THE DYNAMICS OF THE
ORTHODOX FAITH IN AMERICA

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A Lecture by His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios,
Primate of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
Your Eminence, Cardinal Dulles, Your Excellency, Archbishop Migliore, Very Reverend Father Joseph McShane, President of this renowned University, Reverend Clergy, dear professors, deans, beloved students, distinguished guests, ladies, gentlemen, friends, I thank you so much for this handsome opportunity and honor to be here tonight and to deliver this lecture, the first in a promising series.

I express my sincere thanks to the Very Reverend Father Joseph McShane, S.J., the President of this University, for this invitation and for the creation of such a prestigious series of lectures under the title “Orthodoxy in America.”

We have been on this campus for half an hour, having been received by the good President, and we have already enjoyed the hospitality, the cordiality, and the joy of being in this place. So my thanks extend beyond the lecture hall and encompass the whole campus. I also express my thanks to two young professors and scholars who were assigned the responsibility to organize the present lecture series, Dr. George Demacopoulos, whom I thank for the gracious introduction, and Dr. Aristotle Papanikolaou, who was one of my prominent students of theology at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts in the late 1980’s.

I feel also the honor of the presence of Cardinal Dulles, whom I remember for an important theological article that he wrote back in the 1960’s. At that time, I could not even imagine that the author of that article would be present, forty years later, at an initial lecture on Orthodoxy as a distinguished Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church.
This lecture falls within the annual timeframe during which we celebrate the feast of the Three Hierarchs, the three great Fathers of the Church, namely, Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory the Theologian, and Saint John Chrysostom; in fact, it continues and concludes these celebrations. This constitutes not only a handsome coincidence, but also a blessed beginning to this new lecture series.

The title of my presentation is “The Dynamics of the Orthodox Faith in Contemporary America.” This title has been purposely selected in order to indicate from the very outset that in the case of the Orthodox faith, i.e., the faith of the Orthodox Church, we do not deal with an inert, passive, ossified entity, but with something that is dynamic, full of inexhaustible energy, something involved in action and reaction, something that is an expression of vibrant life.

As such, the Orthodox faith has been fully involved in the long past as well as in the present in continuous life situations, challenges, provocations, persecutions of all kinds, disputes, debates, missionary actions, in all geographical areas. It has been involved in developmental processes in new lands and countries, and in efforts to maintain its identity under any circumstances, old or new. The above mentioned challenges, actions, and life conditions in general became ways and means of the manifestations of the dynamic character of the Orthodox faith and Church, a dynamic character revealed throughout the twenty centuries of her existence, and being visible and active in contemporary America.

So then, by the title “The Dynamics of the Orthodox Faith (or Church) in Contemporary America” we mean the expression of a dynamism which produces events and conditions within the life situations and environment of contemporary America. We mean a dynamism which is in direct and uninterrupted continuity and absolute identity with the dynamism of the Orthodox faith and Church throughout the two millennia of her life.

Obviously, there is no way for an adequate and, all the more, an exhaustive presentation of the dynamics of the Orthodox faith in contemporary America. Let me therefore be selective and, by necessity, limited, and offer to you the gracious “fellow listers,” or o8mako/eion, to use a nice Pythagorean word, repeated also by Clement of Alexandria and meaning “co-listeners” or “fellow listers,” some characteristic expressions of the dynamics of the Orthodox faith as we experience them today.

**Expression Number One: The Dynamics of the Orthodox Faith in the Area of Language**

Language is a vital expression of life. It is the main expression of communication and connectedness among human beings and between God and humanity.

Orthodoxy in the course of history has contributed immensely to the perfection of languages such as Greek, Latin, or Slavic. We think of the superb pertinent achievements in the fields of theology, poetry, and hymnography, which combine poetry and music as well. Here, we deal with thousands and thousands of pages and with myriads of ecclesiastical hymns in which the dynamics of faith helped to produce highly sophisticated linguistic achievements in terms of an amazing richness of vocabulary, a remarkably refined style, and unexpected new grammar and syntax formations. But presently, we live in America, and we have the English language. What can we say concerning the English language as a vehicle for articulating properly and beautifully the contents and verbal expressions of the Orthodox faith? And how do the dynamics of faith operate on that level?

