



Memory Eternal: Protopresbyter John Meyendorff

**(Homily marking the twentieth anniversary of
Father John's repose by Archpriest Robert M.
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In the name of the Father, and of the son and of the Holy Spirit.

Twenty years ago, on this day, Father John Meyendorff reposed in the Lord. I cannot emphasize enough what a gift he was and continues to be not only for our small Church in America but for the Church throughout the world.

In April of 1980, Father John presented a paper in Bologna, Italy, at a colloquium dedicated to "The Ecclesiology of Vatican II: Dynamism and Perspectives."¹ The subheading to the topic was "Issues of dialogue with Roman Catholicism." Father John's paper was entitled "Ecclesiastical Regionalism: Structures of Communion, Or Cover for Separation?"

Both the title and content of Father John's paper were very bold. The paper was critical, in the best sense of the term for it drew attention, among other things, to the challenges of Orthodox/Catholic relations with regards to "regional synods" including autocephalous Churches and Roman primacy. The paper also focused on the Orthodox Church as it engaged in ecumenical dialogue and as it lived and proclaimed the Gospel in and to the modern world. Though the paper is not Father John's best known work and while it was intended for a specific audience, its insights and challenges extend beyond its original parameters and speak directly to us as Orthodox Christians in North America.

Father John's ability, indeed his genius, to clearly evaluate the state of Orthodox life and thought in relationship to the "sources" made him a voice of truth which called the Church to the difficult task of critiquing itself as it sojourned in history. Father John stood among those brilliant lights of Orthodox pastors, theologians and teachers who saw that the Orthodox Church was indeed the *Una Sancta* – the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church – commissioned by the Lord to offer its life, its vision, its truth to the entire world. Like his fellow luminaries, Father John was keenly aware how we Orthodox cannot be exempted from taking responsibility for impeding the proper implementation of the dominical command. Like many of his fellow luminaries he felt compelled to point out how we, the Orthodox, often prevent the life in Christ from being disseminated here and now.

In his paper, Father John exposed three inter-related stumbling blocks that, over the course of history, have constrained and continue to constrain the Church from utilizing

not only its own liturgical, biblical and patristic sources but also the sources of modern culture. Consequently, for Father John, the Church, in the name of Tradition, consistency and continuity often sealed itself off from what naturally fostered the renewal and revitalization of every facet of ecclesial life.

The first stumbling block was the fear of freedom. Father John along with his venerable predecessors at Saint Vladimir's Seminary, Fathers Alexander Schmemmann and Georges Florovsky, as well as the many other radiant Russian theologians of the late 19th and 20th centuries, knew the value and heavy responsibility that came with being free in Christ. If Orthodox life and thought was to be taken seriously then those who are free in Christ are obliged to examine and evaluate every aspect of Orthodox life and thought. Father John clearly saw that unless the Church cross examined itself, it risked losing its ability to engage the world – it risked being able to dialogue with the world and to learn from the world so as to better proclaim the Gospel.

In speaking about freedom in Christ, Father John challenged his Catholic audience to assess whether all developments relative to papal primacy and “Roman universalism” were “legitimate.” He also challenged the Orthodox to undergo the same self evaluation relative to developments of church life especially with regards to “ecclesiastical regionalism.” From a broader perspective, Father John expressed his concern that when it came to self criticism the Orthodox were unable to apply their freedom in Christ. “Personally, I regret that this freedom is not used more widely, and I believe that unless the Orthodox learn that form of legitimate self-criticism, their claim to preserve apostolic truth will remain ineffective in contemporary ecumenical dialogue.”

How true these words are. They go beyond the context in which they were delivered and speak directly to us. For unless we, who strive to acquire the Holy Spirit to fill our minds and hearts, can examine every facet of ecclesial life and wisely assess what needs reform our Church will have no place in this world - our Church will not be able to offer a saving word to this world. Father John's reference to freedom can also be seen as a reference to the ascetical life. The ascetical life is more than fasting. It is more than bodily mortification. True asceticism stems from repentance which seeks to change the mind and to open the heart. True asceticism seeks to possess God. And unless we are engaged in this kind of spiritual arena, we practice a false asceticism.

The second stumbling block Father John exposes is an ecclesiastical regionalism based on ethnic identity. Due to historical and/or political reasons ethno phyletism emerges as the unifying principle of the local or regional Christian Church. Consequently, as Father John clearly and courageously pointed out, the identity and unity of the local Church became based on its homogenous ethnic makeup and no longer on Christ, on baptism, on sacramental life and the Gospel. For Father John this kind of ecclesiastical regionalism and autocephaly gave rise to the separation of local Churches in spite of sacramental communion. This anomaly continues today especially in North America where jurisdictional pluralism thrives under the cover of hierarchical and sacramental unity. When ecclesiastical regionalism becomes a cover for separatism, when ecclesial

unity is driven by ethno phyletism then we are compelled to assess whether the Church has assumed a false identity that compromises the Gospel.

The third stumbling block Father John exposes is an uncritical conservatism that is blind to history. Father John was well aware of the inherent fear that exists among Orthodox Christians – the fear to question, the fear to change lest fidelity to the living Tradition be compromised. Only freedom in Christ can expose and overcome this kind of conservatism that nurses a false spirituality driven by fear and ignorance that veils the mind and closes the heart to the activity of the Holy Spirit. Father John stressed to his audience in Bologna and he stresses to us in Boston that Orthodox conservatism, unless nurtured by the Holy Spirit, renders the Church a sect. Father John cautioned against a conservatism that was averse to recognizing that continuity and consistency with the “New Testament and... the *apostolic* Church” required an in depth study of history which ultimately unveils what is mutable and immutable relative to the Church’s living Tradition. “...Orthodox concern for continuity easily transforms itself into frozen conservatism of almost anecdotal character. Moreover, blind fear of any change leads to a gradual drifting into sectarianism; As opposed to sects, ‘catholic’ Christianity is both faithful to the *depositum fidei* and open to the realities of history...”



Brothers and sisters, the life and work of Father John Meyendorff is a gift to each of us. I encourage all of us to become familiar with his work, to become familiar with his writings so that together we might receive that fresh and living breath of life so necessary for us as a Church sojourning in North America.

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^[1] This paper, held at the Instituto per le Scienze Religiose, later appeared in Saint Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly 24 (1980), pp.155-168.