

BOOK REVIEWS

Reverend professor Alexander Schmemmann, *Preasfânta Fecioară Maria*, Translated from English by Florin Caragiu, Basilica Press, Bucharest, 2014, 114 p.

This book is the third volume in the collection of sermons and lectures held by Father Al. Schmemmann and published in English under the title “Celebration of Faith” in 1991-1995. This volume gathers sermons and articles about the Mother of God, published in several magazines in an attempt to compensate for the lack of Mariology studies in the Orthodox theology, compared to the rich liturgical tradition of the cult of the Virgin Mary.

Even if, at first look, the work may seem simplistic, just a work of popularization of Orthodox Mariology, it is not, because Father Schmemmann has a series of reflections of a significant theological depth, expressed in a language full of symbols (pp. 5-6). The Orthodox liturgist insists upon the special role of the honouring of the Virgin Mary in the Christian faith and the life of the Church.

As concerning the role of Mariology in the Orthodox theology, the author shows that we cannot speak of a separate chapter of Mariology, given the intrinsic relationship between the teachings about the Mother of God and all of the chapters of the Orthodox dogmatic. Mariology is presented as “size of „both dogma and piety, both of Christology and ecclesiology” as an element that crosses and penetrates the whole life of the Church” (p. 7). In the foreword to the American edition, the author shows that for a more developed Mariology “we must turn our attention to the liturgical tradition” (p. 9). The Byzantine hymnographs used information from the Holy Scripture, from the apocryphal and the rich theological tradition, surpassing the short definitions of Ephesus.

The first chapter, entitled “Mother of God”, consists of a series of sermons held in Russian and broadcasted by Radio Liberty, translated into English in the American edition. The message is direct, simple, addressed to an audience not familiar with the church from the former Soviet Union (p. 10).

Reverend professor Alexander Schmemmann, *Preasfânta Fecioară Maria...*

In the introduction, Al. Schmemmann states the different names of the Mother of God, how relevant is her presence in the liturgical tradition of the Church, in prayers, in iconography, etc. However, nowadays, many are wondering regarding the point of the over- veneration of the Mother of Christ and why she should be so honoured. (p. 12). Those who have these questions in mind, start from noticing the weak presence of the Virgin Mary in the pages of the New Testament. She is mentioned only by the Evangelists Matthew and Luke concerning the Annunciation and the birth of Christ, by John the Evangelist, who mentions her twice, and in The Acts of the Apostles she is mentioned once; in other books of the New Testament she is not mentioned at all. This was the argument of the Protestants who felt the veneration and the devotion shown to the Virgin as a form of idolatry (p. 15).

The first feature of the Virgin contemplated by the author is her eternal virginity which is considered a stumbling stone for many, being a miracle, that is, a reality that exceeds the capacity of reason to provide a response from your normal activities of life (pp. 18-23). The author's conclusion is that "when we accept Him (Jesus, o.n.) as God and Saviour, we accept and recognize the eternal virginity of His Mother in which the Spirit and Love overwhelmed the matter and its laws" (p. 23).

The second issue considered by author is the image of the Virgin, which does not eclipse the face of Jesus and is not separated from Him. Her face is the face of a woman, who is distinguished by humility, by simplicity and yet is full of beauty and power, it is image of the humble and obedient love (p. 26). The following pages explain, the meanings of the feast days dedicated to the Virgin: the Nativity of the Theotokos (pp. 27-31), The Entry of the Most Holy Theotokos into the Temple (p. 31-35), The Annunciation of the Theotokos (pp. 35-42), The Synaxis of the Theotokos (pp. 42-46), The Protection of Our Most Holy Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary (pp. 46-51) and the Assumption or the Dormition of the Mother of God (pp. 51-56).