We witness, of course, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the appearance of patristic works in English translations. These works have been the result of commendable academic efforts and fine scholarly publishing enterprises. The dynamics, however, of the Orthodox faith in the area of the English language, manifested themselves in a constantly increasing rhythm in the twentieth century, and they continue in the present century through activities initiated, inspired, and promoted by the Church. In addition to translations from patristic works and theological books written originally in a non-English language, predominantly Greek, we have today an astonishing production of Orthodox theological books written originally in English, and constituting not only significant theological works, but also excellent literary products. They cover all fields within the realm of theology, for instance, the biblical, the dogmatic, the liturgical, the pastoral, and the historical, not to mention the various combinations of theology and sociology, psychology, anthropology, environmental sciences, and even political sciences. This impressive production of Orthodox literature in the English
language, be it purely theological or representing a combination of disciplines, is the result of the dynamics of the Orthodox faith. This happens predictably, one could say, in any place in which Orthodoxy is transplanted. It is an expected result.

On the other hand, one could say that we already have a very rich theological language in English, the language of hundreds of theological schools and seminar-ies, the language used in this University, the language of literally millions of theological books, among them true masterpieces. The observation is absolutely correct. What, however, I am talking about is the very special nuance offered by the English language when it is employed in Orthodox theological works, be they patristic or contemporary. It is what I call the Orthodox linguistic idiom in English. This is not a linguistic peculiarity or an exotic feature. This is an enrichment I dare say, an introduction of a fresh nuance to an otherwise beautiful language, full of semantic suggestiveness and sometimes with subtle existential overtones.

Allow me at this juncture to inform you about two particular aspects related to the topic under discussion. The first is the difference between the 1960’s and the present time in America. In the 1960’s the number of Orthodox theological books in English was small and limited mostly to translations. Today, we have a very impressive publishing activity, and we deal with voluminous catalogues of Orthodox theological and ecclesiastical works in English. Today, in the United States, we have bookstores that sell exclusively Orthodox books, and they are doing very well in terms of business. Needless to say, when we talk about Orthodox theological productions available in English, we also include by natural extension DVD’s, videos, electronic media, websites, etc. Here, there is plenty of English Orthodox theological language, a result of the dynamism of the Orthodox faith.

The other relevant aspect which I should like to share with you is the translation into English of considerable amounts of Orthodox hymnological material. Here, the dynamism of the Orthodox faith in the area of language is well on its way to creating an amazing literary treasure in the English language. The amount of hymnological material is huge and highly diversified, but it is always inspiring and beautiful. Here, there is the challenge of taking truly magnificent hymns written mostly in Greek and producing English translations of them in such a way so as to be susceptible to musical manipulation and usage.

Allow me in passing to cite an example in order to show the magnitude and the difficulty of the challenge. I selected from among thousands and thousands, two verses from a hymn to the Mother of God where she is addressed with the words

\[
\text{X} \mu \text{s}oploko/tate pu/rge \\
\text{Kai/ } \text{d} \varepsilon \text{deka/teixe po/lij}.
\]

Literally translated:

*You are a tower built with gold
And a city with twelve protecting walls.*

Please make a comparison. The original Greek even without music is full of rhythm. The English needs heavy editing to make it poetic, significant, and susceptible to musical investment.

This challenge is truly enormous, but the attempts so far have been encouraging. We are justifiably entitled to expect in a few years, through continuous translations, revisions, and painstaking editorial work, the appearance of an amazing wealth of Orthodox hymns and hymnological texts, which will not only become an adornment to the existing corpus of Christian hymnology in the English language, but will also introduce refreshing musical creations for worship and spiritual as well as aesthetic enjoyment. This expectation is rendered feasible by the unstoppable action and inexhaustible energy of the dynamics of the Orthodox faith in the field of language.

