cultural context, in biblical and historical, anthropological, feminist, and systematic, political, and ecumenical theological studies? It did not contribute to the imprisonment of ecclesial life in pre-modern practices and structures and to a conservative mentality<sup>17</sup>? Father Alexander Schmemmann talks about the rupture between theology and life, which through an inefficient use of the data of Revelation, ends in the elaboration of massive treatises, in which the Fathers are quoted, scholastically conceptualized and majestically exposed, but theology remains unincarnated in concrete life of man<sup>18</sup>.

In any case, it should be emphasized that modernity and post-modernity constitute the historical, social and cultural framework in which the Orthodox Church is called to carry out its mission. This is the context in which the Church must make the Son of God incarnate present.

### **III. Orthodox neopatristics and current challenges**

The main goal of the Neopatristic synthesis, as well as the key to its success, is the restoration of patristic thought or the bringing back of the patristic Tradition into the present. The answer to a rationalized theology and a lifeless Western philosophy was to develop a theology based on patristic thought and acquiring the mind of the Fathers in dealing with current issues. Patristic thinking becomes normative in the sense that a theology ungrounded in Tradition can no longer be conceived today, or at least such a theology, which does not benefit from the authority of patristic thinking contained in Tradition, lacks credibility.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander SCHMEMANN, *Biserică, lume, misiune*, translated by Maria Vințeler, Editura Reîntregirea, Alba Iulia, 2006, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Pantelis KALAITZIDIS, "From the «Return to the Fathers»...", p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander SCHMEMANN, *Biserică, lume, misiune*, pp. 29-30.

Rediscovering the Fathers, neopatristic theologians discovered and recovered in Orthodox theology three interrelated concepts that were too little highlighted until then. It is about recovering the concepts of the apophatic tradition, uncreated energies and deification or theosis. The unitary vision of these notions becomes the hallmark of Orthodox theology in the dialogue with Western theology. In Catholic and Protestant theology, apophatic theology, the distinction between essence and energy, and the concept of deification were issues to which Western theologians were indifferent or simply overlooked<sup>19</sup>.

The initiator of the neopatristic movement, father Georges Florovsky highlighted the importance of apophatism, the theology of uncreated energies and the concept of deification, and father Dumitru Staniloae masterfully substantiated on the basis of Palamite theology, the motto of the neopatristic synthesis thought by Florovsky. Likewise, the monumental work of Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, is considered a true textbook of neopatristic synthesis<sup>20</sup>. The Orthodox neopatristic movement has the merit of highlighting the importance of Tradition in Orthodox theology and implicitly of the works and thought of the Holy Fathers. To begin with, patristic thought was between two movements, that of religious philosophy represented by Sergei Bulgakov and the neopatristic one, represented by Georges Florovsky. For Bulgakov, the writings of the Fathers are conditioned by the historical context in which they were developed and thus have a relative importance, and for Florovsky patristic theology is the favorable environment through which the contemporary theologian discovers the perennial principles of patristic thought in the option of which he can respond to contemporary challenges.

Another significant contribution of the neopatristic synthesis is the valorization of the concept of person in Orthodox theology. The development of personalism in Orthodox theology has its beginning in the expression of the concept called sobornost, by Alexis Khomiakov, who described with this concept the notion of the Church, understood

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<sup>19</sup> Moreover, in Catholic theology of the 1920s and 1930s, Palamite theology was severely criticized by theologians such as Martin Jugie and Sebastien Guichardon. See Martin JUGIE, "De Theologica Palamitica", in: *Theologia Dogmatica Christianorum Orientalium*, vol. II, 1933, pp. 47-183.

<sup>20</sup> See: Andrew LOUTH, "The Patristic Revival and Its Protagonists", in: Mary B. CUNNINGHAM, Elizabeth THEOKRITOFF (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 194.

as unity in duality and loving communion of all its members. Religious philosophers after Khomiakov took over and deepened the understanding of this concept, and neopatristic theologians grounded personalism in patristic theology<sup>21</sup>.

