

Theological Knowledge in the Act of Orthodox Faith and Its Importance in the Church's Mission

Abstract

Keywords: faith, cognition, theological knowledge, revelation, vision of God, Holy Fathers, Confession of Faith, evangelism, mission of faith

It is rather difficult and problematic to talk to the man of nowadays about the knowledge of God through faith as this is the man who, in not too a distant past, lived during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment periods and discovered the theory of relativity and the tiny components of the atom and explained everything in the light of the mathematical and analytical rationality, yet experienced psychoanalysis and a constant battle through totalitarian – atheistic ideologies against the sacred. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the dimension of faith is not opposed to human rationality; on the contrary, by dilating human beings' rationality and functions, it gives them the opportunity to ascend and to contemplate the divine mysteries, which are beyond their reason and understanding. By faith, we get to know the hidden mystery of the Name (Ieş, 3:14), the Only True God, Who has revealed the crucified love of God – the Word, the Light in Which there is no darkness (cf. I in 1.5), and the triumphant love of the Holy Spirit Who dwells in us and turns us into holy churches, offering us Kingdom of Heaven. From this perspective, faith is situated above all the other forms of knowledge and understanding of reality; although irrational, faith is understood as the knowledge beyond the knowledge, and the apophatic can even be seen as opposite to rationality, logic and empirical evidence, because faith is the light and power of divine grace, “unlustful thoughts about God” (St. Diadochus of Photice).

The present paper, entitled „*Theological Knowledge in the Act of Orthodox Faith and Its Importance in the Church's mission*”, proposed as a doctoral thesis in theology, for the discipline of Orthodox Missiology, aims at developing the theology of faith and of knowledge through faith through a deep study conducted from a missionary and hermeneutical perspective, while recovering the epistemological dimension of faith with its specificity.

Therefore, I did not focus on originality in the research approach, but I meant to remain *faithful* to the revelation of the Crucified and Risen Christ, depicted in the Holy Scripture and Sacred Tradition and always mentioned in the Church through the theology of the Holy Fathers; we also intended to be truly *responsible* towards believers and the current cultural context, while preserving a nuanced, realistic and eschatological *openness*.

My purpose in the present paper was also to emphasize that the essence of the Orthodox tradition is the transmission of man's experience of enlightenment and deification from generation to generation, as well as the need to explain and understand the Christian knowledge and dogmas from the perspective of experiencing them while living and practising them in everyday life. Thus, in the Orthodox theology, the rational way of lifting the finite to the infinite through the experience of conceptualisation is completed by the one of experiencing through living in the act of faith.

Another important aspect of the theme is the development of the theology of knowledge through a deep study from a missionary and hermeneutical perspective, while recovering the epistemological dimension of faith; in other words, faith is seen as the act of knowledge in its apophatic aspect, and not just an oscillation between the affirmative and the negative aspects of the cataphatic (rational) knowledge of God, or a syncretistic system of religious ideas, since the apophatic knowledge allows a direct experience of the mysterious presence of God, which goes beyond the mere rational knowledge of God. Thus, apophatism avoids reducing God to the natural mind of man, as did St. Augustine, seeking instead to adapt the human mind to the realities of life and the divine communion of the Holy Trinity, helped by the divine grace.

In the context of faith, man comes into contact with a new reality, a new plan of life which is in cognitive and epistemic connection with God, since Christian faith is, above all, the knowledge of God that develops and intensifies in the complex mystery of man open to the communion with the Eternal Revealer, Who, through the kenosis of Revelation and man's reception of truth revealed through faith, becomes the rationality of human nature which, due to the human intellect, has "a natural desire for God" (St. Justin Popovich).

Our research is structured into four chapters, with related sub-chapters that are preceded by an Introduction and followed by Conclusions and References.

In the *first chapter*, my intention was to emphasize the concept of faith and its aspect as a subjective dimension of Revelation and as a natural element in the anthropological structure, which creates free personal dialogue between the Holy Trinity's Persons and the human person. Without faith, no religion can be established and especially the Christian one, which is based on God's Revelation through the Divine Logos Incarnated for the life of the world (Jn. 1,4-5, 3,16; 5,39; 6,47; Mt. 16,16; Mt. 18,11; Lc. 19,10). In the vision of the Eastern tradition, man is a religious and participative being, who is destined to be fulfilled in perfect communion with God, the Holy Trinity and by being involved in communion of life and eternal love through the deifying work of the Holy Spirit's grace.