**Expression Number Two: The Dynamics of the Orthodox Faith in the Area of Truth**

The Orthodox Church has been from the very beginning exceedingly sensitive about the truth revealed by Christ, the Incarnate God, in the Gospel and entrusted to the Church for preservation, presentation, and dissemination. There is no need to speak elaborately on this subject or to show how the Church has made every possible effort to maintain the integrity of the revealed truth and to keep it in its fullness, undistorted, unblemished, unchanged, and absolutely precise. The tacit assumption in this case, which is also frequently explicitly formulated, is that the truth handed over to the Church by Jesus Christ
the Lord is simply absolute; or, to use a hyperbolic phrase, it is absolutely, unde-
niably, and unequivocally absolute. As an absolute, it is unyielding to any
attempt at manipulation, negotiation, or relativization.

The dynamics of the Church has functioned in this area in a superb way. From the
very first steps of the new faith, there have been formidable attacks on the faith as
truth, all the more as a truth that claims absoluteness and exclusivity. We could
simply mention here the Gnostics among other opponents of the early Church in
order to show the magnitude of anti-Church, anti-truth efforts. The Gnostics did
not limit themselves to attacking directly or indirectly the fundamental dogmas
and teachings of the Church; they attacked the very essence of the truth preserved
by the Church. They did so by using language in such an arbitrary, inconsistent,
and contradictory way that it practically destroyed any possibility to have a theo-
logically or linguistically reasonable discussion about the content of faith as
revealed truth. Let me cite here an example from a text by Basileides, the well-
known Gnostic author of the second century in Alexandria, Egypt. The cited text
is from the book of Hippolytos of Rome, written toward the end of the second
century and the beginning of the third century. It refers to a comment offered by
Basileides on the first chapter of the book of Genesis describing the creation of
the world. Here is the text, and please listen to the language, language that is pushed
to the extreme of negation and apophaticism:

Since nothing existed, no matter, no substance, no non-substance, no
simple, no composite, no unthinkable, no senseless, no human being,
no angel, no god, nothing, nothing at all that could be named ... the
non-existing god without thinking, without feeling, without will, with-
out choice, without suffering, without desire wanted to create a world
... so the non-existing god made a non-existing world from non-exist-
ing entities. (Hippolytos, 1Elegxoj Z 20-21)

This is a specimen that is extreme, but it is an example of how to use language in
such a way that destroys language. Here, there is no way to talk about the truth
because language is completely destroyed as a means of conveying any truth.

We can understand, therefore, why the Church fought relentlessly against the
Gnostics as well as against the other heretical groups in order to neutralize the
deadly danger of totally hurting the truth of the Gospel. Already, Justin the
Philoer of Nicea in the middle of the second century, had written against
the Gnostics, followed by Irenaeos, Hippolytos, and Epiphanius. The Ecumenical
Synods, starting with the first in Nicea in the year 325 A.D., are eloquent testi-
onies of the paramount importance ascribed to the truth of the Gospel as some-
thing absolute and inviolable. Throughout the centuries, the dynamics of the
Orthodox faith kept the truth of the Gospel as a sacred, absolute tradition that was
beyond any manipulation or relativization. The care and concern of the Fathers of
the Church on this issue went sometimes even to minute details in order to secure
the proper appearance of the written texts which dealt with matters of faith. Here
is an amusing and charming example from Saint Basil the Great. Basil the Great,
among the other Fathers, wrote about the essence of faith and the inviolable
nature of truth, but he was so passionate about precision in language that he
extended his care beyond the content of a manuscript, even to the quality of the
handwriting. So, he writes to someone who deals with producing texts:

Write straight and keep straightly to your lines; and let the hand nei-
ther mound of letters nor slide down hill. Do not force the pen to travel
slant-wise like the crab, but proceed straight ahead as if traveling along
a carpenter’s rule, which everywhere preserves the even course and
eliminates all irregularity. For that which is slant-wise is unbecoming,
but that which is straight is a joy to those who see and read it, not per-
mitting the eyes of those who read to bob up and down like well-
sweeps. Something of the sort has happened to me when reading your
writing. For since your lines rest ladderwise, when I had to pass from
one to another I was obliged to lift my eyes to reach the beginning of
the next line. And then when no sequence was evident at that point, I
had to run back again and seek the order, retracing my steps and “fol-
lowing the furrow”... Therefore write straight and do not confuse our
mind by your oblique and slanting writing. (Basil, Epistle 334)

