

## Theological Education in Scripture and The Fathers

“Let your light shine forth : Orthodox Theological Education in the modern world”

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Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia  
Faculty of Theology  
Oxford University

### What is theology?

At a consultation of theological schools, devoted specifically to the subject of theological education, it is appropriate to ask ourselves the basic and primary question: What is theology? How do Scripture and the Fathers of the Church understand the task of the theologian?

Looking at the Bible, we encounter at once a striking and remarkable fact: nowhere in the Old or New Testaments do we ever find the words "theology", "theologian" or "theologize". These are, quite simply, not Scriptural terms. By the same token we may also note that none of the Twelve chosen by Christ was educated at a theological college.

It is only gradually that the term "theology" enters Christian discourse. The word was viewed with suspicion by the second-century Apologists, because for them it meant primarily the speculations of religious thinkers who were pagans. On one occasion, however, the adjective "theological" is used in a Christian sense by Athenagoras of Athens, to indicate faith in the Holy Trinity.<sup>1</sup> It was the Alexandrians Clement and, to a far greater extent, Origen who established the Christian use of the word "theology". Significantly it was also at Alexandria that there emerged the first well-established theological college, the celebrated Catechetical School headed by Pantaenus, then by Clement and Origen, and subsequently by Bishop Dionysios of Alexandria.<sup>2</sup> At a later date, in the Byzantine period, the main centre of theological education moved to the Patriarchal Academy of Constantinople.

While noting that "theology" is not a biblical word and that only gradually did it become part of the Christian vocabulary, we may also note something else. When the term is used in the Greek Patristic tradition, it is employed in a markedly different sense from that in which it is normally understood today. Evagrius of Pontos (d. 399), for

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<sup>1</sup> *A Plea for Christians (Legatio)*, x, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Probably there was more than one such "Catechetical School" in 2nd- and 3rd-century Alexandria, and so Pantaenus, Clement and Origen need not necessarily have succeeded one another in direct linear succession.

example, the disciple of the Cappadocians and of the Desert Fathers, observes in a famous epigram: "If you are a theologian, you will pray truly; and if you pray truly, you are a theologian."<sup>3</sup> Theology, states Saint Diadochos of Photiki (5th century), "bestows on the soul the greatest of gifts...uniting it with God the Logos in unbreakable communion".<sup>4</sup> For Saint Peter of Damascus (11th-12th century), theology is the most exalted of the eight stages of spiritual contemplation, an eschatological reality of the age to come, which takes us out of ourselves in ecstatic rapture.<sup>5</sup>

As these three instances indicate, theology meant far more to the Fathers than it customarily does to us today. In their view it certainly signified, as it does to us, the organized exposition of Christian doctrine, using the reasoning power of the human brain; for the reasoning brain is a gift from God and is not to be neglected. But to them it signified also, much more profoundly, the vision of God the Holy Trinity, a vision involving not merely the reasoning brain but the total human person, including the intuitive spiritual understanding (*nous*) and likewise the heart (*kardia*), in the Biblical and Patristic - not the modern - sense of the word. *Theologia*, that is to say, is nothing else than *theoria*, contemplation. It presupposes living communion with the living God, and it is integrally bound up with prayer. There is no true theology that is not part of an act of worship: all authentic theology is liturgical, doxological, mystical. If we Orthodox today have forgotten the depth and richness of the Patristic usage of the term "theology", and have come to interpret the theological task in predominantly "scholastic" and "academic" terms, then that is greatly to our own loss. Our Orthodox theological schools will not be able to make a full and proper contribution to the life of the Church as a whole unless we return to a true understanding of theology that is to be found in the Fathers, both Greek and Latin.

This Patristic understanding of theology is admirably summed up by a contemporary Greek theologian, Christos Yannaras: "In the Orthodox Church and tradition, theology has a very different meaning from the one we give it today. It is a gift from God, a fruit of the interior purity of the Christian's spiritual life. Theology is identified with the vision of God, with the immediate vision of the personal God, with the personal experience of the transfiguration of creation by uncreated grace." In this way, he continues, theology is not "a theory of the world, a metaphysical system", but "an expression and a formulation of the Church's experience ... not an intellectual discipline but an experiential participation, a communion."<sup>6</sup>

There are several key words here, to which in due course we shall be returning: gift, grace, personal experience, participation, communion, interior purity, transfiguration, vision of God.