In addition, I pointed out the valences and the signification of faith in the light of "believing" and "trusting". From this perspective, faith connects two terms: the one who believes and the one in whom we believe or in whom we trust. However, faith is both a gift of God received by man once with the Sacrament of Baptism, which allows the personal connection with Christ, whose Sacrifice and Resurrection let us die to our sins, in other words to our selfishness and isolation, and to rise to a new life, which involves intimate communication with Christ and which will lead us too to resurrection through the power of His Resurrection (cf. Rm. 10,9); it also involves the power of the soul which allows the believer to start a personal, free and cognitive dialogue which is materialized in the personal and community experience of the Church with its Head, Christ, God-Man, real and revealed God, always present in our lives through the Church in the Sacraments.

After these considerations, I approached the biblical model of faith and the faith dimension as knowledge and understanding of God's mystery; then, I discussed faith as obedience, since faith leads to obedience and submission to God (Jn. 6,28 to 29; FA.11,21; Apoc. 14,12) shown by the love of Christ (I Pt. 1,7 to 8), who, through our faith in His love, becomes our likeness (Gal. 2,20); faith as experience shows that the foundation of knowledge of God is the Revelation, the discovery of the ineffable Divine Love of the human person, and the human experience with the divine through the act of faith.

In the last chapter I presented the cognitive dimension of faith as the vision of God in the theology of the Holy Fathers, starting from the Apostolic Fathers and continuing with the teachings of St. Basil the Great, St. John Chrysostom, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Gregory Palama and with the lives of Saints and the Paterikon.

In the *second chapter*, the research focused on the Orthodox faith and its mission in the current context. Therefore, I identified the causes of the religious-moral consciousness crisis which lead to faith apathy and even to existential deviations and mutations in the act of faith. Contemporary man has reduced faith to a moral and formal feeling, which is limited to certain rites and practices related to certain holidays, which most often arise from the desire to preserve the identity and origin of national traditions. From this perspective, the causes of the religious-moral consciousness crisis have their origin in man's religious-moral consciousness crisis expressed through the individualisation and secularisation of moral conscience, the failure of secularisation and the loss of the meaning of sin consciousness and immoral life; they also originate in the relativism of moral life expressed through a crisis of values and exacerbated selfishness. To these, the contemporary cultural and socio-economic issues are added, such as: unemployment, poverty, discrimination and social and religious unfairness, as well as current ideologies such as: globalisation, secularism and religious syncretism.

Further, I highlighted the structure of the act of faith as a religious act which is profoundly human, free and redeeming and which represents man's answer to God's saving vocation and interpellation. The theological discourse about faith from an Orthodox perspective is built on the theology of the person, on the human hypostasis that is open to communication and communion, which in Father Stăniloae's words is expressed as "the intent to communion"; this involves defining a person as reality and subject open to communion, and not as a specific "thing" or a component of the evolving nature but as a unique person open to the communion with another person in sacrificial love. Understood from this perspective, faith is the adherence to Revelation, giving knowledge to the believer in his personal and community-ecclesial dialogue with God, the Supreme Person, the perfect communion of love. From the perspective of the open and giving relationship of the Holy Trinity who reveals from the Father through the Son into the Holy Spirit and of the participation in the communion through the free and conscious response – love of man who is open through faith, we infer that the act of faith is a fundamental

human spiritual act which is born after the contact, the immediate relationship between the human person as a whole, both body and soul, and God – the Holy Trinity. According to the Eastern tradition, faith as a profoundly human religious act encompasses all the three constitutive faculties of the human soul – the intellect, the will and the feeling – without being dissolved in them, but preceding them as a fundamental and integrative element of our spiritual life which unites them all into a unitary synthesis. Thus, the full meaning of faith must be understood from a holistic perspective, as a free volitional and cognitive vocation, founded on Revelation and experienced in its spiritual dimension as a prayer, asceticism and contemplation in the mystical Body of Christ, the Church, in which faith materialises, manifests itself and is cultivated and enriched.