In neopatristic theology, the notion of person constitutes the essential basis of the divine image in man. Neopatristic theologians extended the patristic conception of person from God to other people in the context of patristic anthropology: a) each person is unique and irreplaceable; b) the human person is not reduced to human nature; c) the person always defines himself in relation to other people; d) it is unknowable in its depths, but like the divine Persons it can be known and experienced; e) the face of God in man is also reflected in the relationship of communion between human persons; f) the communion between human persons is an obscure face of the communion between the Triune Persons; g) human persons can only exist together with other persons, in a loving communion, which again springs from triune communion and love; h) the communion between the Triune Persons becomes the source and model of the communion of the Church. Starting from this concept, a true theology of love was developed in response to modern conceptions of love and sexuality. The ideal of the human person is love, and the path to the perfection of this feeling defines the fulfillment of the relations between human persons and of man with God<sup>22</sup>.

Starting from the meanings implied by the concept of person, Khomiakov develops the sobornost concept through which he explains the catholicity and communion of the Church. He stated that the Church is one because God is One and the unity of the Church does not take into account time and space because it consists in the unity of grace. The Church is an invisible reality, formed by all those who have a common belief in the

<sup>21</sup> See: Paul LADOUCEUR, "Treasures New and Old: Landmarks of Orthodox Neopatristic Theology", in: *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 56.2, 2012, p. 207. For a better view about this concept see: Olivier CLÉMENT, "Aperçus sur la théologie de la personne dans la 'Diaspora' russe en France", in: *Mille Ans du christianisme russe*, Paris: YMCA- Presse, 1989, pp. 303-309 and Aristotle PAPANIKOLAOU, "Personhood and Its Exponents in Twentieth - Century Orthodox Theology", in: Mary B. CUNNINGHAM, Elizabeth THEOKRITOFF (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 232-244.

<sup>22</sup> Theologians who elaborated a theology of love were: Sofronie Sakharov, Paul Evdokimov, Maria Skobtsova and Dumitru Staniloae.

Christian God<sup>23</sup>. This was the whole meaning of the Slavophiles regarding the sobornost concept. Religious philosophers developed this notion, defining the Church as the people of God, whose unity is sustained by the Holy Spirit and whose head is Christ. They also developed modern Eucharistic ecclesiology. The representatives of this concept were Nicholas Afanasiev, Ioannis Zizoulas and Alexander Schmemmann. They understand the Church as a Eucharistic community and reduce Christ to the Eucharist. Afanasiev considered that there has always been a Eucharistic unity between the Orthodox and the Catholic Church, overlooking the dogmatic differences between the two Churches. Neopatristic theologians such as Florovsky and Staniloae rejected the idea of a communion of the Orthodox Church with the Catholic one and argued it by the fact that communion can only be achieved between those who share the same faith, guaranteed also by hierarchical or synodal communion. Eucharistic communion must be seen as the obvious and necessary result of unity and communion of faith. The Orthodox Neopatristis highlighted the fact that only in dialogue can a unity of faith be reached, but in any case, they always supported the idea that a communion between churches would be possible only by the return of other Christians to the Orthodox faith. And regarding the reduction of Christ and the Church to the Eucharist, from a patristic perspective, the neopatristic theologians affirmed that Christ shares himself with the believer in different degrees and ways within the Holy Liturgy and not only through the Eucharist, that the structure of the Church is Christocentric, speaking thus about a Christocentric and not Eucharistic ecclesiology.

The neopatristic movement also sparked interest in liturgical theology. The leading representative of this direction is Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, who practically invented modern liturgical theology as a discipline. The theologians concerned with the development of Orthodox liturgical theology, aimed to restore the faith of the Church, applied in its practice. Another aspect that can be included in the contributions of neopatristic theologians is the concern for the development of a theology of the icon<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Aidan NICHOLS, *Light from the East: Authors and Themes in Orthodox Theology*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1995, p. 121.

<sup>24</sup> See some relevant works about the Theology of the Icon: Leonid USPENSKY, *The Theology of the Icon*, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992; Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Meaning of Icons*, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999; Michael QUENOT, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992; Michael QUENOT, *The*

Although the main criticism of the neopatristic synthesis is the non-involvement in the problems of the current society, in more recent times the interest of the neopatristic theologians goes precisely to these problems, some not addressed and not encountered in orthodox theology, because these problems were unknown in the patristic thought. The reason why the Fathers did not provide answers to these problems is only one: they did not exist in their time. We will refer here to bioethics and environmental protection. Regarding bioethics, we can state that it is the main modern problem to which Orthodox theology has provided answers from the perspective of patristic thought<sup>25</sup>. The conceptual framework included by neopatristic theologians is vast, summing up studies that concern homosexuality, abortion, sexuality, pornography, assisted reproductive technology, cloning, euthanasia, palliative care and organ transplantation. Paul Ladouceur includes these issues in his theology of the human body, suffering and psychic and mental illness<sup>26</sup>. These problems are addressed by recourse to orthodox anthropology, contained in the teachings of Scripture and Tradition, and the application of some fundamental principles of patristic anthropology is considered: a) the human person is created in the image of God and called to reach the likeness of his Creator; b) people are biologically, psychologically and spiritually complex beings, so each person is unique and irreplaceable. The key to approaches in the field of bioethics is precisely the in-depth understanding of the concept of person.

