

14 September 2010

Your Eminences,

Most Blessed President of the Board of Trustees

Very Reverend Dean,

My fellow professors,

Dear students,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very grateful for the honor you are doing me this evening. The bestowal of an honorary doctorate shows that in effect you are receiving me into the teaching body of your School, into your academic family. Such a reception, I would venture to say, brings me back to my home. The School of St Vladimir's, thanks to Father John Meyendorff and Father Alexander Schmemmann of blessed memory, but thanks also to the theological "climate" that St Vladimir's has represented for so many decades, has been for me a real "nursery," a point of reference, a place that I have always experienced, even from a great distance, as a place I belong to.

Today you are bestowing on me a great academic honor. But for about fifty years you have been nourishing me with something of great importance: with criteria of a theological orientation. I believe that in the consciousness of the Orthodox the School of St Vladimir's, along with its sister School of St Serge in Paris, has deeply marked the history of the Church. These two Schools have preserved

theology as the primary expression of the Church's experience. And they have done so in a climate, lasting for centuries, of the "Babylonian captivity" of the Orthodox to a scholastic mentality and to a religious attitude centered on the individual that only served to alienate the ecclesial event.

The brief lecture that, as is customary, I shall now deliver, has the title: "The Causal Principle of Freedom." I should like it to evoke a sense of the presence of Father John Meyendorff and Father Alexander Schmemmann.

-.-

The Trinitarian of God as the Causal Principle of Existential Freedom

With the definition "God is love," Christian experience proposes an ontological hermeneutic which in the signifier *love (agapē)* summarizes absolute existential freedom (i.e. the *being* of God). In the language of the religious traditions and the philosophical systems (as a rule) the signifier *God* refers to an existence free from limitations of beginning, end, space, time, change, mutation, decay and death. Christian ecclesial experience, however, had historically to confront the very specific challenge which it had inherited from ancient Greek philosophical thought: whether we can identify an a priori possibility of existential freedom — whether the causal principle of the existential fact is freedom or necessity.

In the experience of the ancient Greeks it is only by intellection (*to noein*) that we can identify being (*to einai*). For that reason alone humanity endowed with mind can confirm that which exists as existent, as well as identify the *mode* of its existence.

The *mind* is the *place* of the knowledge of being (*to einai*) and of beings (*tōn ontōn*), of the modes-forms of being (*the place of forms... the perception of sensible things is the mind*). And this is because all existent things exist *according to their participation in that which is intelligible*, which means: they exist in the degree in which they participate in a prehypothetical intelligible reality defining the mode-form-*logos* of their existence.

A universal (*xynos*) *logos*-mind pre-exists existent things, a given rationality (with an unexplained cause), *a most divine and dispassionate energy*, which *exists in or is brought into being in* existent things as their *essence* (the specific *mode* of their existence), *like art is to its material and like light makes potential colors into actual colors*. Thus *when one says mind*, one is referring to *the cause of the world and all its order*.

If God exists, then he is himself existentially bound to the intelligible *logos* that is definitive of his existence, to the *logos* of his *essence*. Even God is that which his essence defines him to be: he cannot be something other than what he is as God.

The word *essence* (*ousia*) is a product of the feminine of the present participle of the verb *to be* (*einai*): the essence manifests the *mode of participation* in being, the mode which makes every existent thing be what it *is* (a human being, a horse, a lily, etc.). In the word *mode* (*tropos*) we summarize those characteristics (the given *logoi*) which make *every* human being a human being, *every* horse a horse, *every* lily a lily, and God God.

In the ancient Greek perspective the mode by which the human mind conceives of God, the attributes which it accords to him, correspond to the reality of God, since *being* is realized only *by intellectual participation*, only as subject to the necessity of its rational prescriptions: *Everything occurs for a reason and by necessity....* It is necessary for there to be *something divine... that which is not moved but is the mover... infinite, dispassionate, immutable.*

The fundamental starting-point of the Christian gospel is the fact of the *inhumanation of God*. If this refers to a historical fact which is true, then ancient Greek ontology is clearly overturned: if God can also exist as a human being without ceasing to be God and without merely *appearing* to be a human being but really *being* one, then the existence of God is demonstrated to be free from logical prescriptions of essence or nature. God is then existentially free from every necessity of mode of existence, and can therefore also exist by the mode

of human essence or nature (as a perfect human being) without ceasing to be God.

Moreover: if there exists a possibility of the freedom of being (*hyparxis*) from the prescriptions-necessities of essence or nature, and if the fact of this existential freedom is the causal principle of what exists, then there is a logical space for the “grace” (the gift of being) which God can bestow on humanity with a view to humanity’s sharing itself in the *mode* of freedom from the necessities of its essence or nature (necessities of decay, of death — limitations which accompany the nature of created being).

Within the perspective of ancient Greek ontology all the above possibilities are simply *foolishness*.

The fact that before the Christian Church fully took root in society it became part of the then Greek or Hellenized world of the Roman Empire and expressed itself in the (philosophical) language of that world is quite remarkable. The earliest texts proclaiming the Church’s message are already couched in a language that refutes ancient Greek rationalism: a language consistent with the semantics of the ontological theories which were to follow historically and were to constitute a systematic hermeneutical proposition emphasizing the absolute existential freedom of God.

From the very start of its historical life the Christian Church has referred to a *triadic* God, to a triad of hypostases of the Godhead (i.e. to three specific existences) which makes the divine *being* an existential reality.

Ecclesial experience has defined from the very first that the divine *being* “is love.” Not that God *has* love, that love is a moral-qualitative characteristic of God (a property of the way he acts), not that God first exists and since he exists he loves. The phrase *God is love* reveals precisely that which the phrase *God is triadic* also reveals — both phrases signify the mode which makes God be that which he is (be God).

