

## **Fatherhood and Discipleship in Theological Education**

Theological Schools Consultation, Leningrad, USSR, 3<sup>rd</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> February, 1982

By Fr. Michael NAJM  
Dean of St. John of Damascus School of Theology - Balamand

In all of the previous conferences on Orthodox Theological Education attempts were made to rediscover the authentic Patristic approach to the methodology of Theological education.

The common concern of these attempts was to apply this methodology to issues and challenges raised by our contemporary situation. These attempts sought to avoid the pitfalls of the past scholastic systems and the prevailing fashions of intellectualism. After a long period of western-influenced theological academism orthodox theological schools must exercise great caution in the definition of their curriculum and programs.

We acknowledge gratefully the role of Syndesmos in helping our theological schools to rise to the challenge of undertaking this important theological task, which is equally reflected in the whole pastoral life of the church. Fatherhood and Discipleship in theological education play a vital role in liberating our educational process from the particular pitfalls and weaknesses from which we have suffered.

In this paper I would like to study this issue, in the light of the New Testament and the Tradition of the Fathers, in order to establish a wide perspective on the situation of our theological education. In this process we hope to be free from the influence of the scholastic theology which was characteristic of our near past.

Contemporary Orthodox Theological Education cannot advance unless it adopts the insights of Biblical and Patristic modes of education. This implies that the Father-Son relationship must be taken into consideration in all of its dimensions in order to be incorporated in a process of authentic theological learning.

### I. The Uniqueness Master-Disciple Relationship in the New Testament

The relationship between Christ and His disciples is always to be characterized by a unique personal quality. The person of Jesus is always the exclusive center of this relationship because Christ is the embodiment of the Teaching itself. The disciples were first of all conceived, not as servants but as beloved friends and sons ; "...because I have made known, to you everything I have learned from my father". (John 15:15). They therefore were able to accept the teaching of Christ, and his personal authority as a teacher, without any alienation from his person.

Discipleship in the New Testament implies a personal attachment between the Son of God and his apostles which shapes their inner life totally. There is nothing in the life of the disciples which exists outside of this relationship. For his disciples the Lord Christ could neither be simply reduced to an ordinary principal of a school, nor to a rabbinical teacher. Christ is rather the living lord of his people and the sole source of Divine wisdom. Christ receives all peoples as his disciples if they abide in His Word. As the sign of a true disciple depends upon his fidelity to his teacher, so the sign of Christ's disciples is par excellence their abiding in His Word. "If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples, you will learn the Truth and the Truth will make you free". (John 8:31)

The significant difference which exists between the Rabbinical teachers and Christ is to be found on the one hand in His Person and in His sonship to the father, and on the other hand in His unique role as Father to His disciples. For Christ the Law and Scripture can never be the sole criteria for entering into contact with God, but are rather confirmation of His own relationship to the Father.

Christ is endowed with a teaching from another world by virtue his unity of will with the Father: "What the Father has taught me, is what I preach." (John, 8:28)

The opposition to Christ as Teacher arose from the fact that He did not receive authority from any teaching body. According to the prevailing system of teaching in Christ's epoch the student in rabbinic tradition submits himself completely to his Master's authority in a total and servile manner. The rabbinic teachers were placing a value of its own to their own office as the seat of authority. This was out of character with the teaching tradition in the Old Testament. All teaching had to take place within the context of an individual pupil's relationship to a teacher, and never by an individual's own study. Only one who had studied and served under a Jewish scholar for an extensive period, could then himself become a scholar with authority to teach his own tradition. The way in which particular teachers developed and defined their doctrines gave rise to the appearance of schools and various circles of the teaching, grouped around a particular Master.

Although Christ was addressed as a "Rabbi" by His disciples, (Mark 9:5, 11:21) and by others (John 3:2), he had not passed through a rabbinical school and He had clearly transgressed the recognized limits of the prevailing function of a rabbi. This gives the disciple-Master relationship a new and unique dimension.

When Christ went up to Jerusalem for the feast, and taught in the temple, the Jews were surprised and puzzled and said:

"How did he learn to read? He has not been taught". Jesus answered: "My teaching is not from myself, it comes from the one who sent me; and if any one is prepared to do His will, he will know whether my teaching is from God or whether my doctrine is my own: when a man's doctrine is his own he is hoping to get honour for himself; but when he is working for the honour of one who sent him then he is sincere and by no means an impostor." (John 7:15-19)

Jesus did not establish a school like the other schools but revealed that His wisdom was from God. In contrast the Greek pupils and the rabbinic learners bound themselves to their master seeking to become themselves masters in the future. But the call of Jesus to his disciples differed, in that it did not imply that they would themselves become masters in the same fashion as the rabbanic Masters (Matt. 23:8).

