

SAINT PHOTIOS THE GREAT: DEFENDER OF THE TRUE ORTHODOX FAITH & MISSIONARY EXTRAORDINAIRE!

by

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All missionary activities taken by Photios are distinctive for their flexibility, freedom, and realistic applicability. Every care was taken to avoid carrying out evangelism in an imposed and irrelevant manner.¹

Photios the Great (+891):

Saint Photios is the greatest Patriarch in the history of the Church and one of the Three Pillars of Orthodoxy, St. Gregory Palamas and St. Mark of Ephesus being the other two. He was considered the most learned person of his time, an intellectual giant; yet, he was a truly humble servant of God. He was raised to the Patriarchal throne of Constantinople in 858, having been “raised through all the degrees of the priesthood in six days”.²

Most memorably, it was the patriarch’s lot to stand against the arrogant, uncanonical and heretical claims of Pope Nicholas I of Rome, who openly asserted for the first time the pope’s pretensions to universal jurisdiction over the Church...³

Photios was deposed and imprisoned but eventually released, and later he was unanimously returned to the Patriarchal throne. He presided over what is considered the Eighth Ecumenical Council: Constantinople IV (879-880), which anathematised the *filioque* to the Creed. Eventually, another emperor change resulted in Photios again being deposed and imprisoned in a monastery for five years. It was during this time he wrote his famous *Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit*, “a learned and eloquent refutation of the *filioque* heresy”.⁴ The Saint reposed whilst still imprisoned.

He reasoned and was compassionate in his dealings with others; however, he never wavered from true Orthodoxy. He was the first to launch a major theological attack on the *filioque* clause, that heresy stating, contrary to our Lord Jesus Christ, that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as the Father.

Strange that otherwise spiritually intelligent souls sought to set themselves above the Holy Scriptures and Holy Tradition; and, in fact, contradict the Lord’s words in the New Testament:

But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of Me. (St. John 15:26)

How much clearer could it be? Our minds boggle when we consider the spiritual struggles and suffering caused by some people's inability to simply take the Lord at His word. If the Holy Spirit were to proceed (originate) also from the Son, the Lord would have said so! The Gospel might read "***which proceedeth from the Father and Me,***"... But it doesn't. Here are just a few of the Saint's comments in his highly authoritative *Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit*:

Above all else, there is a saying of the Lord which opposes them like a sharp, inescapable arrow, striking down and destroying every wild beast and fox as though with a thunderbolt. What saying? That which the Son Himself delivers; that which states that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father...⁵

...

Why does this saying, which even schoolchildren can see and understand, not devour you and your blasphemy? Why do you not fear, like criminals hiding their audacious deeds, but instead malign and falsify the Lord's words and make Him teach your errors? The Lord Himself plainly declares that the Spirit proceeds from the Father; neither will faithlessness to His Word, nor the intellect, permit this insult. It is evident that he never once uttered the phrase *from Me* (emphasis supplied). Though you do not change the words, by stealth you commit the crime of changing from me to from mine, and by this trickery you accuse the Saviour of teaching what you believe. Therefore, on account of this new expression, which is only your opinion, you have charged the Saviour with three falsehoods: that He said what He did not say; that He did not say what He did say; and that He taught an idea that does not even follow from His words, but which, rather, His teaching denies; and, fourthly, you suggest He contradicts Himself...⁶

God is in Three Persons, but there is only One God. As much as we wrestle with these terms and review them within Scripture and the context of the Fathers' holy deliberations on them, we still will never understand fully. We do not need to; all we need is *faith*.

The Father is the source of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Father is the fountainhead of Both. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father; and the Holy Spirit proceeds (is caused by) from the Father *only*. This is the Holy Trinity. If we do not believe in the Holy Trinity, we are not even Christians. It is true that the Holy Spirit is sent by the Son from the Father to do His work in this world, but being sent in a time sense and originating from, being caused by, are quite different matters. Those who believe and teach the filioque heresy subordinate the Holy Spirit to a position akin to the Father's grandson:

If, by begetting the Son, the power was given to the Son that the Holy Spirit would proceed from Him, then how would His Sonship itself

not be destroyed when He, Who Himself has a source, became the source of Another Who is equal to Him and is of the same nature as He? According to the *Filioque* teaching, it is impossible to see why the Holy Spirit could not be called a grandson!