What happens to our contemporary situation here in America concerning the
issue of faith as absolute truth? The dynamics of the Orthodox faith helps the
Church maintain her position regarding the truth of the Gospel as absolute, perfect, and complete. Here, the Church is aware of a very real phenomenon that is not exclusively American but international, namely, the galloping relativization of everything, including the truth. We are constantly and painfully reminded of the truly unique dialogue between Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate, recorded in the Gospel of John: Pilate said to Jesus, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate said to him: "What is truth?" (John 18: 37-38).

Here is a truly existential confrontation: Jesus deliberately ignores the question about being king because He understands His kingship as being a heavenly and spiritual one, and declares Himself as the messenger of the heavenly truth, which is absolute. Pilate answers skeptically, if not cynically, "What is truth?"

Pilate's answer, or question, is a question that prevails in our culture today because we are aware of the degree of relativization, lying, distortion, semi-truths, quasi-truths, para-truths, truncated information, terrifying inflation, and ruthless manipulation of language. Thus, everything is relativized and conditional. Consequently, there seems to be an eclipse of the truth of the Gospel as absolute, and such an eclipse has a dramatic impact on value systems, moral principles, and theological dogmas.

The dynamics of the Orthodox faith does not allow a submission to the pressures of the relativization of truth. The story of Pontius Pilate is almost 2,000 years old, yet his position did not prevail. We believe that the dynamism of the Orthodox faith will eventually and finally overcome the secular pressures to relativize divine truth. This, of course, is a matter of faith. But the Church is a Church of faith and not of yesterday, but of two thousand years.

In the final analysis, the absolute truth is not a theoretical scheme, but a living person, Christ Himself. He declared: "I am the truth" (John 14:6). And we faithfully respond with the phrase from the Epistle to the Hebrews (13:8): "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and to the ages of ages." He is the absolute, unchanging, ageless truth.

**EXPRESSION NUMBER THREE: THE DYNAMICS OF THE ORTHODOX FAITH IN THE AREA OF SPIRITUALITY**

At an international conference in Northern Europe last summer organized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which had as its theme environmental issues related to the Baltic Sea, we had the opportunity to stop for a few hours in Helsinki, Finland. During that occasion we met for one hour with the President of Finland. We were just a small group of four bishops led by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. The President of Finland, without any delay, opened the discussion by asking: “Can you please talk about spirituality, spirituality versus the materialism and technological dominance which prevails in the contemporary world?” Thus, for one hour, in the Presidential Palace of Finland in Helsinki, we did not discuss political issues, international affairs, or social issues, but rather Orthodox spirituality, spirituality as a modus vivendi, as a mental attitude, as a behavioral determinant in view of the modern conditions of life. The topic is, of course, of critical importance in today’s world and in contemporary America.

The dynamism of the Orthodox faith is strongly present and active in this important issue of spirituality in our American reality. Spirituality could be defined in various ways. When we use the term “spirituality,” we normally mean the practicing of prayer, of meditation, of reading religious literature, of worship, of community edification, of a sense of the sacred and the holy in the personal as well as in communal life and similar things.

Tonight, however, allow me to focus on another aspect and to approach the subject from a different avenue. Let me define spirituality as a basic Orthodox understanding of a human condition or attitude in which God is the priority. Let us then see the priority of God versus any other priority as an expression defining and describing the dynamics of faith as spirituality.