To be a disciple of Christ means to be drawn to him as Lord and thus to do God's will (Matt. 12:46-50). Unlike the legalistic approach of the rabbis, in distinguishing between the worthy and the unworthy, Christ summoned to discipleship all types of people in a comprehensive way. Christ's call was to all people, that they might serve the Kingdom. The duty of a disciple does not lie in transmitting a particular teaching about Jesus but rather in the fulfilment of his duty as a witness to his Lord and in dwelling in the Word and Spirit.

"Learning" in the New Testament refers directly to the will of God. Jesus himself is the central point of reference in whom is revealed to mankind God's will. "Learning" therefore involves keeping oneself receptive to the word of the Father. "Learning" is no longer an intellectual process of acquiring knowledge about Christ, but involves the total acceptance of Christ himself. Only then, is the old existence left behind, and a new life of discipleship in Christ begun.

## II. Discipleship As The Result Of The Father-Son Dialectic

When Jesus Says "I" say to you it is clear that he is identifying himself directly as a son with His Father. Being a "Son" his teaching is different from that of the scribes and all other teachers. As the "Son" he is the Absolute Teacher.

Just as the eternal Wisdom of the Father is given to the son in the unique Father-Son relationship, so it is passed on from the Son to the disciples. The relationship of God the Father with His Son seeks to manifest itself in the distribution of the Divine Wisdom to mankind. It is the gift of the Father which the Son distributes. This is illustrated after Peter's confession of faith, when Christ said to him:

"It was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven" (Matt. 16:17)

The sole source of Christ is the fellowship with the Father from whom he draws his authority as a teacher and which involves a mutual dynamic of knowledge. Thus the Son, in his teaching and ministry, fulfils on the cross the truth of Fatherhood as the dominant character of his teaching. On the cross, Jesus seeks to unite all of mankind to the Father.

The use of the word "Father" places the disciple in a position, of response and issues a demand for service and love. In this encounter the truth of Fatherhood is established. Thus the word Father relates to those who accept the teaching of Christ. The central concern of Christ's teaching of Fatherhood is always to instruct the disciples about His Kingdom. The reality of Fatherhood seeks to teach the ways of

entering into the mystery of God. In contrast, the pretence of the Jews, that they serve one Father, was to refute the charge that they are illegitimate. "We are not born of prostitution" (John 8:41). Clearly the antithesis between the Jews and Jesus can be traced back to a difference in Fatherhood. Christ accuses the Jews of placing the Devil as their father because they are unable to become His real disciples.

"It is because you are unable to understand my language. The Devil is your Father" (John 8:43-44). As the child learns all that is decisive from his Father he follows and imitates him. Knowledge of the Father is the fruit and consummation of the whole redemptive process. The Truth of Fatherhood is the revelation of the Son and only through him is it a truth for the disciples.

There is no reference in the Bible to a general Divine-Human Sonship by nature as state. However there is no radical rejection of the idea of universal fatherhood. The stress is rather on the personal Father of Christ. Christ always speaks of "my Father". The whole event of salvation is anchored in the most intimate union between Father and Son. Mutual knowledge is an unconditioned characteristic of the union of love between Father and Son. This is also the presupposition of the commission and sending of the Son into the world.

The conflict with the Jews concerning the truth of the Father arose because he claims God as his own Father (John 5:18). The conflict resulted from his knowledge of the Father, and His self-identity in the Father which the Jews could not understand.

The Jews sought to compare Christ to a mere man, by placing him in the house of his earthly father, (John 6:29), in order to invalidate the distinctiveness of the mission.

We have seen how the relationship between the Father and the Son in its sharing of divine knowledge is transmitted into the world in the person of Christ. Thus himself can be called "Father" who beyond his participation in the creation of the world and man accomplished through his incarnation and his redemptive work, the recreation and spiritual rebirth of man.

### III. The Pedagogical Apostolic Teaching Based on Fatherhood

The foundation of the significance which the Church gave to the personality and work of the spiritual Father may be traced in the epistles of St. Paul. In Romans 4:1-8 the Apostle Paul begins by speaking of the Jewish view that Abraham is the father of the race. By way of illustrating that the decisive role of Abraham is not found in blood-relationship but rather in being the spiritual ancestor of all nations. Abraham is not only a model or prototype but also a spiritual father from whom all are descended. The Fatherhood of Abraham furthermore is derived from his faith in God as the Father of us all.