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<sup>3</sup> *On Prayer* 61 (St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth, *The Philokalia*, tr. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, vol. i [London 1979], p. 62).

<sup>4</sup> *On Spiritual Knowledge*, 67 (*The Philokalia*, vol. i, p. 275).

<sup>5</sup> *A Treasury Of Divine Knowledge* (*The Philokalia*, vol. iii [London 1984], pp. 109, 277).

<sup>6</sup> Christos Yannaras, "Theology in Present-Day Greece", *St Vladimir's Seminary Theological Quarterly* 16:4 (1972), pp.

If theology means all this, we may well ask: Is it a suitable subject to be studied in universities and academies? Can we legitimately set examinations in theology, awarding to our students theological degrees and diplomas, assigning passes and distinction, "firsts", "seconds", and "thirds"? One thing at any rate is clear: if theology is to be taught and studied in universities and academies, professors and students should keep always in view the golden rule of Saint Gregory the Theologian: that we are to theologize "in the manner of the fishermen, but not of Aristotle".<sup>7</sup>

### Four marks of theology

Although the word "theology" is not found in the Bible, there are many Scriptural texts in which the nature of theology is indicated. Let us look at a few of them:

1. "No one has ever seen God: the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father - he it is who has revealed God to us" (John 1:18).
2. "Now that you know God, or rather are known by him..." (Galatians 4:9).
3. "We see through a mirror in a riddling, enigmatic way" (1 Corinthians 13:12).
4. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).
5. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 45 [46]:10).

These five texts can be summed up in four crucial words: *Charisma*, *Mysterion*, *Katharsis*, *Hesychia*. Let us take each key word in turn.<sup>8</sup>

#### 1. *Charisma*

Theology is a *charisma*, a gift from God, a free and undeserved gift, a gift of grace. With good reason the contemporary and friend of Saint Maximos the Confessor, Saint Thalassios of Libya, speaks of "the desire of all desires, the *grace* of theology".<sup>9</sup> Theology, in other words, signifies not simply our human enquiries into the being and life of God, but rather God's disclosure of himself, his self-revelation (John 1:18). Theology is not so much us searching out and examining God, as God searching us out and

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<sup>7</sup> *Oration* xxiii, 12.

<sup>8</sup> In what follows, I am much indebted to the thorough study by my friend Professor Constantine Scouteris, *The Meaning of the Terms "Theology", "To Theologize" and "Theologian" in the Teaching of the Greek Fathers and Ecclesiastical Writers up to and including the Cappadocians* (Athens 1972), hereafter cited as Scouteris, *Meaning*.

<sup>9</sup> *On Love*, iv, 62 (*The Philokalia*, vol. ii [London 1981], p. 329).

examining us. In secular scholarship the human person *knows*, but in theology the human person *is known* by God (Galatians 4:9).

Thus theology rests upon a divine rather than upon a human initiative: in theological research God is never the passive object of our knowledge, but always the active subject. To put the same point differently: theology is wisdom - not just scholarly enquiries and academic learning but *wisdom*. The true wisdom, however, is always Christ himself, the living and hypostatic truth, "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24). Christ himself is theology; he is *the* theologian, and we are theologians only by virtue of the *charisma* that we receive from him. The genuine theologian is always *theodidaktos*, "taught by God".

The point is well expressed by Origen. Theology, "the knowledge of divine things", he affirms, is an "exhalation" (*atmis*), an "outflowing" (*aporroia*) and an "effulgence" (*apaugasma*) from God himself.<sup>10</sup> "To be counted worthy of spiritual knowledge does not lie within our power<sup>11</sup> ... Jesus, by theologizing, proclaimed the things concerning God to his true disciples; and we, using the traces that they have left behind in their writings, acquire thereby a starting-point from which ourselves to embark upon theology."<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein Didymos the Blind styles theology the "power" (*dynamis*), the "glory" (*doxa*) and the "energy" (*energeia*) of God.<sup>13</sup>

At the very least this must mean that theology presupposes personal faith. Human reason is indeed essential if we are to theologize coherently, but our human reason can be effectively exercised only within the context of faith. *Credo ut intelligam*, stated Anselm of Canterbury, "I believe in order to understand"; and he spoke of *fides quaerens intelligentiam*, "faith seeking out understanding" - not *vice-versa*!