Saint Photios the Great⁷

The monarchy of the Holy Trinity reduces to a dual divinity. In short, there is no Trinity:

In no case, either before or after the Council of 879/880 did Photios reject the *Filioque* on *just* (emphasis supplied) canonical grounds. Actually he explicitly stated that his grounds were both biblical and theological. They were biblical for they were based on the teaching of St. John's Gospel and on the explicit saying that the 'Spirit proceeds from the Father' (full stop!). They were also theological in that the *Filioque* introduced *two* (emphasis supplied) causes and *two* (emphasis supplied) origins in the Trinity and thus *utterly destroyed the monarchy of the Holy Trinity* (emphasis supplied).⁸

Saint Photios never compromised on the true Faith. Yet he was considered very reasonable:

By way of epilogue it may be pointed out that the image of St. Photios that emerges from the acts of the Eighth Ecumenical Council is one of moderation, sensitivity and maturity. Confrontation is avoided but without compromising firmness in matters that relate to the faith. Generosity towards others is displayed and maturity permeates everything. This is indeed the image, which Prof. Henry Chadwick has recently resolved to promote. This is the authentic image of the East. The Photian Council of 879/880 is indeed the Eighth Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church, Eastern and Western and Orthodox. It is a *Council of Unity* – the last one before the storm of the great Schism – based on the common Holy Tradition and especially on the unadulterated faith of the Ecumenical Creed.⁹

That Saint Photios considered the *Filioque* a heresy cannot be doubted:

Saint Photios *repeatedly* (emphasis supplied) characterised the *Filioque* as a heresy, and its believers as cacodox (wrongly believing).¹⁰

Saint Photios is further known for his tremendous missionary zeal. Missionary activities are many times not considered (particularly by Protestants) where Orthodoxy is concerned. Nothing could be further from the truth than to say that Orthodoxy is not "missionary-minded". The Church sent its Apostles far and wide from its inception. It is because of such missionary exploits that Western and

Eastern Europe (what are now these areas), including Britain and Ireland, became true Orthodox Christians.

Consider also the conversion of Ukrainians/Russians near the end of the first millennium. In more recent times, in the late eighteenth century Russian Orthodox Saints headed major missionary efforts to what is Alaska. Saints Herman and Innocent stand out. Materials were prepared, including the Divine Liturgy in the local vernacular; St. Innocent learning Aleut and other languages and utilising them in his missionary activities is an amazing story and feat in itself.

Such missionary spiritual ventures would certainly have been vigorously supported by Saint Photios and are extensions of “the Byzantine missionary development based upon the translations and uses of the vernacular”... In Macedonian Ochrid, “Slavic Christianity prospered in accordance with the Byzantine model.”¹¹

It is significant that Patriarch Photios took the Church to the Russians even earlier than the 988/989 date of Prince Vladimir’s “conversion of Russia”. In an encyclical in 866, he announced that

the Russians had been converted and had accepted a bishop from Constantinople. This *initial* (emphasis supplied) conversion concerned only Byzantine cities in the Crimea. More significant was the conversion of Olga, the powerful princess of Kiev in 957, who assumed the Christian name of Helen in honor of the reigning Byzantine empress, and the ‘conversion of Russia,’ which occurred in 988-989 under Prince Vladimir, who took the name of Basil and married Emperor Basil II’s sister, Anna. Under Vladimir, Byzantine Orthodoxy became the official religion of the Russian state, with its major centers in Kiev and Novgorod.¹²

...

Thus, around the beginning of the second millennium, the Byzantine Church exercised its ministry in a territory extending from northern Russia to the Arab-occupied Middle East, and from the Adriatic to the Caucasus. The center, Constantinople, seemed to have no rival – not only in terms of power or wealth but also in terms of intellectual, artistic and literary achievements.¹³

The Thessalonian brothers, Cyril and Methodius, came into Orthodoxy to be missionaries, to spread the Gospel! Whilst Patriarch of Constantinople, Saint Photios “at the instigation of the Ukrainian Princes, Blessed Mykola and Dir, sent Constantine (who later took the name ‘Cyril’) and Methodius to Kyivan Rus’ – Ukraine”.¹⁴ They went on to develop what became known as “Church Slavonic”.¹⁵

The Orthodox Church has also continuously made the translation of the Scriptures into the native tongue the first priority when doing missionary work.¹⁶

Saint Photios – a true defender of the Orthodox faith and missionary extraordinaire! No question about it. We should emulate his unending quest for knowledge, spiritual purity, unyielding resolve and reputation for moderation. He had no equal.

We might criticise Orthodoxy in some parts of the world for failing to vigorously pursue missionary evangelism, but it might be naïve and somewhat unfair to do so. During our history, we have never faced the tyranny of the Islamic hordes. We have not borne the iron fist of the Soviet state that systematically murdered millions of Orthodox and others in the name of totalitarian atheism. No Adolph Hitler has ever hideously extinguished millions of any minority in our country. Orthodoxy has had to face severe repression and persecution throughout the centuries.

