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Marcus Plested

Marquette University, marcus.plested@marquette.edu

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Reflections on the Reception of the Church Fathers in the Contemporary Context

– Marcus Plested

THIS PAPER BRINGS TOGETHER various thoughts relating to the reception of the Fathers that have arisen in my research and teaching over the last few years. It argues for the ongoing relevance of the patristic matrix for any form of theological endeavor that seeks to serve the church. Indeed, I contend that the Fathers provide us with a model for scriptural engagement and gospel proclamation, doctrinal articulation, and pastoral practice that should be regarded as normative. But this recognition of the normative character of the patristic witness does not amount to any sort of static or culture-bound notion of authority, nor does it suggest that the Fathers were infallible or superhumanly prescient—able to offer pat answers to the problems and burning issues of our own time. The pattern of patristic reception I am proposing may be illustrated (and I use the word advisedly) through a number of visual considerations relating the above to the Orthodox icon.

TEACHING PATRISTIC PASTORAL THEOLOGY

Let me begin with some considerations arising from a postgraduate class on patristic pastoral theology and pastoral practice. This class, “Texts and Practices in the Early Church,” is a seminar-based course that was developed for the master of arts in pastoral theology offered by the Cambridge Theological Federation. One of the course materials, designed to help students conceptualize and articulate their understandings of the weight and import of the patristic witness, was a set of seven models of reception and reappropriation. There is nothing especially binding about the number seven in this context (indeed an earlier sketch worked with only five models), but seven is, as we all know, a most attractive number for a theologian.

SEVEN MODELS OF PATRISTIC RECEPTION AND REAPPROPRIATION

1. Imitative

According to this model, it suffices to do what the Fathers did and to re-say what they said. The Fathers, in this view, have all the answers to today’s questions.

2. Normative

In this model, the church fathers are seen to provide a *paradigm* of pastoral theology and practice that we are called on to “translate” to our own specific contexts—preferably within the context of a living tradition, a continuum of faith.

3. Reconstitutive

According to this model, the churches have lost their way and have become severed from their past. We must, therefore, start over again with a return to the Fathers, reappropriating and recreating the patristic tradition in our own context.

4. Recollective

In the recollective model, the experience of the early church is there to be remembered, recalled, and recontextualized. The patristic tradition represents a somewhat distant, almost utopic, reality which we may invoke with respect and attempt somehow to relate to our own contexts.

5. Imaginative

According to the imaginative model, the Fathers give us a rich vein of material and experience that we may freely draw

upon for inspiration, or reject, as we see fit. We are in no way bound by the Fathers but see them as a colorful and potentially instructive resource.

6. **Connective**

Here, the patristic experience allows us to make connections between then and now, as we see need. The patristic experience may, on occasion, illumine contemporary practice and reflection but has no intrinsic authority or interest beyond the historical. “They did it like this, we do it like that.”

7. **Reactive**

The reactive model rejects the Fathers, regarding the patristic approach to pastoral ministry as an example of how *not* to do it. The patristic witness is seen as irredeemably dated, irrelevant, outmoded, patriarchal, culture-bound, useless, et cetera.

Naturally, these models have very permeable boundaries. Roughly speaking, recognition of the authority and relevance of the patristic matrix diminishes as one descends down the list. These models have proved to be of some use for students in this particular course. Indeed it has been striking to see how positively students respond to patristic material. Even with classes of very mixed backgrounds, including many of a broadly liberal theological persuasion, the church fathers remain an inexhaustible treasury.¹ I have yet to meet anyone who has plumped for model 7 as their model of choice.

Introducing theological students to the pastoral theology of the early church is not always a straightforward affair. There is a great imaginative leap required, not to mention a high degree of hermeneutical sophistication. Texts are necessarily the principal means of entry into the pastoral theory and practice of the early church and the first task has been to encourage students to immerse themselves into the life and thought of the early church through close study and critical discussion of some key texts. But issues of reception and reappropriation in an ecumenical context have always been to the fore of class discussion. The early church is indubitably a key source and pivotal point of reference for all our various ecclesial traditions. This does not, of course, mean that it is necessarily normative for all these traditions or beyond critical evaluation and discussion. Responses to it have certainly not been uniform—and this has made for some lively discussion in class.

