

Ilarion Alfeyev, Metropolitan of Volokolamsk, *The Mystery of Faith, Introduction to Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Iași, Doxologia Publishing House, 2014, 380 p.

The world we are living in has undergone major changes nowadays. Thus, contemporary world is used to having more questions than answers and, in virtue of this fact, people feel entitled to place under doubt any statement even if, until not long ago, it was considered to be a certainty, an axiom. Therefore, our world ceased being a *dogmatic* one, a world ready to accept most easily a truth understood as such for centuries. Nowadays, we are living in a profoundly anti-dogmatic world, in which humans can dispute or deny everything, even if without solid arguments.

This context throws cotemporary man into a chaos of thinking, because there is no more solid ground for founding his entire system of values. Nevertheless, man cannot live without certitudes. Even the certitude that nothing is certain, the famous antique statement, throws man into uncertainty, even if a negative one. Yet, this state of facts reveals something: man's thirst for rules, for the rational balance offered by the certitudes existing in his life. As a vulnerable being, man will always need certitudes in his live, anyway. And the higher the authority that offers these certitudes, the more balanced man feels, because his certitudes will be more difficult to shake.

Modern man has almost always misunderstood the word *dogma*. He tends to think that, in the best case scenario, dogmas would be inflicted ideas, artificially built according to the historical context and offered to people as truths. In fact, dogmas are just landmarks, a minimal but indispensable guide to spiritual life, a gift given by God to us, to be used if we want to get in touch with God. The author of the book under consideration shows that the services of the Orthodox Church integrate dogmas in the prayers and we are living them really and existentially. Also, none of the words used in the holy services is random, each having a precise role in our spiritual life. The dogmas are truths revealed by God to man and re-

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sulted from spiritual life, as the fruit of prayers to the Holy Spirit and not the other way around.

The book under consideration, *The Mystery of Faith, Introduction to Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, is trying to bring forth this very aspect. It is a highly sensible book, written by a modern theologian for the modern man. Lacking any trace of dry, scholastic element, the book helps us understand the mystery of man and how vivid dogmas are, in fact. And they cannot be otherwise since they are the vivid expression of the manifestation of the Living God. Dogmatic theology is revealed by this book not as a rational theology, but as a living one, indissolubly connected to the life experience, as it is, in fact.

The book has eleven chapters, each of them being divided into several very well structured subchapters. Among others, the author approaches, most competently, a whole range of actual topics such as: the issue of the evil, the sin, the place of woman within the church, the apocatastasis and other topics that are not usually to be found in actual dogmatic works. The author tries and brilliantly manages to problematize some old torments of the human spirit, teaching us at the same time that both man and particularly God are mysteries hard to fathom and which can never be exhaustively understood.

The presentation starts somehow chronologically, from *The Search of Faith*, going on through *God, The Holy Trinity, Creation, Man, Christ, The Church, The Sacraments, The Prayer, Deification* and ends with *The Life of the Age to Come*. All these chapters elevate us, step by step, to an ever more profound knowledge of God and man. The book starts boldly by the statement that faith is a path on which man meets God and moreover, it is a meeting point where God and man welcome each other. Here, it is God who believes, His faith in man being unshaken and therefore, welcoming. This is why God is both a sacrament and mystery but also a heavenly gift. A specialist in Patrology, Metropolitan Ilarion Alfeyev grounds his arguments mostly on the theology of the Holy Fathers of the Church, without neglecting the most outstanding contemporary theologians and thinkers. Also, the text includes lots of excerpts from the significant fathers and theologians in this field, which gives weight and valor to the work.

The author goes on with his approach, by relating God, the One and Only threefold Being showing chronologically the way in which God revealed Himself to humankind in this way. At first, in the times of the Old

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Testament, God could not reveal Himself as a trinity because the Jews, through whom God kept in touch with Man, being surrounded by exclusively polytheist peoples, would have been most easily misled into thinking that there might be several gods. Nevertheless, there are the well-known old testamentary analogies that clearly show that God is a unique being in three distinct Persons. But this truth is completely revealed in the times of the New Testament through the person of Jesus Christ the Redeemer.

A patrologist by formation, metropolitan Ilarion Alfeyev shows that, according to the Scriptures, but using mostly arguments brought by the fathers of the Church from the first Christian ages, this has always been the belief of the Christian Church.

Also, in the course of time, there have been numerous voices contesting the biblical statement referring to the act of creation. The author of the book does not open polemics on this topic, considering that this is not necessary, since the Bible does not aim at offering a scientific perspective upon the origin of the Universe, and a purely literal approach of the Bible with respect to Creation would be naïve. Actually, the Bible does not pretend to be a scientific book and the authors of the Holy Scripture could not have the knowledge to be found in the contemporary world. The Holy Scripture aims at correlating the divine with the humane; it does not mean to offer scientific accuracy, as it uses, according to the author, a metaphoric and symbolic language. Yet, this does not diminish at all the value of the Bible, it having been written in accordance with the realities of the respective times, but including spiritual truths that are universally valid.

The book goes on to explain that Man is the creation of God, according to His Own looks, by a special act, which ontologically connects Man to God. This link represents the most important aspect, due to the fact that, from now on, Man's destiny can only be fulfilled by close communion with God and only through Jesus Christ. By disobedience, man broke the communion with God, bringing upon him sin and death. And being in the impossibility to correct this mistake, and incapable to defeat death, God's Son came and, taking a human body, ontologically linked us to Him, and, out of His endless love for Man, opened for us the way to holiness and deification. The resurrection of Jesus represents a crucial moment in the history of Christian faith. This is why Christ is also called the second Adam. The fact that God works alongside Man is proved by the entire holy activity of the Church where God often makes miracles through His chosen

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ones, and through the Holy Spirit, in the Church.

Further, the author deals with the all holly rituals in the church, showing the way God acts through all the ceremonies of the Church, but particularly through the Holy Liturgy where the Son of God is really present. In fact, between the dogmas of the church and the liturgical life there is a very close connection, liturgical life being nothing but the living and dynamic manifestation of these dogmas. The author explains the fact that the Church itself developed starting not from the dogmatic expressions and neither from the Holy Scripture, but from the Holy Liturgy. The Liturgy, through what we are calling *the sharing of the bread*, existed from the times of the Redeemer. At that time no dogma had been formulated and the Gospel had not even been written. Everything developed later on, starting from the spiritual experience of the Christians. In the ceremonies of the Church, dogmas come to life and are liturgically embodied. During the ceremonies, the dogmas are integrated into the prayers and we are living them in a real and existential way. They were later expressed most exactly, as a historical and dogmatic necessity, under the pressure of the heresies.

The book closes, naturally, with a chapter on eschatology, starting with references to the Bible, going on with fundamental quotes from the writings of the Fathers of the Church, over which reigns our Lord's Resurrection, as a new existential reality and eternal life. Also, the subject of apocatastasis is opened in the most relevant way possible, as a possibility, the eternity of the evil being equal to the eternity of God, as a never ending defy of the divine rescuing plan.

To conclude with, the book under consideration is written by a contemporary theologian scholar, addressing the contemporary reader in particular, approaching primarily the torments of humankind and the dissolutions in which we live today. Problematization is always a vivid and exciting approach, which keeps opening the path to any kind of responsible dialogue. From this point of view, we consider that the work of Metropolitan Ilarion Alfeyev reached its goal, problematizing its reader and urged him towards new and more profound horizons.

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