## 2. *Mysterion*

Saint Basil the Great and Saint Gregory the Theologian regularly use the phrase "the mystery of theology". But, if we are to appreciate what it means to call theology a "mystery", it is important to recall the true religious meaning of the word. A "mystery" is not simply an unsolved problem, a baffling conundrum, but something that is indeed revealed to our understanding; yet it is never exhaustively revealed, because it reaches out into the infinity of God.

Theology, then, is a mystery in this religious sense, because, as Saint Thalassios says, "it transcends our mind",<sup>14</sup> seeking to express in human language that which lies far beyond all human comprehension. In the words of Archpriest John Meyendorff, theology is "à la fois contemplation de Dieu et expression de l'Inexprimable", "simultaneously

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<sup>10</sup> *Fragments on Proverbs* (PG 13:17B-20A).

<sup>11</sup> *Commentary on Psalm 43* (PG 12:1424B).

<sup>12</sup> *Against Celsus*, ii, 71.

<sup>13</sup> *On the Psalms* (PG 39:1429A).

<sup>14</sup> *On Love*, iv, 80 (*The Philokalia*, vol. ii, p. 330).

contemplation of God and expression of the Inexpressible".<sup>15</sup> In T. S. Eliot's phrase, theological discourse is "a raid on the inarticulate". "Every theological statement", remarks Saint Basil, "falls short of the understanding of the speaker.... Our understanding is weak and our tongue is even more defective."<sup>16</sup> According to the Cappadocians, once theology forgets the inevitable limits of the human understanding, replacing the ineffable Word of God with human logic, it ceases to be *theologia* and sinks to the level of *technologia*.<sup>17</sup>

That is why our theology has always to be expressed "in a riddling, enigmatic way" (1 Corinthians 13:12). We are compelled to employ antinomy and paradox because we are stretching human language beyond its proper limits. In order to embrace, however inadequately, the fullness of divine truth, we find ourselves obliged to make statements that are seemingly contrary to each other. Not without reason did Cardinal Newman describe the theological enterprise as "saying and unsaying to a positive effect".

Because the realm of theology is in this way the divine mystery, our theological discourse has to be at once both negative and positive, both apophatic and cataphatic. We balance our affirmations with negations, and these negations afford us the possibility to reach out through prayer and worship into the radiant darkness of Sinai. A theology that lacks the apophatic dimension becomes exactly, in the Cappadocian sense of the term, mere "technology". We are not to see the cataphatic and the apophatic ways of theologizing as alternatives, each complete in itself. No: they are not mutually exclusive but interdependent, not successive but simultaneous. Each presupposes the other, and there can be no genuine theology that is not at once both cataphatic and apophatic. The "saying" and the "unsaying" are part of a single movement.

### 3. *Katharsis*

Since theology is the vision of God, and since it is the pure in heart who see God (Matthew 5:8), authentic theology is impossible without *katharsis*, purification. Although theology remains always a gift of God's grace, this free gift requires on the human side our active co-operation, our voluntary *synergeia*: "We are fellow-workers (*synergoi*) with God" (1 Corinthians 3:9). All theology is in this sense "theanthropic". Our human co-operation consists precisely in our conversion, in our obedience to the commandments, and in the opening of our hearts to God's love, thus making possible the total transfiguration of our personhood through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Theology is in this way a matter of lived experience; it is a *vios*, an all-embracing "way of life". There can be no true theology without a personal commitment to holiness; the real theologians are the saints.

For this reason it is surely dangerously misleading to speak of theology as a "science", as if it were on the same level as geology or zoology. Undoubtedly even in

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<sup>15</sup> Introduction to Vladimir Lossky, *Vision de Dieu* (Paris 1962), p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Letter 7*.