In terms of environmental protection, neopatristic theologians developed a true theology of creation. Starting from the idea that God is the creator of heaven and earth, they showed that God created everything from nothing and not from something pre-existing, He differs from creation by the fact that He is uncreated, He is present in creation not by His being, but by His uncreated energies and the reasons of things. Man discovers God

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*Ressurrection and the Icon*, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> Among the theologians concerned with bioethical issues, we mention: Marc Andronikof, Dominique Beaufils, John Breck, Olivier Clement, Tristram Engelhardt, Stanley Harakas, Paul Evdokimov and Jean Claude Larchet.

<sup>26</sup> Paul LADOCCEUR, "Treasures New and Old: Landmarks of Orthodox Neopatristic Theology", p. 221. See also: Jean-Claude LARCHET, "Orthodoxe (Bioéthique et Christianisme)", in: Jean-Nôel GILBERT, Hottois Marie-Geneviève MISSA (eds.), *Nouvelle encyclopédie de bioéthique: médecine, environnement, biotechnologie*, De Broeck Université, Brussels, 2001, pp. 627-633.

through creation, and his mission as the link between creation and God is the transfiguration of creation, man also has the option of disfiguring and exploiting the world. Creation theology is related to liturgical theology in the sense that man as a liturgical being can sanctify creation and progress in dialogue with God through it<sup>27</sup>.

#### IV. Conclusions

The first theologians who promote and outline the main directions to follow for the realization of a neopatristic synthesis, Father Georges Florovsky and Father Dumitru Staniloae, reformulate in the spirit of the Fathers a remarkable theology of the Incarnation. Beyond the phenomenon of theological and ecclesial self-definition and self-understanding, the theology of the Incarnation must be applied to the problems of the society in which the Church lives, such as human rights, secularization of policies and institutions, desecration in politics, culture and ethnicity, exacerbated consumerism, social hierarchies, in the name of a just society, the affirmation of authentic Christian love in the relationship between the sexes, the position of women in society, etc.

The answer, so far, of Orthodox theology, it has been based more on the expression: “we prefer to observe rather than to act”<sup>28</sup>. Theology must also be embodied in order to always remind us of the antinomic character of the ecclesial event, in its commitment to the novelty of the world, beyond what it has known so far. “In the neopatristic synthesis, experience refers to ecclesiality, to divine worship, to the sacramental and mystical-ascetic dimension of the Church, to the unity between *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*”<sup>29</sup>.

In conclusion the neopatristic synthesis is only at the beginning of a long and arduous journey. The fathers of the 20th century, referring to the concept of Tradition in the life of the Church and society, laid the foundations of this synthesis and indicated the directions that the theologians of the 21st century must follow, with the aim of organically

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<sup>27</sup> Representatives of this theology are Patriarch Bartholomew II also known as the Green Patriarch, John Chrysavgis, Alexei Nesteruk, Philip Sherrard, Elizabeth Theokritoff, Dumitru Staniloae, Georges Florovsky, Dumitru Popescu, John Zizioulas, etc.

<sup>28</sup> Pantelis KALAITZIDIS, “From the «Return to the Fathers»...”, p. 25.

<sup>29</sup> Cristinel IOJA, *Dogmatică și dogmatişti...*, p. 27.

embodying theology in life, in worship and ecclesial experience, in the creative and transcendent response to the current anthropo-cosmic reductions, to nihilistic rationalism, to the re-enchantment of the world and its perversion. Perhaps it would be useful to remember not only the concept of return to the Fathers expressed by Florovsky but also the complementary alternative of this return summarized in the phrase: together with the Fathers. The neopatristic synthesis, as thought by the great neopatristic theologians of the last century, does not aim to deepen Orthodox theology in a fundamentalism of Tradition and patristic thought, but on the contrary, it opens our horizons to the future.