Spirituality, as the priority of God in human life, brings to this life the sense of the holy, the beyond, the ineffable, the sacred, and the transcendent. Spirituality
becomes a liberation from our bondage to material reality, and it opens refreshing perspectives beyond the palpable and statistically verifiable. The priority of God in human life as a central characteristic of spirituality is brilliantly evidenced in the lives of the martyrs and the saints. The Church offers high honor and constant homage to them because she sees them as the embodiment of the precious principle of the priority of God, the priority of God as the expression par excellence of spirituality in any and every human condition, even and mostly when facing death. It is important to note that the lists of saints and martyrs include people of all social strata: poor and rich alike, young and old, men and women, clergy and laity, bishops, priests, monks, theologians, soldiers, farmers, public officials, gardeners, cooks, inn-keepers, physicians, lawyers, ascetics of the desert, and people of the busy cities. We commemorate them everyday. Orthodox people live constantly in their spiritual company and feel that the dynamics of faith that has produced the hundreds of thousands of martyrs and saints in history is active also in the present time, in the present society, no matter where this society is located.

Here in America, the dynamics of Orthodoxy as spirituality, i.e. as a living witness to the priority of God in human life, following the example of the saints and martyrs, faces, among other, two major challenges. The first of these challenges comes from the existing and prevailing lifestyles in our society, which are characterized by a hectic rhythm of business, by the domination of technology, and by a consuming anxiety for survival and success. People seem to have no time for dealing with spiritual issues, with the meaning of their life vis-à-vis God or what lies beyond what they see and touch. They have no time, which reminds us of the famous question posed by the French thinker Blaise Pascal: “Peut-être auront le temps de mourir?” “Perhaps, will they have time to die?” They don’t have time, even to die!

Orthodoxy has no magic solution to this problem. What the Church offers is the dynamics of faith, which radically influences personal human conditions and attitudes which in turn are open to the growing of a vigorous spirituality. In this case, the dynamics of faith acts as a catalyst, as a transforming factor introducing spirituality within the most technologically advanced environments and within the fully contemporary contexts of a busy life.

The second major challenge has to do with spirituality understood as a human attitude that is based upon the priority of God. The problem here is the number and attraction of priorities that claim the attention and final espousing by the people of today, especially here in America. As a result, you have plenty of wrong classifications of priorities in the lives of people; you have a loss of what is first and what comes second or third in importance; you have conflicted foci and a ruining of lives as a result of wrong priorities; you have a terrible waste of gifted individuals who have fallen victims of worthless priorities.

The dynamics of Orthodox faith enters the scene by forcefully proposing a radical rearrangement, making God the priority. In this instance, we may very well hear the voice of Christ addressing the issue in a superb way from a different angle in the Gospel of Matthew. He says, Do not be anxious, saying ‘What shall we eat,’ or ‘What shall we drink,’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ... but seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. (Matthew 6: 31-33)

The Orthodox faith intensely and completely adheres to this dominical exhortation. If God and His Kingdom is the absolute priority, then any other priority of relative value will follow. Thus, spirituality, as the priority of God in life, will naturally, so to speak, create a healthy and robust inner core of properly classified values, needs, and secondary priorities of all kinds. Thus, spirituality will become not only an expression of religious devotion and experience, but also a tremendous, multifaceted enrichment of human life in all its aspects.
lable behaviors or attitudes, and we know well what happens in various religious bodies when imbalances within the contexts of religious beliefs or the different experiences of religiosity become the norm and the prevailing reality. Hence the importance of a faith which presents a model of balance through its dynamics, a balance which, in a world flooded with religious excesses, becomes a truly healing commodity. The keeping of such a balance is not an easy task; but, here, is a clear manifestation of the dynamic character of faith.

Similar observations hold true for the other characteristic of the dynamics of the Orthodox faith, namely, its function as a vital agent creating completeness or wholeness. The balancing effect of the dynamic action of faith does not cut off anything from this faith. Everything is developed to completion, and everything is whole and preserves its integrity, its plenitude. Let me cite an example from the purely theological field.

As it is well known, Orthodoxy has formulated the Christological dogma in a perfect way. Both in short, creedal statements or in long, elaborate teachings, the Church has presented to the world her belief in Christ as perfect God and perfect human being. He is the Lord. From this point of view, the Church has cultivated a Christocentric stance. This is apparent already at the end of the first century A.D., in the writings of St. Ignatius of Antioch, in which, characteristically, the name of Christ appears almost in every second line of the text. This Christocentrism, however, never became in Orthodoxy what specialists call Christomonism, which is an absolute, isolated, prevailing and exclusive worship of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, Christology has been always developed in parallel contemporaneous ways with a perfect Trinitarian theology and a full and bright presentation of the faith in the Holy Spirit. The Church has been Christocentric, Trinity-centric, Spirit-centric. It has developed everything to perfection and completeness.