<sup>17</sup> Scouteris, *Meaning*, pp. 164-7.

geology or zoology there is a need for personal commitment; indeed, some would argue that the observer is always part of the experiment. But in geology and zoology it is generally enough to gather objective facts with the utmost accuracy, and then to analyse these facts with insight and impartial rigour. The personal sanctity of the geologist or zoologist is irrelevant. In theology it is otherwise. Theology certainly seeks to be "scientific", in the sense that it too aims at accuracy and intellectual rigour. Although the behaviour of many Christians might lead us to think otherwise, we do not in fact serve the Kingdom of God through vagueness, muddle and lazy thinking. It is the devil who loves woolliness and imprecision, whereas the Holy Spirit is marked above all by lucidity, clarity and transparency (for these things are not inconsistent with the presence of mystery). But in theology accuracy and intellectual rigour are never enough by themselves. What is required of us is also, and much more fundamentally, personal communion with God and personal love for him.

Evagrius of Pontos underlines this point by comparing the theologian to Saint John the Evangelist at the Last Supper:

The breast of the Lord is the knowledge of God;  
He who rests upon it is a theologian.<sup>18</sup>

Theology involves an intimate closeness such as the Beloved Disciple enjoyed with the Saviour. Saint Maximos the Confessor is yet bolder and more emphatic: "mystical theology" presupposes *erotiki ekstasis*, "erotic ecstasy", a self-transcendence permeated with an overwhelming longing for the living God.<sup>19</sup> Without "erotic ecstasy" you can be an excellent geologist but not a theologian. Theology without personal communion with God is mere pseudo-theology. In the words of Saint Diadochos, "Nothing is so mean and poor as a mind philosophizing about God when it is outside him"<sup>20</sup> - a warning that all of us who claim to teach or study theology should take seriously to heart!

This journey of *katharsis*, on which as theologians we are called to travel, requires of us three things in particular:

1. The starting-point is repentance, *metanoia*, the turning-round of our mind. This *metanoia* is to be understood in the far-reaching sense attached to it by Metropolitan Daniel of Moldavia: "... not only a reawakening and a change of mind, but also a crisis which provides a reorientation of the person or of the community"<sup>21</sup> - nothing less than a radical recentring. This "repentance", as well as being our starting-point, is also something that continues throughout our earthly life, beyond which we never pass until

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<sup>18</sup> *Mirror for Monks* 120 (ed. H. Gressmann, *Texte und Untersuchungen* xxxix, 4b [Leipzig 1913], p. 163).

<sup>19</sup> *On Theology*, i, 39 (*The Philokalia*, vol. ii, p. 122).

<sup>20</sup> *On Spiritual Knowledge*, 7 (*The Philokalia*, vol. i, p. 254).

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Ciobotea, "The Tasks of Orthodox Theology Today", *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 33:2 (1989), p. 119, quoting Fr Demetrios Constantelos.

our last breath: like the dying Abba Sisoës in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, we too must say on our death bed, "I do not know if I have even begun to repent."<sup>22</sup>

2. Purification requires of us *askesis*, unremitting ascetic effort in the widest possible sense. In the words of Saint Gregory the Theologian, "Do you wish to become a theologian?... Keep the commandments ... Action is the basis for contemplation."<sup>23</sup> If we are to theologize, says Saint Gregory of Nyssa, our life must correspond to our faith;<sup>24</sup> there is no "orthodoxy" without "orthopraxy". The point is clearly emphasized in the story of Christ with the woman of Samaria at the well (John 4:15-18). Our Lord speaks of the "living water ... springing up into eternal life", and the woman at once responds with eagerness: "Give me this water." But Jesus brings her down to earth: "Call your husband", he says; and when she answers, "I have no husband", he agrees, saying, "He whom you now have is not your husband." Noble sentiments about eternity are not enough; she needs first to put in order her personal moral life.