PATRISTIC THEOLOGY: SOME KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Study of the approach to theology in the early church is deeply salutary for any form of theological endeavor today. The church fathers did not produce “pastoral theology” as such, nor did they compose systematic treatises on Trinitarian theology, Christology, or ecclesiology. Their theology was necessarily pastoral and ecclesial—written in and for the church. In our own woefully divided and compartmentalized theological sphere, this holistic approach has much to commend itself.

Mention of the pastoral and ecclesial context brings us to the central problem of tradition, tradition understood not as the dead weight of the past but as the living community of faith in which the gospel is both received and transmitted. This process of reception and transmission is pre-eminently one of education and formation. Patristic theology, as I say, is best understood not as a series of more or less disconnected reflections upon discrete sub-disciplines, but as an attempt to teach and communicate and inculcate the revelation of God in Christ, “and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:22).

To theologize in this context is not to write “about” God but to recognize and proclaim God, and to consider the consequences of that recognition and proclamation. St. John the Evangelist has the title “the theologian” in the Eastern Orthodox tradition not because of his intellectual skills but because he proclaims, more emphatically than the other evangelists, that the Word in Christ is indeed God, that the *logos* is indeed *theos*. The other figure to have the title “the theologian” is St. Gregory of Nazianzus. In his case, the title again recognizes not so much his theological erudition as his peerless defense of the equal and identical divinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Theology, at least as understood by the Fathers, is thus inseparably bound up with the life of the church. It loses its essential ecclesiality at its peril.

Two definitions may help flesh out what I am trying to say about the patristic conception of theology. The first is the familiar declaration by St. Irenaeus of Lyons, that “the glory of God is a living human being.” Humankind is the pinnacle of God’s creation, the summation of God’s purposes. A human being living an authentically human life is God’s glory, God’s self-revelation in the world. And “the life of the human being,” Irenaeus continues, “is the vision of God.”² In other words, our life makes sense only in relation to the vision, the love, and experience of God—in relation, that is, to theology. The other definition comes from St. Gregory the Theologian, who defines the human being as “an animal . . . in the process of being deified” ().³ There is no need for us to claim that we are by nature distinct from the animal kingdom, or indeed to deny that the observable processes of evolution (such as they are) may have had some part in producing our current make-up. What is different about us is not so much our nature but our calling, our vocation to share the very life of God. This process of

deification—exactly equivalent to St. Irenaeus’ “vision of God”—is that which defines and shapes an authentically human life. This is what theology is really about.

Having outlined *some* aspects of the theological enterprise of the early church, let me also outline some other (slightly less elevated) considerations. Many patristic texts represent something of a “counsel of perfection.” We must be constantly alive to the gap between theory and practice. Was, for example, the ideal pastor sketched by Gregory in his *Apology for His Flight* ever more than an unattainable ideal?⁴ We must also recognize that we have no direct access to the pastoral life of the early church. L. P. Hartley’s poignant observation, “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there,” referred to a gap in time of some fifty years.⁵ What of a gap of fifteen hundred years or more? It is a great mistake to underestimate the hermeneutical impedimenta surrounding any attempt to understand let alone appropriate the Fathers. We must be also alive to the effect of the various lenses through which we view this period. The Fathers wrote in specific sociocultural and historical contexts. This inevitably has a formative influence on some of their responses to issues such as, *inter alia*, the status and role of women or the legitimacy of slavery. Again, such considerations must inform our critical response to the sources.