However, faith is not just an intellectual act of rational acceptance of a supernatural Divine truth revealed with the purpose of meeting the spiritual and knowing God from a theological point of view, nor is it a deliberate act of will, as a manifestation of our dependence on our Creator, Redeemer and Judge or of a sentimentality that reduces the act of faith exclusively to its affective, pietistic element; faith involves the cognitive, real, free and personal-community experience of divine love as inner joy and enlightenment within the ecclesial community. In this respect, faith is both the personal and the ecclesial act that defines the Eucharistic community, the propositional truth professed in the Creed. In the life of the Church, faith is the mystagogical experience, the confession of the mystery of the Incarnation, the Death, the Resurrection and the Ascension of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who, through Sacrifice and Resurrection, brings the Kingdom of Heaven into our lives. Faith is manifested as both an inner and a communal attitude that defines the Church as a new life with Christ and in Christ, Who becomes present through the sanctifying and renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Since the Pentecost, the historic moment of the founding of the Church until the end of time, faith is *fide Christianismus insignitur* (St. Gregory the Theologian), in other words the fundamental and ontological reference mark of the Christian confession. Faith implies and requires the confession of faith through the Creed, as the history of Revelation, of man's salvation through divine iconomy and its free acceptance by him, as the Creed encompasses the believer's personal feeling as well as the openness and acceptance of the truths confessed through the pneumatic experience of the Church from an eschatological perspective of perfection. The propositional

faith professed in the Creed is the response to the call of Christ and it is “saving and necessary to all” (St. Simeon of Thessalonica).

In the perspective of Christian teaching, the fruits of faith knowledge and of faith truths are the fruits offered by the Holy Spirit: “And the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, purity; there is no law against them “(Gal. 5,22 – 23). These fruits are seen in the lives of believers and constitute the criteria for verifying the correct experience of true faith. Consequently, I dedicated a chapter to the knowledge and confession of faith in the Christian life. Thus, Christian life is Church’s life lived within the Holy Trinity. In other words, life lived as death and resurrection with Christ through the Sacrament of Baptism (Rm. 6,3 – 10; cf. Gal. 3,27; I Ptr.1,3; 3,21); as enhancement and growth in the knowledge of God (Col. 1,10) and exceeding love (Philip 1,9), and by “holding the truth in love, we may grow up to Him in all things, who is the Head, the Christ” (Ef. 4,15). The life testimony of the Orthodox Christian must be proof of the pneumatic experience mirrored in the memory of the Church and confidence in the truth of Revelation, since we confess our faith not as an intellectual and cognitive construction, but as a gift and responsibility in the Holy Spirit.

The second chapter ends with an emphasis on faith acknowledged by the ecclesial act, especially through the Holy and Divine Liturgy, thus emphasising the confessing and missionary dimension of the Divine Liturgy. Being a living member of the Church, a living being in which the Holy Spirit works and blossoms involves living in the Liturgical Spirit of the Church during the Liturgy when faith is embodied in the believer who is called into a perfect union with Christ, the Eucharist, who transforms and renews our life. The whole cult of the Church and its missionary vocation revolve around the Death and Resurrection of Christ the Lord, who is called in each believer’s life through the mystery of faith. Therefore, during each Holy Liturgy, the believer witnesses the experience of Taboric light *hic et nunc*, he becomes witness and partaker of the Revelation, he is called to confess through word and deed.

In the *third chapter*, I analysed the missionary coordinates and constants of faith expressed through evangelisation, confession and diakonia.

Orthodoxy as a religion of the Incarnation, of the love of the Holy Trinity of the Revelation, as well as the restoration of the whole man, body and soul, is in direct and uninterrupted continuity with the primary Church, which is why, in its mission, it addresses the problems of the contemporary world out of an inspiration originating from the Holy Scripture and the patristic tradition. Thus, the Church's mission, since its inception, has focused on two directions: the external mission or the *ad extra* mission, which involves preaching the Gospel for converting peoples, and the domestic mission or the *ad intra* mission, by which the Church has seen to the baptized and its own believers by organising the internal, liturgical and social life of the Christian community.

Evangelisation is the call to renewal, to conversion and, at the same time, to trust; it is the transmission not only of a divine call to receive the Lord Jesus as the Son of God-Father Who, through His Birth, Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension to heaven and through His teaching, priestly and royal work, restored and saved the human being, but also of a divine commandment to give up sin.