This *askesis*, leading us to the denial of our selfish ego and to humility, is not solitary but ecclesial, presupposing as it does a life founded upon the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, and lived out in communion or community. As Alexis Khomiakov expressed it, "No one is saved alone: he is saved in the Church, as a member of her and in unity with all her other members. If anyone believes, he is in the communion of faith; if he loves, he is in the communion of love; if he prays, he is in the communion of prayer."<sup>25</sup>

3. Above all there can be no progress on the path of theological *katharsis* without prayer. Prayer and theology are essentially connected. Recalling what was said by the good thief on the cross, "Lord, remember me when you come in your kingdom", Saint Modestos of Jerusalem (7th century) terms these words *theologia*;<sup>26</sup> and significantly they are precisely a confession of faith that is also a prayer. "The theologian is the one who prays": Evagrius' statement should make Christians wary of saying (as they often do), "I am not a theologian", for what they are actually saying is, "I don't pray and I don't particularly want to."

Being a part of an act of prayer and worship, true theology is always doxological. To theologize, as the Fathers understood it, is to glorify the Creator in praise and prayer, and indeed to become ourselves a living hymn of glory to God. In the words of Constantine Scouteris, "The whole person, living out the mystery of the new creation - educated, that is to say, 'through healthy dogmas' and 'purified' - becomes an unceasing hymn and continual praise of God."<sup>27</sup> In this way, as Saint Gregory of Nyssa points out,

<sup>22</sup> *Apophthegmata*, alphabetical collection, Sisoës 14 (PG 65:396C).

<sup>23</sup> *Oration xx*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> *On the inscriptions to the Psalms* (ed. W. Jaeger and J. McDonough, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. v [Leiden 1962], p. 148:21-23).

<sup>25</sup> *The Church is One*, 9, in W. J. Birbeck, *Russia and the English Church during the Last Fifty Years* (London 1895), p. 216.

<sup>26</sup> *On The Dormition of the Mother of God*, 1 (PG 86:3281A). Cf. St Isidore of Pelusium, *Letters*, i, 255 (PG 78:336C).

<sup>27</sup> *Meaning*, p. 82.

theology unites us to the angels, who are the doxologists *par excellence*.<sup>28</sup> Theology, in the words of Saint Diadochos, "makes the intellect a partner with the angels in their Liturgy".<sup>29</sup>

If theology involves all this, we may well ask ourselves: Is it not highly dangerous to theologize? Who among us has the temerity to undertake the study of theology? Who among us dares to call himself or herself a theologian? Saint Gregory the Theologian would certainly commend us for our caution in this regard:

Not to everyone does it belong to philosophize about God; not to everyone - the subject is not so cheap and low - and, I will add, not at all times, nor before every audience, nor on all points, but on certain occasions, and before certain persons, and within certain limits.

Not to everyone, because it is permitted only to those who have been examined, and are far advanced in contemplation, and who have been previously purified in soul and body, or at the very least are being purified.<sup>30</sup>

"Not to everyone ... nor before every audience": how far, then, is a modern university - or even a modern ecclesiastical seminary - a suitable setting in which to teach and study theology? In my limited experience most universities and, all too often, most seminaries are not exactly hot-beds of holiness.

We may take heart, however, from a threefold distinction drawn by Saint Gregory Palamas.<sup>31</sup> He speaks first of the saints, that is to say, those who possess full personal experience of God. In the second place, he says, there are those who lack such fullness but who trust the saints. And thirdly, there are those who lack personal experience and who do not trust the saints. The first group, the saints, are in Palamas' view the true theologians. The second group, those who trust the saints, may also be good theologians, albeit at a lower, secondary level. The third group, those who do not trust the saints, are bad theologians, or, more exactly, not real theologians at all.

This reassures me. I am painfully aware how far short I fall of sanctity, but at least I can strive to be a theologian in the second sense: I can trust the saints, and I can seek to bear faithful witness to what the saints have said and lived. Theology on this secondary level is not impossible even in a modern secular university: with scholarly exactness we can transmit to those around us the message of the saints. That, at any rate, is what I am trying to do in Oxford.

Theology is highly dangerous: of that there can be no doubt. But let us not be unduly daunted by the perils. What the Orthodox Church needs today is a theology firmly

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<sup>28</sup> *On the Theophany* (ed. W. Jaeger and E. Gebhardt, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. ix [Leiden 1967], p. 241:19-20).

<sup>29</sup> *On Spiritual Knowledge*, 67 (*The Philokalia*, vol. i, p. 275).