Moving on now to some reception issues that have emerged in my recent research, let me now sketch a number of visual and iconic hermeneutical considerations—beginning with some considerations that emerged in the process of researching and writing my book on *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*.⁶

Multiple Perspective

The term *reverse perspective* is often used to characterize the visual principles of the Orthodox icon by contrast with the linear perspective that became standard in Western art in the Renaissance. Rather than inveigling the gaze of the viewer to rest on some imagined vanishing point in the distance through the use of convergent sight lines, the perspective of the icon springs outwards, arresting the attention with its sheer immediacy. Conventional notions of distance collapse as certain objects are rendered larger the further away they are. The absence of an outside light source, with attendant effects such as *chiaroscuro*, mitigates against any sense that one is merely a spectator. The light comes, rather, from within the icon. The persons depicted emerge to impress themselves upon the viewer and require a response, whether of veneration or of rejection. *Theoria* (contemplation) in this case, is inescapably participatory, ineluctably relational. The very nature of the icon confounds any attempt to treat it simply as an object. Indeed, as a function of this non-linear perspective, the icon becomes, in a sense, the active subject and the viewer the viewed.⁷

What we call reverse perspective is, however, only one of the ways in which the Orthodox icon operates. Indeed, “reverse perspective” is something of a misnomer in that the technique long predates the linear perspective of which it is supposedly the reverse. Icons also routinely combine a view from above with face-on presentation, use variable dimensionality, or represent interior space with exterior features: there is no single perspective, reverse or otherwise. In the icon, we are also prompted to question our received notions of time as non-simultaneous events are depicted on the same plane. In the icon it is always “now.” In short, the icon operates on what we should call a multiple perspective, in both spatial and temporal terms.

The notion of multiple perspective is a most useful one for any undertaking that involves the reading of texts. If the study of reception history has taught us anything it is that texts are never received as neutral archival material. When one author reads another, there is always an ongoing and very present dynamic of interpretation, negotiation, and dialogue. We do well to be aware of this interactive and synchronic dynamic in our encounter with church tradition. We should be under no illusion that we are somehow outside the picture, capable of purely objective analysis of what we observe in the past. We are, rather, part of the picture, responding and relating to tradition within a rich and ever-expanding vista of possibilities.

This is the primary benefit of a multiple perspective: the realization that patristic sources are not simply inanimate objects from the past to be observed and pronounced upon from some lofty height of supposed impartiality. Our sources are as much active subjects as objects of investigation—better approached, in other words, as icons than as paintings of the conventional Western type.

An Iconic Mode of Reception

We might go further and speak in terms of an *iconic mode of reception*. In Christian history, the Fathers have been used as weapons with depressing regularity, employed as sources of theological artillery with which to confound and dismay one’s

enemies. Passages from their works have been de-contextualized, objectified, and depersonalized: torn from their scriptural foundations and thrown at the enemy with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. Such an approach manifestly betrays the very nature of the patristic theological enterprise.

I have christened such polemical use of the Fathers “patristics as ballistics.” This is a characterization I conceived of as part of my study of the patristic hermeneutic of the Council of Aachen (AD 809)—Charlemagne’s attempt to secure the formal adoption of the *filioque*.⁸ This council stands as a stark example of “patristics as ballistics” or, to put it another way, *non-iconic* reception. The decree of the this council, the *Decretum Aquisgranense*, represents a departure in patristic reception. Patristic authority had long been appealed to in conciliar settings but the Council of Aachen is unprecedented in the way in which it presents the Fathers as an indiscriminate and univocal force whose authority is both predetermined and incontrovertible—and does so primarily in order to shame and confound those obstinate heretics, the Greeks, in the vexed matter of the *filioque*.

A non-iconic mode of reception, in short, brings the Fathers down to earth, cutting the connection between their works and their persons. Their writings become merely an archive that may be accessed and utilized on demand. For all the reverence given and authority ascribed to them, they are, ultimately, just objects for our use, weapons in our hands.

By contrast, an iconic mode of reception is revealed in the nature of the icon itself. The material becomes a means of manifesting and revealing immaterial realities: “heaven in ordinare” as that sublime poet, George Herbert, puts it. An iconic approach to the Fathers looks to them as living saints and ecumenical teachers. Such an approach is in essence both personal and relational. An iconic mode of reception is dynamic, not static. In this mode of reception, the Fathers are ultimately subjects, not objects.