In his instruction and teaching to neophytes St. Paul likes to make use of the metaphor of the Father. Indeed he refers expressly to birth:

"I am saying all this not just to make you ashamed but to bring you, as my dearest children, to your senses. You might have thousands of guardians in Christ, but not more than one Father and it was I who begot you in Christ Jesus by preaching the Good News". (I Cor. 4:14-17)

In his epistle to the Galatians St. Paul speaks of the conversion process whereby birth through Christ gives knowledge of God as contrasted to the ignorance and slavery of paganism. He reminds them that "once you were ignorant of God, and enslaved to Gods who are not really Gods at all" (Gal. 4:8- ).

The knowledge of God comes through the transformation given in true discipleship to their Father-teacher St. Paul:

"My children, I must go through the pain of giving birth to you all over again, until Christ is formed in you". (Gal. 4:19)

This birth does not only involve the relationship between St. Paul and the congregations of Galatia and Corinth, but is accomplished and completed by the economy of Jesus Christ, through the Kerygma of the Good News. St. Paul is not pleased at being called Father, but is seeking to describe the relationship of the teacher and the student to whom he gave birth. The apostle is revered as a "Father" by the Christians, because it is through him that they have received the faith.

In his teaching to the Thessalonians St. Paul describes the transmission of the Gospel in filial terms:

"Like a mother feeding and looking after her own children [...] as a father treats his children, teaching you what was right." (I Thess. 2:8-12)

Similarity the cry "ABBA" which is found in Galatians 4:8 refers to the working of the spirit or sonship as contrasted with the cry of a servant to his Master.

St. Peter in his Epistles stresses the leading role of the spirit in the making of true sonship. This grace is the gift of the Father acting through the Holy Spirit. In this act is found a soteriological dimension. Salvation lies in sonship by grace of the Spirit.

"Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in great mercy has given us a new birth as his sons". (I Pt. 1:3)

Fatherhood calls for the human response to the Divine calling, leading through the Gospel word to the rebirth of man.

#### IV. The Patristic Methodology of Master Pupil Instruction

The church defines from among the Fathers some of them as Teachers. In using the term "Father" the church joined two functions in one person. These two functions are:

- 1- The function of the shepherd, who regenerates and gives birth to the faithful.
- 2- The function of the Teacher who possesses a special gift in articulating the faith.

In this sense, the Father has a special responsibility in teaching and interpreting the righteousness of God, and in confronting the great issues and crises of the church.

The church recognizes the difference which exists between the innumerable fathers and the few who are strong and vivid exponents of the Teaching.

In its doctrinal formulation the church refers to the teaching of the Fathers as the formal and normative term of reference.

In the early era of the church this methodology of instruction was prevalent and held great honour. An example may be found in the dialogue of judgment between the proconsul of Asia-minor and the deacon Papilas. When asked by the proconsul if he has children, Papilas answered that he has many. Because some pagans who were present interpreted his answer as a reference to children according to Christian faith and not real ones, the proconsul blamed him and accused him of being a liar. Papilas replied proudly, that if the proconsul wished he could at that very time discover that in every district and city

"I have children according to Christ".  
(*Martyrium of Carpos* 32)

The Patristic methodology of instruction centers on the Father-son relationship. This basic relationship is described by St. Irenaeus:

"For when any person has been taught from the mouth of another, he is termed the son of him who instructs him, and the latter is his Father".  
(*Ad. HER.* XLI, 2)

Similarly Clement of Alexandria speaks of this relationship:

"And every one who is instructed, is in respect of subjection the son of his instructor".  
(*Stromata Book I*, 1)

The term "Father" was thus given to the ordained ministers of the church in reference to their function as instructors. In the fourth century, the title of Father also began to be used to describe a monastic instructor. It was in this manner that the significance and authority of the desert Fathers spread into the church as a whole. During the Tridological debate, the term "Father" became the title of those great

individuals who formulated in their writing the principles of the Faith and taught the people the Orthodox doctrine. This is what St. Basil meant when he spoke of the need to preserve the teaching as formulated by the Fathers and in the Tradition. (Epistle 140, 2)

The Fathers are thus those persons in whom the Orthodox witness is encountered and in whom the authentic method of discipleship to Christ is found. The true content of the Christian Faith is not an intellectual doctrine, but rather a living body of truth which is transmitted and re-enacted from generation to generation, from Father to Son, as a Divine inheritance given directly from God. Every pupil receives instruction in the tradition from God himself. The Pupil accepts the teaching of his Father as it comes from God and as the means by which the power of Divine Grace is transferred. The method of transmission always remains the Word of God.

