

Jean-Claude LARCHET, *What is Theology? Notions of Methodology in the Practice and Teaching of Orthodox Theology*, Basilica Publishing House, Bucharest, 2021, 184 pp.

At the Basilica Publishing House of the Romanian Patriarchy, in 2021 a work signed by one of the best-known contemporary theologians - Jean Claude Larchet - came out of print. From the title of the work we can easily realize that the work aims to present some *notions of methodology in the practice and teaching of Orthodox Theology*, the content of the work being therefore an exhaustive one. In the introduction, the author motivates the need for such a work by emphasizing the fact that Orthodox theology does not only have a theoretical side, but also a practical or empirical one, related to the spiritual dimension (p. 9).

Declaring mystical theology as the highest step of theology, the author notes the fact that theology, respectively spiritual contemplation, is much more than the assimilation of theoretical theological knowledge. Theology is an experience that only the saints have. This experience - *theology*, must be the premise (and at the same time the goal) from which to start the study of Theology as a science, because “*Theology* must be the goal and the culmination of theology, and the latter obtains its meaning and value only through the first” as the author states (p. 15).

Speaking about the relationship between Theology and Philosophy, the author considers that for a good theological formation, especially of the apologist theologian, the study of Philosophy is also welcomed. After assimilating some notions of the Philosophers, it would be much easier for the theologian to understand, for example, the writings of Saints Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor or Gregory Palamas. However, a well-defined boundary must be kept, so as not to confuse Theology with Philosophy (p. 25).

In order for someone to be a true theologian, he must have as his main virtues the love of God and his fellowmen, as well as humility, this is

because the theologian must humble himself both before the Truth Himself - God, and before the Church that holds the truth of the Truth (pp. 35-36). The establishment of Academies, Institutes and Faculties of Theology following the model of other secular Faculties, generated over time a break between Theology and liturgical-spiritual life, which finally materialized in the so-called *divorce* (Fr. George Florovsky) between the two (p. 41).

The author presents methodological concepts for teaching the majority of theological disciplines. Thus, he claims that a difference between Orthodox Dogmatic Theology and Roman Catholic and Protestant Dogmatic Theology lies in the importance that Orthodox Dogmatic Theology gives to *the foundations of dogmatic theology* found in the Synods, in the Holy Fathers, as well as in the symbolic texts of the Orthodox Church, in the detriment of Roman Catholic and Protestant Theology that departs from Tradition (p. 63). The author also sounds the alarm on the fact that researchers, often Western Protestant theologians specializing in the study of apocryphal writings of the Church, are often advanced to the detriment of those who deal with the study of the Holy Fathers and their authentic writings (p. 73) .

Referring to the study and teaching of the New and Old Testaments, the author emphasizes that the Study of the Old Testament cannot be separated from the Study of the New Testament, because the Old Testament has value for Christians only in the context of its connection with the New Testament. The Old Testament needs a typological interpretation, but also a symbolic one (p. 86).

Patrology as a discipline of study enjoys a special honor, but there are several dangers to which it can be subjected, such as: 1. The tendency to favor some minor authors, often heretics, to the detriment of the Holy Fathers and Church Writers; 2. The danger of the Fathers being perceived and studied as philosophers, without emphasizing the clear difference between patristic thought and philosophical thought; 3. The tendency of modern patristic studies to neglect patristic filiation (according to which the Fathers were inspired by the Fathers who preceded them) and to favor philosophical filiations, thus losing the value of the notions of *Tradition* (understood as *thinking in continuity, in absolute fidelity to the kerygma*)

and *catholicity* (understood as thinking *according to fulness / universality / totality* of the Church); 4. Studying the differences between the Fathers rather than the common elements, a fact that constitutes a danger that would affect the very notion of *Patrum consensus* and the criterion of authenticity enunciated by Saint Vincent de Lerin; as well as 6. The danger of no longer considering the Saints of the Church as living and contemporary authors with us, but on the contrary, of considering them (as happens in Protestantism) as outdated and studied with a critical distance (pp. 91-93)

Within the study of the Fathers, it has become a fashion to favor the ancient philosophers, as well as the multiplication of studies that put the Fathers in a direct relationship with the Neoplatonic philosophers, this trend not being healthy. The author believes that this tendency has been accentuated in recent years, especially in Catholicism, being transmitted through mimicry to orthodox patrological theologians (pp. 114-115). With regard to Church History, the purpose of this theological discipline is to help us better understand the present, given that the present is the consequence of the past (p. 119) or the future of the past.