If we examine the history of the *filioque* dispute we see that it is the non-iconic mode of reception that has prevailed. Seemingly ever more extensive and invariably partial collections of patristic material are thrown into the ring from the time of Photius onwards. Anselm of Havelberg, in his debate with Nicetas of Nicomedia in 1136, brings to bear Cyril and various Latin Fathers and claims never to have even heard of any *per filium* formula. The Latin delegates to the discussions at Nicaea-Nymphaion in 1234 brought with them a substantial battery of texts on the *filioque* that, so far as they were concerned, brooked no dissent. In the run-up to the re-union council of Lyons (1274), Nicholas of Cotrone adapted and circulated a weighty but highly defective anthology of patristic citations supporting the *filioque* which formed the basis of Thomas Aquinas’s *Contra errores graecorum*. At the reunion council of Ferrara-Florence (1438–39), the Greek delegation was outmaneuvered and flummoxed by much of this material. It had few answers to the sheer volume of patristic material with which it was faced apart from a recurrent charge of interpolation and falsification—a charge it was only able to prove occasionally. Forced to fight on ground not of their choosing and on an uneven playing field, the Byzantines were forced into capitulation.

But what might an iconic mode of reception look like? Photius of Constantinople’s answer when presented with reports of patristic support for the *filioque* is instructive. Photius does not expect inerrancy from the Fathers. To err is human and the Fathers are human. If we do encounter teachings inconsistent with the scriptural witness and the proclamations of the Ecumenical Councils in the Latin Fathers, we should hide rather than expose their failings and not emulate Ham in failing to cover the nakedness of his father, Noah.⁹ Photius is not working on the basis of any extensive knowledge of the Latin patristic tradition and can come across as unduly dismissive in what he calls, in the *Mystagogia*, “your Fathers.” In this respect he can be quite as culturally limited as the Carolingian theologians of the Council of Aachen. Nonetheless, his point on errancy is an important one. Photius also very correctly points out that much of what was expressed as a theological opinion was being taught as dogma by many Latin theologians of his day. This estimation tallies nicely with Augustine’s own clear sense of provisionality with respect to his teaching on the *filioque*.

An iconic approach to the Fathers must, therefore, involve a recognition of their capacity for error. As human beings, their works are necessarily imperfect. We need have no obligation to follow Gregory of Nyssa in his universalism or Augustine in his more extreme anti-Pelagian positions. Again, as human beings, the Fathers do not speak with one voice—indeed some would barely speak to one another in their own time.¹⁰ Here we may choose to supplement the notion of iconic reception with the distinction made by some Fathers between the image and the likeness.¹¹ The image pertaining to human beings by virtue of their creation, the likeness being the gradual process by which the image is realized and perfected. In their earthly lives, the Fathers may be seen as growing into the likeness: approaching perfection but not yet perfect.

This plurivocality is recognized in many of the ablest theologians of East and West. St. Maximus the Confessor and St. John of Damascus allow for a *per filium* formula precisely so as to embrace both the Latin and the Greek perspectives on the Trinity. St. Gregory Palamas frankly confronts certain differences between various Fathers but sees no underlying disharmony in their chorus. Although he squarely rejects the *filioque* doctrine (in his *Apodictic Treatises*) he willingly speaks of the Holy Spirit as

“common to both” Father and Son, and specifically as the pre-eternal rejoicing of Father and Son.¹² Such formulations arise out of his sympathetic reading of Augustine’s *De Trinitate* in the Planoudes translation. Indeed, Palamas uses *filioque* language in the context of the immanent Trinity—but not in respect of origination. It seems to me that this “Orthodox *filioque*” is of considerably greater significance for Orthodox appropriation of the *filioque* tradition than the compromise *per filium* formula.