Spiritual birth like natural birth, has three stages; conception, pregnancy and birth itself. Every spiritual aspirant, according to St. Simeon the New Theologian, conceives Christ as embryo, through hearing and keeping the words of his Father. Birth itself entails the pangs of childbirth, just as the pupil must suffer, the teacher also goes through birth pangs, because of the ignorance and illiteracy of his students. Through this pain alone is acquired spiritual freedom. The real teacher does not condemn his students to a life long period of childhood but helps them to grow up and mature into manhood. Fatherhood does not carry any contradiction to the value of fraternity, brotherhood and equality. St. John Chrysostom in his treatise "On The Priesthood", makes a distinction between the bodily Fathers and the spiritual Fathers. The bodily Father is the person who gives birth to his sons in transient life while the spiritual father gives birth to his sons in eternal life. The bodily Father cannot deliver our bodies from sickness or death, where as the spiritual Father knows how to diagnose and cure the body from all disease and from death.

As a natural father brings up and educates his son over the period of a whole lifetime so in a higher degree the spiritual Father nurtures with the knowledge of God a son who is not born of human flesh. A teacher can be called "Father" only in the sense that he is the image of the Father above.

St. John Chrysostom in his commentary on St. Matthew who quotes the words of the Lord against the calling of fathers and teachers on earth (Matt 23:8-12) stresses the idea:

"And again call not father" not that they should not call, but they may know whom they ought to call father, in the highest sense. For like as the master is not a master principally; so neither is the Father. For he is cause of all, both of the masters, and of the Father".

(*Homily LXXII, 3*)

Thus all the Fathers of the church emphasized that the Father is one and the teacher is one who is in heaven, but that the image of Fatherhood can be acquired and exercised on earth through Divine Synergy, and through the Father of our spirits (Heb 12, 9).

## V. The Application of the Notion of Fatherhood in Our Theological Education Today

In order to give our theological education its proper Orthodox identity and authentic meaning, and to avoid the perplexity and impasse of the western academism, we must give witness in our theological education to the evangelical and patristic basis of the Father-disciple relationship.

Sin in itself is the rejection of the Divine adoption given to man. Sin through this rejection leads to an absolute individualism, while the grace of Divine cooperation creates an open and collective communion. Fatherhood or Motherhood involve in themselves a sacrifice, since the Father or the mother give of their lives to their children, and die to themselves. As St. John the Baptist has said:

"He must grow greater I must grow smaller"  
(John 3,30)

In conclusion we must seek the following goals in our theological education:

First: we must overcome the limited notion that our educational process involves simply a person-to-person level of instruction. We must seek to discover the real Father-Son dimension of education.

Second: we must recognize that this Father-Son relationship not only gives personal freedom to the student but also presents him with an opportunity for a living encounter with the Divine.

Third: the recognition that in the last analysis, every pupil is a student of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit reveals and brings to light in every generation teachers who teach and Students who are taught.

Fourth: Our Theological Institutes provide the proper setting for the growth of students in Fatherhood. The students will no longer be children:

"I have come that they may have life and that they may have it to the full".  
(John 10:10)

but rather real Fathers in the body of the church.

Fifth: Theological Institutes must generate and enrich a stagnant and sterile world with the fertility of the Divine Love. This sacred task centres on the creation of a new level of relationship between persons.

Sixth: Theological education must serve as a model for other types of education, in that its methodology brings a new element into the learning process.

Seventh: Our theological education must concentrate on the growth of the many spiritual gifts and "charismas" in particular the "Word of Knowledge" which plays a primarily role in revealing the Divine Truth.



Eighth: Theological students ought not to feel that they are designated to be merely objects to be instructed disciples but rather to be trained to accept in their inner life, the Divine presence through the working of the Divine energies.

Ninth: The Master-disciple relationship based on the Father-Son relationship cannot reduce religion to mere instructions, ordinances and laws, nor to a mechanical and stereotyped relationship, as if God is only an all-powerful observer demanding execution of His commandments

Finally, we must bear in mind, that in our church no one can build on any other foundation than the laid down by the apostles. In the continuing process we can draw on the wealth of experience built up by generations in which the apostolic teaching took flesh. This must remain, the purpose and goal to which we are dedicated and to which we must always strive towards in our theological education being our heritage from Christ and our Father.