

MADE PERFECT IN FAITH



Father James Thornton

CENTER FOR TRADITIONALIST
ORTHODOX STUDIES

Made Perfect in Faith

MADE PERFECT IN FAITH

**Sermons on the Lives and Works
of Fifty Holy Church Fathers**

by
Father James Thornton



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To my spiritual son Reader Damjan Rakonjac

„Von Herzen—möge es wieder—zu Herzen gehn!“

Ludwig van Beethoven

About the Author

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Preface and Acknowledgements

The series of sermons of which this book is comprised was delivered at the Protection of the Holy Virgin Mary Russian Orthodox Church in Los Angeles, California, beginning on Meatfare Sunday in 2004 and ending on the Sunday of the Prodigal Son in 2005. It was the intention of this author through these sermons to familiarize the Faithful of our parish with the lives and works of many great Holy Church Fathers and, through that medium, to teach some of the most important fundamentals of the Orthodox Faith and way of life.

Limiting these to an introductory sermon on fifty individual Church Fathers, the writing and delivery of which occupied approximately one year's time, it is obvious that many Holy Fathers could not be included. Indeed, to include them all, several series the length of the present one could be written. However, although not every Holy Father has been included, Saints of many different ethnic and national backgrounds, encompassing representatives both of the Eastern and of the Western regions of the Church, were deliberately selected, to demonstrate the œcumenicity and catholicity of the Orthodox Church.

In that regard, I have been rather expansive in my application of the title "Church Father," going somewhat beyond the usual conventions. My criteria throughout, however, have been that the holy men chosen epitomize personal sanctity and thoroughgoing Orthodoxy in teaching, and that they inspire the Faithful to struggle to better their spiritual lives by emulation of these men.

Constraints of time in this context made an exhaustive treatment of each Holy Father impossible. However, it was hoped that in giving the most salient details of the life and works of each of these God-pleasing men, and then in drawing from the works or from the example of each something edifying and memorable that listeners might apply to their own lives, the sermons would serve the beneficial purposes of teaching and spiritually uplifting. It is hoped also that this published volume will do the same.

I wish to thank my wife, Presbytera Elizabeth, for her patience in listening to each of these sermons and her useful recommendations. I wish also to thank the Most Reverend Dr. Chrysostomos, Archbishop of Etna, for his valuable insights into the lives and teachings of the Holy Fathers. My thanks go as well to Reader Damjan Rakonjac, to whom I have dedicated this volume. A music major at Pepperdine University and director of the English choir at our parish, Damjan never fails to inspire me with his unshakable dedication to our Faith and our Church. I am indebted also to the Reverend Deacon Father Martin Person, the Reverend Hieromonk Dr. Patapios, and the Reverend Hieromonk Gregory for their assistance in proofreading and completing the annotations and index. Finally, I thank my spiritual sons and daughters for their unceasing encouragement and love, without which my small efforts would be impossible.

*Father James Thornton
Protection of the Holy Virgin Mary
Russian Orthodox Church
Los Angeles, California
June 2005*

Sermon I

The Holy Church Fathers

In the Orthodox Church, we often speak of “the Holy Church Fathers.” We quote their words in sermons, commentaries, essays, and books. We regard them as the preëminent interpreters of Holy Scripture. We study their lives. We celebrate their memories on their Feast Days throughout the year. We pray for their intercession before God. Their teachings and example, set upon the foundation of the Holy Gospels, form the structure of the Orthodox way of life and the Orthodox worldview.

In the realm of theology, the Holy Fathers rank first. Modern Orthodox theologians struggle to acquire “the mind of the Fathers,” that is, to acquire their ways of thinking, ways of thinking that describe not only intellectual processes, but, much more significantly, patterns of thought that flow directly out of lives lived in sanctity. Since the teachings of the Orthodox Church and the Orthodox way of life are found in the lives and works of the Church Fathers, for the next several months, I hope to explore with you the lives and teachings of some of these great men.

Now, if the Holy Church Fathers loom so tremendously in the Orthodox Church, let us consider this question: What is a Church Father?

During the earthly life of Jesus Christ, the Lord, as we know, established His Church. Establishing Her, He promised that He would always be with His Church and that the Church would be ever faithful in preserving the truth. Christ God fulfills these promises in many ways. However, one of the most important ways He chooses to be with the Church and to maintain Her always along the path of truth is to provide Her in every age with holy men to guide Her by their teachings. Thus, every age is an “Age of the Holy Fathers.” Each of the Holy Fathers explained and taught the Orthodox Faith, and most of them left behind a body of writing, a treasury of truth.