In the West, John Scotus Eriugena substantially extended the range of Greek sources available in Latin, helping correct the woeful imbalance and limited range evident in the *Decretum Aquisgranense*. He was acutely aware of the growing cultural and theological gap between East and West and to help bridge it he proposed a bold synthesis of Denys and Augustine, one that expressed the underlying harmony of these two very different figures.¹³ On the *filioque*, he adopts a distinctively Eastern position emphasizing the causation of the Father but upholding procession through the Son, *per filium*. Eriugena also develops a compelling and dynamic understanding of authority that consists in the continuum of faith instituted by the Word incarnate and transmitted to the apostles and to their successors.¹⁴

The *Sentences* of Peter Lombard offers a seminal treatment of the fundamental convergence of apparently divergent patristic sources—all under the guiding maxim *non sunt adversi sed diversi*.¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, for his part, is fully cognizant of the differences that exist among the doctors of the church but is also frank about the possibility of error, for instance through excess of zeal in combating particular heresies.¹⁶ But he is convinced of the underlying harmony of the holy doctors in accordance with both scripture and reason. That said, Thomas will tolerate no disharmony on the matter of the *filioque* in that this is a matter of papal authority. Here, I fear, we are back in the distinctly non-iconic realms of the *Decretum Aquisgranense*.

In the modern period too we can trace a number of promising instances of iconic reception. Speaking just of the Orthodox tradition, the whole revival of Orthodox theology in the twentieth century is built around the creative reaffirmation of the Fathers: Fr. Georges Florovsky’s neo-patristic synthesis stands as a particularly fine example. This reappropriation requires not repetition but a “new creative act.” An essentially analogous notion of patristic revival also lies at the center of the extraordinary theological achievement of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov.

I trust this gives some flavor of what I understand iconic reception to be. An iconic approach enables us to engage with the Fathers in a dynamic mode, learning from them as living teachers and saints. It also underlines their historicity, spurring us to explore their *Sitz im Leben*. The iconic mode encourages us to expand our notion of patristics beyond dogmatics and thereby give full credence to the scriptural, liturgical, and mystical dimensions of the Fathers’ theological enterprise. It allows for plurivocity, error, and harmony. It precludes an archival proof-text approach and subverts any static or culture-bound notion of authority.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Fathers constitute an indispensable resource for any form of theology that seeks to serve the church. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that any such theology is bound to adhere to the second of my seven models—the “normative” model. It is also my contention that patristic reception is best conceived of in dynamic and even visual terms. We should not think of patristic reception in terms of the dead weight of the past, still less as furnishing ammunition for own theological predilections. We should, rather, approach the Fathers much as we might approach an icon: treating the patristic tradition as a living and multi-perspectival reality irreducible to system or merely rational analysis. Through such an iconic mode of reception we may ourselves enter into a mode of theologizing that is necessarily pastoral and necessarily ecclesial: theology in the service of the church indeed but also theology born of the church, born of the living continuum of faith which belongs as much to us as to the Fathers.

1. As the French Oratorian Louis Thomassin put it, “inexhaustum est penu Theologiae Patrum.” *Dogmatum theologicorum* 1, preface, §xx. This was a remark enthusiastically embraced (if slightly misquoted) by Fr. Georges Florovsky, the herald of a thoroughgoing patristic revival in twentieth-century Orthodox theology. See his “Patristic Theology and the Ethos of the Orthodox Church,” 22.

2. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.7 (SC 100).

3. St. Gregory, *Oration* 38.11 (PG 36:324).

4. *Ibid.*, 2 (PG 35:408–513).

5. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, 1.

6. Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*. The section on reverse and multiple perspective reproduces and reworks material from chapter 1 of that work.
7. A most useful and perceptive discussion of current research regarding reverse perspective may be found in Antonova, "On the Problem of 'Reverse Perspective'" and *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon*.
8. The section reproduces and reworks sections of Plested, "Patristic Hermeneutic," 130–37.
9. Photius, *Mystagogia* (PG 102:352A).
10. Here we might think of St. Jerome and St. Ambrose or St. Epiphanius and St. John Chrysostom.
11. For example, by St. Irenaeus of Lyons and St. Diadochus of Photice.
12. Sinkewicz, *Saint Gregory Palamas*.
13. See D'Onofrio, "The *Concordia*," 115–40.
14. See Marler, "Dialectical Use of Authority," 95–113.
15. On this maxim, see Ghellinck, *Le Mouvement*, 517–23.
16. For the Greek Fathers in Thomas, see Emery, "Note," 193–207. See also Plested, *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*, 15–21. For the Fathers in general in Thomas, see Elders, "Thomas Aquinas," 337–66.