The testimony (or martyria) is a second missionary coordinate that stands proof to conversion and to the acknowledgement of evangelical truths, to serving the Gospel through word and deed, through the Christian way of life. The Christian martyria as a new life in "spirit and truth" is the Church's response to the current consumerist, hedonistic and anthropocentric society; it is the new life as a testimony of the Gospel worked through faith, yet not characterised by a static and passive existence, but by a permanent process of being authentic, growing together with Christ to get that "likeness" in communion with Him. Thus, the communion with Christ in the Holy Spirit, experienced in the Church in a plenary way, transforms the human being through the power and the transfiguring work of the uncreated energies and through man's opening to the communion with God through faith, in a gradual, discreet and delicate way in a Christological and pneumatological being.

A third missionary coordinate of the Church, which is in organic continuity and complementarity with the Church's evangelism and testimony, is its diakonia or philanthropy. Diakonia or the service to the neighbour can be translated by Church's solidarity as the mystery of the kingdom of God to the world, in the spirit of reconciliation, justice and freedom, in order to comfort and help especially the poor, the suffering and those who go through hardships.

In the *fourth chapter*, I contextualised the missionary dimension of faith in the life of the parish as a place of communion and union in life with Christ and a place where faith and the challenges which contemporary times have for it are manifest. The parish is a reflection of the whole Church; it is life in Christ, that experience of the Sacrament and life of love in the antinomic horizon of the reality of symbol and of the symbolism of reality in which man through faith, prayer, asceticism and liturgy lives his life in a mysterious and real way in Christ, through the Eucharistic symbolism and realism. In this regard, the Church as a parish is the place of unity and union of God the Holy Trinity with the believer through the Sacraments. Which is why, being an Orthodox means proclaiming the Gospel of the Incarnation, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ, witnessing living in the joy of the light of the Resurrection and of God's presence in creation, in history and in the life of the world as a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven in the unity of the parish community of faith. In this way, the believer lives the mystery of the Church in his life and in the reality of his parish. Within it, he leads the fight of spiritual perfection and sanctifies himself, joins his brothers in Christ, continuously fulfilling his existence in Christ. The parish is the place of birth and manifestation of faith, of Christian evangelism that is intertwined with life's philokalia through asceticism and prayer, present in family life as well, where spouses do the mysterious work of man's becoming eternal in the world's time and space through sacrificial dedication. Yet, it should be noted that parish life, which involves communion of religious life is not static, definitive and rigid, nor is it constrained by obsolete and anachronistic rules, rites and norms; on the contrary, it is a permanent process of spiritual growth and renewal with Christ, in fidelity and communion with those who have reached His "likeness" and in communion with Him.

In the context of the religious pluralism of contemporary Europe, the life of a Christian, hence the life of the parish, which represents the place and the way in which Christian faith is experienced, is subject to many new challenges such as: the religious relativism, which leads to an ideologisation of Christianity, in other words to a relativisation of all the deeply Christian values and traditions (that is, God revealed in the human – divine person of Jesus Christ does no longer count as Incarnated "true God from true God" who, through His Cross and Resurrection, rescued the human nature and redefined the purpose of his earthly life which is fulfilled in the eternal one; He becomes a simple founder of religion, along other major figures in the history of religions; or, according to the ideologised Christian's view, the Orthodox Church is

nothing more than a civilising factor, an authority regulating morality or a means of preserving old traditions). Several factors add to these challenges: the proliferation of sects and new religious movements and the lax attitude of some Christians who are indifferent to the missionary – liturgical life of the Church and who, instead of becoming “living stones” and “God’s home” (I Pt. 2,5: Eph. 2, 22), end up by being indifferent and anonymous to God, “haters of God”, “filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness” (Rm. 1, 29) due to the theological ignorance or to the minimal ignorance shown towards the teachings of the Orthodox faith and its relativisation.

In *Conclusions*, I presented the main ideas of the paper in a synthetic and systematic manner, pointing out that, according to the Tradition of the Church and its way of theologising in the “Spirit and Truth”, which is permanently and constantly updated in the pneumatic life and in the saints’ communion’s ideal of holiness through the confession of the same faith “which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), faith constantly has several hypostases in every believer, manifesting itself as God’s saving vocation (call) and man’s loving, free and conscious response, contained in a dialogic and participatory logic with the purpose of deification.