Since the field of Church History is very vast, the author recommends studying the history of the Church of the first eight centuries as a unitary whole. The formation of an independent Western Church, during the time of Charlemagne, requires in the vision to study the history of the Western Church in more detail. At the same time, three sections can be established: the history of the ancient Church; the history of the Byzantine Church and the history of the Latin Church (pp. 124-125).

With regard to *Moral Theology*, we learn that true morality is the Christian way of life, which is not necessarily defined by obeying certain rules, but by a certain state of the spirit that guides behaviour by resorting to certain norms, but which are foreign to the legal side. Moral Theology deals with the way of life of Christians, a way of life understood as asceticism, as a struggle for the agonizing of virtues and liberation from passions (pp. 127-128). Bioethics, understood as part of Moral Theology, has recently developed due to scientific progress and medical technology. Aware of current scientific and technological challenges, theological professors must train students to acquire an authentic conception of the

origin of life, genetic engineering, abortion, contraception, euthanasia, the value of the human person, and life after death (pp. 128-130).

About Hagiology as a theological subject which, unfortunately, in Romania is not part of the Theology Curriculum, the author of this book notes the fact that unfortunately this theological subject is not only missing from the Protestant Theological Faculties, but has also disappeared from the Catholic Theological Faculties. The reason would be the fact that, unfortunately, many of the more “scholarly” believers and clerics who make up the teaching staff no longer believe in angels, devils and the omnipresent miracles in the accounts of the Saints’ lives (p. 135).

In relation to this aspect, the author concludes, “Hagiology is not taught in all Orthodox Academies (or institutions of higher education), but it should be taught”. Veneration of the Saints occupies an important place in liturgical life and in Orthodox spirituality, and reading the Lives of the Saints is very important for the spiritual life of every Orthodox believer, for the reasons that Saint Justin Popovici emphasized very well in his remarkable introduction and conclusion to one from his major works, *Lives of the Saints*, in 12 volumes (p. 137).

Iconology should not be confused with art history, as is often the case in the West, where the specificity of the icon is not noticed, because the icon is not placed in the ecclesiastical context, as it would normally be. As a theological subject, Iconology really consists of what we usually call “icon theology”, a term coined by Leonid Uspensky. The theology of the icon must refer especially to the theological bases of the icon, which shed light on its content and form, justifying its veneration by believers as an act of worship (p. 145). As far as Canon Law is concerned, the author of this book prefers instead of this name the one of the *Study of Canons*, reasoning that the name of *Canon Law* is borrowed “directly from the faculties or institutes of Catholic theology in the West and is strongly marked by a legal conception of the canons of the Church” (p. 153) and noting at the same time that the study of the canons must be closely related to other theological subjects such as Pastoral, Patrology, or Church History (p. 156).

Regarding the pastoral training of priests, the author does not recommend that this training be carried out by companies specialized

in group management, because there is a risk that these companies use methods and techniques of psychic manipulation that do not respect people as such, short-circuiting personal reflection and free will (p. 161). With regard to Homiletics, we learn that this theological matter must have a much more practical aspect, to explain to the faithful what they live in the sacramental liturgical life but also what they should live in the ascetic personal life (p. 162).

Personally, the present work made a pleasant impression on me, as it is also one of the very few works addressed to the training of professional theologians regarding the teaching of Theology. I believe that this book can open up new and beneficial perspectives, being useful to any theologian of value.

Ph.D. student Ionuț MÎLCOMETE