In Chapter II, the author sees the Mother of God as the archetype of humanity. In the inconsistency that characterizes the contemporary theories and views on Mariology, some live with the splendour of its medieval nostalgia, others abandoned it as something outdated, archaic. Facing the two completely contradictory anthropological directions, the anthropological minimalism and maximalism, the doctrine of the Mother of God gives

Reverend professor Alexander Schmemmann, *Preasfânta Fecioară Maria...*

us the right balance, the necessary response. The author shows that the main spiritual disease of our time is the anthropological heresy. If anthropological minimalism is supported by humanities that reduces man to the status of phenomenon (object), determined by impersonal natural laws, the other direction, the anthropological maximalism, affirms the absolute human rights and freedoms. Strangely, both coexist nowadays. The solution and right approach to the problem of man is offered by Mariology, because in the honouring the Virgin Mary and the theological speculation regarding it, the anthropological dimension of Christology is revealed (p. 62). In the Saviour's incarnation is the basis of Mariology: Mariology springs from the revelation of Christ and not from Mary (p. 63). "In the Mother of God, the very notions of dependence and freedom cease to be opposed to each other, as some that would exclude each other... the Theotokos receives, is obedient and humble not in front of something or somebody, but in front of the Truth itself..." (p. 69).

Chapter III (pp. 71-85) sets the guidelines of the Orthodox Mariology. The author is aware that Mariology is no longer the focus of Christians today. The crisis of the Christian world today is not caused by the lack of adaptation of the Church to the world, but by the moving away from the Christian vision of God (p. 72). In this chapter, the author also insists that there is no "Mariology" in the Orthodox Church, as a theological discipline, as a system of concepts, "the honouring of the Mother of God is widespread... throughout the entire life of the Church; is an "issue" that belongs both to dogma and to piety, both to Christology and ecclesiology" (p. 72). The Orthodox understanding on Mariology was always expressed in Christological terms and the liturgical veneration has developed in those successive feasts (p. 73). Liturgical life is in Orthodoxy the main place, even the exclusive place of Mariology; at the end of each service, at Apollis is remembered Mother of God, each group of hymns or prayers always ends with a Theotokion, that is a hymn dedicated to the Mother of God (p. 75). Al. Schmemmann shows that there are three major theological themes referring to the Mother of God: Mary as the New Eve – the cosmological aspect of Mariology; Mother of God as the Church (temple) and the theme of the Assumption - the mystery of eschatology (pp. 76-77). Virgin Mary is the image of the Church and, at the same time, is the embodiment and personification of the world.

In Chapter IV, the Orthodox liturgist shows the relationship between

Reverend professor Alexander Schmemmann, *Preasfânta Fecioară Maria...*

the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit, in a society that cares more and more for spirituality, for the presence and the work of the Holy Spirit in the world, an interest that is not exempt from spiritual confusion (p. 85). At the same time, we notice a clear decline of the interest in Mariology, even of those Christians who, in the past, exaggerated the place occupied by the Virgin in the economy of salvation (p. 86). In the Orthodox theology, pneumatology and Mariology are inseparable in the life of The Church, and they must be also together in the theological meditation. If “The Holy Spirit is the One Who reveals to us the Mother of God, it is her who, remarkably, is the revelation of the Holy Spirit in the Church” (p. 87). Our Lady is in Tradition and in the life of the Church the true epiphany of spirituality, being herself the first and most perfect fruit of the Spirit in all creation (p. 90). So, Mariology is to be understood as a kind of criterion of pneumatology.

The last chapter is dedicated to Virgin Mary’s presence in the liturgical worship of the Orthodox Church, an abundant presence, but without a significant theological reflection (pp. 100-113). There is nothing in the theological Orthodox creation that corresponds to the important Mariological treatises of the West (p. 100). The author shows that the absence of theological speculation is part of “Mary’s great mystery” in the life of the Church (p. 101). Studying the evolution of piety towards the Mother of God, we find that its origin is in the liturgical life of the Church (p. 106), which makes us understand the true nature and theological implications of Mariology. “Mother of God is not subject to a particular cult added that of Christ... Mariology is, rather, an essential “dimension” of the cult of the Holy Trinity and Christ, an aspect and a special note of that cult” (p. 107).

The work of father Al. Schmemmann is an important one for the understanding of “the mystery of Mary”, relying on the references taken from the Holy Scripture, from the Tradition of the Church, especially from the cult, comparing the Orthodox Mariology with the Catholic one, drawing attention to possible errors and urging towards a necessary reflection upon Mariology.

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