We can see the dynamics of balance even in specific areas, like the worship or the canon law of the Church. In the realm of worship, the main liturgical forms such as Eucharistic liturgy, the service of matins, and the service of vespers present a remarkable internal balance, alternating between reading and singing, movement and immobility, biblical and hymnographic material, prose and poetry, word and silence. In the realm of canon law, one can easily detect the balance between aókrì/bēia and oïkonomi/a, which is between precise, strict application and lenient, flexible practice; between pedagogical reprimand and correctional punishment; between understanding human weakness but insisting on human perfection.

In essence, the dynamics of faith as a balancing factor reminds us of two ancient Greek admonitions, namely, “máde/n algan” and “pa-n me/trón alrîston”, which mean, “Do not do anything in excess” and “every due measure is excellent.”

The balancing effect of a dynamic faith is important in our contemporary situation in America. We have bitter experiences of excesses in the religious field and their catastrophic consequences. We are aware of the pain caused by uncontrol-
the Holy Spirit as well. Equally important is the fact that the prayers of the Eucharistic Canon, which end with the central Christological event of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine of the Eucharist into the Body and the Blood of Christ, are addressed primarily to God the Father with the parallel mentioning of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The wholeness, the completeness of what constitutes the essence of faith, is amply demonstrated in the Orthodox faith, and is the result of its dynamic character. This wholeness, coupled with balance, is vital for contemporary Christians, especially in America, Christians who frequently suffer from inadequate forms of faith, from incomplete expressions of Christianity, which exhibit a weak Trinitarian theology, or a meager Pneumatology, or a Christomonistic predilection. The dynamics of the Orthodox faith aims at offering the complete and the whole content of divine revelation in Christ, preserved intact in its unsurpassed beauty and integrity for twenty centuries by the Church.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Tonight, thanks to your kindness, I had the handsome opportunity to speak about four aspects, four expressions, four manifestations of the dynamic character of the Orthodox faith in America: a) in the area of language (the creation of an English theological Orthodox language), b) in the area of the absoluteness of the truth as revealed by God who became a human being in the person of Jesus Christ the Lord, c) in the area of spirituality understood in a special way as the priority of God, and d) in the dynamic character of faith as a balancing agent and an agent contributing to the presentation of the wholeness of faith, intact and perfect.

I did not speak, as perhaps expected, about Orthodox worship or about social issues. I did not speak about inter-Orthodox, inter-Christian, interreligious problems. I did not speak about major or minor ethical problems, or about issues of peace and war. I did not speak about the epic of the Orthodox immigrants, who came to the United States and created what they have created in the past two hundred years. I did not speak about Orthodoxy as the carrier of the amazing legacy of the Hellenistic and Greek tradition, and its tradition of language and culture. And, I did not speak about Orthodoxy as true philanthropy, as true humanism, as true understanding of what human beings, the cosmos, and God are about.

But, then, I just offered an introduction. And, I presuppose the long series of promising lectures that will follow and that, I am sure, will touch upon those and other very crucial and very basic aspects, and make this forum a forum of enlightenment, wisdom, and joy.

Ultimately, the presence of Orthodoxy in America could be understood in terms of a dynamic faith expressed in an all encompassing love, a love which, according to the great Father of the Church St. John Chrysostom, has no limit and goes beyond any measure. As he beautifully put it, “Ou0 ga/r elni me/tron tou/tou tou~ kalou~ (i.e. a0ga/phj). Me/tron a0ga/phj to/ mhdamou~ i3stasqai”, “There is no measure of this good, which is love. The measure of love is not to stop anywhere.” (St. John Chrysostom, Exegesis of the Epistle to the Philippians II, 18).