And so, we may begin by saying that a Holy Church Father is first a man who lives an exemplary life. He is holy in that he struggles to make his life conform totally to the will of God. He is holy in that in his earthly life he lives a life in Christ, completely and without exception. A man who lives a life that is less than a holy life cannot be one of the Holy Church Fathers. Father Georges Florovsky writes, "Apart from the life in Christ theology carries no conviction, and, if separated from the life of faith, theology may easily degenerate into empty dialectics, a vain *polylogia*, without any spiritual consequence."¹ The teaching of the Fathers, Father Florovsky goes on to say, "was rooted in the decisive commitment to faith. ...Theology of this kind can never be separated from a life of prayer and from the practice of virtue."²

The key to living a life in Christ is living a life of asceticism. To become virtuous Christians, the Holy Fathers, like all of the Saints, subdued the passions, which are the downfall of most of us and of most Orthodox Christians. This they did by denying themselves, and in denying themselves, they broke the slavery of sin. Having done this, having cleansed themselves of the passions, they were granted mystical insight into the truths of God.

Some of the Holy Fathers were simple men, like many of the Holy Apostles, without, or largely without, worldly learning. Some of the Holy Fathers were extremely learned men, the most learned men of their times, possessing the finest educations the world could offer. Yet the mystical insight into the truths of God was the same for all of these men, regardless of their learning. Some people who have read only the lives of Saints who were simple men and women—Fools for Christ, for example, or some of the Desert Fathers—conclude that Orthodoxy is exclusively a simple Faith for simple people. Other people, in contrast, who have delved into the writings of, say, Saint Gregory the

¹ [Protopresbyter] Georges Florovsky, *Aspects of Church History*, Vol. iv of *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Co., 1975), p. 17.

² *Ibid.*

Theologian, Saint John Chrysostomos, or Saint Gregory Palamas, reach the opposite conclusion, that Orthodoxy is exclusively a highly refined, highly cerebral Faith. The truth is that Orthodoxy is neither exclusively one nor the other, but is both. True theology, at bottom, does not spring from intellectual speculation, but from purity of heart. And this teaches us further what Father Florovsky emphasized: that however simply or elegantly truth is expressed, for it to be of any consequence, it must be lived.

Next, a Church Father is Orthodox in his teaching. He is of one mind with all the Holy Fathers of his own age and of past ages. If purity and holiness are the foundation of true theology, then we can easily understand why there is what theologians call a Patristic consensus. That rather formidable term simply means that there is comprehensive agreement among all of the Holy Fathers on matters of Orthodox teaching. Properly read and understood, the Holy Fathers do not contradict one another on any issue of significance. In the early days of the Church, Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, Saint Irenæus of Lyons, and Saint Ignatius the God-Bearer were of one mind. In the fourth century, Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory the Theologian, and Saint Gregory of Nyssa were of one mind. In the twentieth century, Saint John of San Francisco, Saint Nicholas of Ohrid and Žiča, and Blessed Philaret of New York were of one mind. All of these men were of one mind with the other Holy Fathers of their own age and with the Holy Fathers of previous and later ages.

This unity of mind is why we do not count men such as Tertullian and Origen, to mention only two, as Holy Church Fathers. Their errors were of a more substantial nature. Many of



*The Holy Fathers of the First
Œcumenical Synod*

their teachings are sound, and even highly valuable, but some of their teachings also are suspect or completely foreign to Orthodoxy. To these men, we may grant the titles *Church writer* or *Church historian*, but not, speaking strictly, *Church Father*.

In the months ahead—God willing—, we will talk of the lives and works of individual Holy Fathers. What can we gain from this? Why is it helpful to us as struggling Orthodox Christians? We are here in this Church building this Sunday morning because we ultimately wish to please God and to achieve the salvation of our souls. The lives and the works of the Holy Church Fathers give us an understanding of God, of man, of the spiritual and material worlds, and of the relationship of all of these to one another. They teach us the authentic Orthodox Faith. They point the way for us. They show us precisely what God expects of us. Listen, beloved children in Christ, to their words and observe closely the nature of their lives. Doing this, we shall, in the words of Saint Paul, acknowledge “the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; in Whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”³

³ Colossians 2:2–3.

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MADE PERFECT IN FAITH

In this homiliary, Father James Thornton introduces fifty of the greatest Fathers of the Orthodox Church. And rightly are these men venerated as *Church* Fathers, for, as Father James demonstrates, they are the very embodiment of Orthodox Christianity as the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church: they are *one*, in that together they preserved the unique truth of Christianity with a consensus indicative of “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16); they are *holy*, in that they led exemplary lives of virtue, synergistically participating in the deifying Energies of God; they are *catholic*, in that each in his own time and place manifested the totality of Orthodoxy in its therapeutic wholeness; and they are *Apostolic*, in that they were the historical successors to and the spiritual continuators of the life of discipleship into which the Lord initiated His first followers. Eschewing the dry language of history and the recondite language of theology alike, Father James opts to present his subjects in the pious language of hagiography. He thus renders the Church Fathers immediately accessible to all, challenging us to ask ourselves about them, in our own spiritual lives: “Seest thou how faith wrought with...[their]... works, and by works was faith made perfect?” (St. James 2:22).

Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna
David B. Larson Fellow in Health and Spirituality
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