<sup>30</sup> *Oration xxvii (Theological i)*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> See A. M. Allchin, "The Appeal to Experience in the Triads of St Gregory Palamas", *Studia Patristica* viii (Berlin 1966), pp. 323-8.



loyal to Holy Tradition but at the same time courageous, not timid and cowardly. While it is our task faithfully to bear witness to the saints, this does not exclude the use of our imagination, of our exploratory insight, of our adventurousness and dynamic creativity. There can be no true theology without repentance, *askesis* and prayer but equally there can be no true theology that is not generously creative. One of the most disturbing features in the contemporary Orthodox world is the way in which - alike in Greece, Russia and the west - there is a concerted effort by certain "ultra-Orthodox" groups to quench all creativity. With our whole strength we must resist such an attempt in the name of the Spirit of truth, who is also a Spirit of freedom.

#### 4. *Hesychia*

What has been said about theology and prayer brings us to our fourth theme: there can be no theology without *hesychia*, without inner stillness, silence of the heart. "Be still (*scholasate*), and know that I am God" (Psalm 45[46]:10): theology, as the knowledge of God - as not merely talking about God but also listening to Him - presupposes stillness, *shole*, *hesychia*. Let us continue the quotation from Saint Gregory the Theologian: "And what is the permitted occasion? It is when we attain a state of stillness from all exterior defilement and disturbance.... It is necessary to be truly in a state of stillness and so to know God."<sup>32</sup>

In other words, all authentic theology is mystical theology. No one has expressed this better than Vladimir Lossky:

Far from being mutually opposed, theology and mysticism support and complete each other. One is impossible without the other. If the mystical experience is a personal working-out of the content of the common faith, theology is an expression, for the profit of all, of that which can be experienced by everyone ... There is, therefore, no Christian mysticism without theology: but, above all, there is no theology without mysticism. It is not by chance that the tradition of the Eastern Church has reserved the name of "theologian" peculiarly for three sacred writers of whom the first is Saint John, most "mystical" of the four Evangelists; the second Saint Gregory Nazianzen, writer of contemplative poetry; and the third Saint Symeon, called "the New Theologian", the singer of union with God. Mysticism is ... the perfecting and crown of all theology ... theology *par excellence*.<sup>33</sup>

This recognition of the mystical element in theology has an important practical consequence for theological education. While theology may be legitimately taught within the context of a university faculty, a more appropriate setting - especially when the students are mainly candidates for the priesthood - is that of an ecclesiastical academy. In the ecclesiastical academies that have existed in Russia since the seventeenth century, an effort is made to ensure that the level of the teaching is at least as high as in a university faculty, but at the same time the institution has a semi-monastic structure. The students do not merely attend lectures, but they and their professors are also housed together, they

<sup>32</sup> *Oration xxvii (Theological i)*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London 1957), pp. 8-9.

eat their meals together, and above all they pray together, sharing a life that seeks to be genuinely cenobitic (although in practice the Russian schools have often fallen short of the ideal which they set themselves). Unfortunately, when the Theological School was opened at Athens in 1837, it followed the model of a German university faculty, not that of the Russian ecclesiastical academies. When the Theological School of Halki was established in 1844, on the other hand, it adopted the Russian pattern, and as a result it was able to provide far more vocations to the ministry of the Church. Let us hope that, in a revived form, Halki will in the future render services to the Orthodox Church no less than those which it so notably rendered during its illustrious past!

### **Joyful Wonder**

There is one last thing to be added. *Charisma, mysterion, katharsis, hesychia* - all are needed; but equally essential is joy. We are to devote ourselves to theology with the fear of God but also - as Saint Diadochos insists - with joyfulness of heart.<sup>34</sup> There is no reason for theologians to be dour and morose; a sense of humour is important in theology. In the story of the conversion of Kievan Rus', what Vladimir's envoys found lacking in the worship of the different nations that they visited was specifically the element of joy; and what converted them to Orthodox Christianity when they attended the Divine Liturgy at Constantinople in the Great Church of the Holy Wisdom was the sense of joyful wonder. As theologians let us today cultivate the same joyful wonder, and then we shall find that our witness bears fruit in ways far beyond our imagining.

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<sup>34</sup> *On Spiritual Knowledge*, 68 (*The Philokalia*, vol. i, p. 275).