This mode is not omnipotence, omniscience, ingenerateness or immortality. From the first texts recording the Church’s experience, the mode of existence which differentiates God from every existent thing is his absolute existential freedom, a freedom from any predetermination/necessity/rational prescription of existence. Both the signifier *love (agapē)* (since we understand love only as an active choice, not as a necessity) and the linguistic signifiers which refer to the *triad of the hypostases of God* refer to this absolute existential freedom.

The linguistic signifiers which ecclesial experience has used to identify the three hypostases of the Godhead reveal:

— the *personal* character of the hypostases (existences with self-consciousness and rationality);

— the existential otherness of every hypostasis (its unique, dissimilar and unrepeatable character);

— the existential (life-giving) *relation* which connects each hypostasis with the other two hypostases.

The signifiers (names) of the personal hypostases of God are, in the language of the Church: *Father, Son, Spirit* — from the first moment of the Church's historical life and considerably before the appearance of a systematically articulated ontology.

The names of the personal hypostases of the triadic Godhead reveal existence not as self-contained atomicity, not as a unit of existential autonomy, but as a mode (and fact) of *relation/self-transcendence/love*. The names indicate that the existence of each hypostasis of the triadic God “is realized” as a *relationship of love*, that each hypostasis *exists* as love, that it *is* love.

By signifying relation and the dynamic of relation, the names of the hypostases of the triadic God realize the possibility that one signifier should indicate both the subjective *identity* (existential otherness) of each hypostasis and the common *mode of existence* of the three hypostases (i.e. love).

What is signified linguistically by the name *Father* is the subjective identity (existential otherness) of the *causal principle* of divine being, and also a mode of

existence which does not bind the hypostasis to atomic self-containedness. The name *Father* indicates that the specific hypostasis of God is neither known nor exists in itself and for itself but only as the “begetter” (*gennētōr*) of the Son and the “processor” (*ekporeuōn*) of the Spirit. The Father *hypostasizes* his *being* (makes it a hypostasis, a real existence) in a loving mode (*agapetikōs*): “begetting” the Son and causing the Spirit to “proceed.”

This *being* of the Father’s is indicated not only by his godhead but also by his *fatherhood*: his uncircumscribed and non-predetermined freedom to exist because he loves, a freedom which is confirmed by the “begetting” of the Son and the “procession” of the Spirit. Thanks to the name *Father*, this freedom is signified not simply as a fact to do with the will, but as the cause of the *being’s* being hypostasized (i.e. of its constituting existential hypostases). The freedom (causal principle of the existent) is signified linguistically as the causal principle of *being* because it is identified with the hypostatic self-determination of God as Father, that is to say, as *love*: He exists and constitutes the cause of the existence not because he is God, but because he wills to be the *Father* — to exist as freedom of loving self-transcendence and self-offering.

The same absolute existential freedom is also indicated by the name Son: by the sonship a hypostasis of *being* is signified which is not predetermined existentially by its “nature” or “essence,” but is self-determined as freedom of relation to the Father. The relation is loving, that is to say, free from causal existential

dependence. He wills to exist because he loves the Father: his love is signified by the name *Son* as existential response to the freedom of the love of the Father, the causal principle of existence.

The Son exists without his existence “preceding” his sonship, without its being bound existentially to predeterminations of ontic (atomic) self-containedness. That which he *is* is signified precisely by the *voluntary* sonship, not by the *essential* (i.e. belonging to essence and therefore necessary) godhead. He is *God*, because he exists as *Son of the Father*, because his existence corresponds to and refers to the life-giving will of the Father: he hypostasizes the freedom of love, its non-subordination to existential necessities.

The Son is also indicated by the name Logos (Word) of the Father: his existence makes the Father known and the Father’s will known, which is creative-cosmopoeic-salvific of creatures. The Logos of God *witnesses* to the Father, without his existence “preceding” his witness: his existential witness hypostasizes the sonship; the sonship of the Son is the Logos of the Father, the making known of the Father’s will. This will of the Father’s has the same “logical” space in the language of the Church as the divine *being: love* as absolute existential freedom, as a voluntary convergence of wills of the three hypostases of the Godhead.

A voluntary (loving) convergence of the three personal wills in a common will and energy of the Godhead: this is signified in the language of the Church from the

first moment, and with the “mission” (*sending*) of the Spirit (the *Paraclete*) by the Logos. As Logos, the Son *witnesses* to the Father as *sending* the Spirit: the personal factor of the manifestation of God “outside” God as ontopoeic and life-bearing love.

Language is “stretched,” reaching the limits of expressive possibilities in order to prove the astonishingly accurate aim of the signifiers which Christian experience has made use of, before any shaping of a systematic ontological context, with a view to referring to hypostases of the divine *being* of a single existential identity and common (loving) mode of existence.

Personal (i.e. self-willed, self-activated, self-conscious) hypostasis should be noted not as an atomic onticity and an existential identity existing in itself, but as a loving relation and referential realization, that is to say, as freedom transcending any defining autonomy.

This is exactly what the word *Spirit* seeks to convey: that the active hypostatic otherness should be revealed which exists by referring “through its work” to the *being* of the love of the Father, to divine love as ontopoeic and life-giving truth. This is connected with the *Spirit of the Father* as the opposite number (by linguistic logic) to the *Logos of the Father*: the Logos “is begotten” by the Father and witnesses by his existence to God as the Father of love. The Spirit “proceeds” from the Father (the causal principle of existential freedom) and

indicates by its existence the “property” of God, his identity as creative, life-giving love.

Christos Yannaras