As Americans, we have been blessed (until recently) and have been relatively unaccustomed to being attacked and/or occupied by foreign troops or terrorists. In the past, God’s gift to us has been water and distance. These are unfortunately less important than they were previously. Thus, we should be thoughtful and considerate when we think about labeling Orthodoxy as lacking in missionary zeal in the parts of the world where Orthodoxy is persecuted by oppressors. We haven’t experienced these horrors first hand at home except in the Pearl Harbor and 9/11 contexts.

We should also remember that true Orthodoxy engenders tremendous missionary and spiritual zeal. When in our rather youthful country’s experience have we ever had a married priest Saint such as St. John of Kronstadt, whose true Orthodox praxis and humility were so well known and he so beloved that over 60,000 people attended his funeral? Answer – never, and not likely.

As Orthodox Christians, we are called upon to live a Christian life, struggling and suffering, as our lives in Christ may require in order to emulate Christ and attain deification by His grace. Let’s all remember Saint Photios and try to follow his example. He was a considerate moderate man, who, nevertheless, never faltered in his zeal for the true faith.

If and when, secular people confront you about your Orthodox faith, it is a sin to ‘be silent’. We all have a spiritual duty to speak up and defend true Orthodoxy. I keep reiterating ‘true Orthodoxy’ because as Archbishop Averky of Jordanville of blessed memory contended a few decades ago, it is very important to distinguish between true Orthodox and others. He stated this many years ago, but his words are even more relevant today considering significant rises in heresies and heretics since his words written in 1975.¹⁷ The established churches appear to be sacrificing Christ, the Apostles and the Holy Fathers on the still burning embers of crass ecumenism and political correctness. These activities are a prelude to the Antichrist.

Keep vigilant, be prepared to suffer to keep the faith. Remember Saint Photios the Great. He never flinched, telling the devil to, in effect, ‘bring it on’. We cannot afford to do less.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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- ¹ +Metropolitan Emilianos Timiades, *Saint Photios on The Transcendence of Culture* Creative Missionary Method, p. 10 of 12 at <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles/TimiadesStPhotios.shtml>.
- ² *God is Wonderful in His Saints Orthodox Saints for February*, February 6, St. Photios, Patriarch of Constantinople (891) at <http://www.abbamoses.com/months/february.html>.
- ³ *ibid.*
- ⁴ *id.*
- ⁵ No. 2, at <http://www.geocities.com/trvalentine/orthodox/mystagogy.html?200517>.
- ⁶ *ibid.*, No. 23.
- ⁷ *Encyclical to the Eastern Patriarchs* (867), p. 3 of 4 at http://www.geocities.com/trvalentine/orthodox/photius_encyclical.html.
- ⁸ Fr. George Dion. Dragas, *The Eighth Ecumenical Council: Constantinople IV (879/880) and the Condemnation of the Filioque Addition and Doctrine* (originally appeared in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. 44, Nos. 1-4, 1999, pp. 357-369), see p. 3 of 11 at http://www.geocities.com/trvalentine/orthodox/dragas_eighth.html?200519.
- ⁹ *ibid.*, p.7 of 11.
- ¹⁰ All Representatives and Presidents of the Twenty Sacred Monasteries of the Holy Mountain of Athos, *Letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch Concerning the Balamand Agreement* (a letter in opposition to the 'findings' of Balamand, which were basically unOrthodox), p. 5 of 14 at http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/athos_bal.aspx.
- ¹¹ Jera's Ars Magical Saga: *The Greek Orthodox Church, The Orthodox Church of Byzantium, Missions: The Conversion of the Slavs*, p. 7 of 12 at <http://www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/Labyrinth/2398/bginfo/church/church/html>.
- ¹² *ibid.*
- ¹³ *id.*
- ¹⁴ Dr. Alexander Roman, *Our Cyrillo-Methodian Heritage: Making Sense of Slavic Culture*, p. 1 at http://www.unicorne.org/orthodoxy/articles/articles_a/cyrillo.htm.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 2.
- ¹⁶ Deacon (now Father) John Whiteford and Patrick Barnes, *Miles From the Truth A Response to 'Thema: Eastern Heterodoxy*, p. 22 of 38 at http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/inquirers/thema_response.aspx.
- ¹⁷ Archbishop Averky of Blessed Memory, *Are the Terms 'Christian' and 'Orthodox' Accurate for our Times?*, see http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/averky_terms.aspx.