

Some Patristic Inspirations for the Theological Study of Spirituality

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In his paper, the author discusses the relevance of the theological study of spirituality based on early Christian literature for the contemporary theology. He particularly recalls the importance of patristic texts for promoting the ethos of dialogue in relation to non-Christian religions and argues for theological effort to reconnect theology and spirituality in theological work with special regard to ecclesiological aspect of this effort in outreaching to cultural and social aspects of Christian life.

1 Introduction

Church history tells us that whenever there has been a spiritual and cultural renewal in thought or action (these two realities are constantly interconnected), it has always happened on the background of the teachings of the Church Fathers. The reflection of the patristic tradition and the teachings of the Church Fathers can be recognized not only in the context of the history of theology in periods marked by certain crises, but also in the search for new ways of dialogue with secular culture, non-Christian religions and spiritualities (Dojčár 2017, 93–94). The impact of these authors was evident in the Middle Ages, when studying this literature was part of the university education. It has formed and created the monastic spirituality that again reappeared after the Second Vatican Council, the significant documents of which are based on the thinking of the early Church Fathers.



About the author

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2 Rediscovery of the Church Fathers in Theology

Patrology is an autonomous scholarly discipline dealing with early Christian literature that appeared in the 17th century as derived from the Latin *pater*, “father”, and *logos*, “word”. It was a Lutheran theologian Johannes Gerhard who introduced the term into the theological discourse. Traditionally, Western culture considers the origins of patrology to be associated with the death of Isidore of Seville in 636, while Eastern Christianity considers its origins to be associated with the death of John of Damascus in 749. The Eastern and Oriental churches do not acknowledge this Latin classification (Brown 1997); however, we will stick to it as it is generally accepted.

The teachings of the early Church Fathers became more significant during the early Church theological disputes, when Vincent of Lérins introduced the theological term *argument of the Church Fathers* (*Commonitorium* 1978, 28; Pigula 2008, 167–179).

Medieval theology is based on the systematic commentary of selected excerpts from the works of early Church authors, with an emphasis on their common agreement on certain topics. At the time the first universities were being established and the educational process was being transferred from monasteries to the secular environment, the use of the works of the Church Fathers continued in both the monastic spiritual context and the newly born university world.

In the post-Tridentine era, the first critical editions of the early Church Fathers’ texts appeared because of the Catholic-Protestant controversy. They were used as confirmation of scholastic theological definitions, while some of the Church Fathers’ spiritual thoughts served as a kind of adornment of the rational theological process.

Although *patrology* appeared already in the 17th century, it took almost three centuries until the beginning of the 20th century when the awareness of the importance of patristic texts arised along with their implementation into theological work. This preparatory period culminated in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, which were significantly influenced by the topics and formulations of the Church Fathers (Gianotti 2010; Dolinský 2013, 5–27).

3 Contemporary Importance of Reading of Early Church Texts

Early Church authors were able to aptly implant the Christian message in the cultural field of the Greco-Roman environment without damaging the identity of the issue, and thus they adopted and applied several stimuli from which our Christianity lives today. The inculturation of the ancient Biblical texts as well as the Church Fathers’ texts is nowadays deeply rooted in Christianity and can help us identify new impulses for life, especially in the current multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-spiritual environment. Confronting one’s own life with a different environment means refusing to form a spiritual ghetto and instead making dogmatic progress called *intellectus fidei*. Reading patristic texts is also at help in the ecumenical dialogue with Christian churches around the world. In particular, it helps with uncovering the resources, roots and formation factors of our European civilization due to substantial contributions of secular or inter-religious origin.

Emphasizing the importance of humanitarian education is rooted, willingly or unwillingly, in the study of the sacred texts that help in combating fundamentalist currents in society (Lichner 2013, 135–156). Many early Church authors were witnesses to and creators of the fixation of the biblical canon, as well as the formation of the confession of faith, *regula fidei*, that decided how the sacred texts were interpreted.

These writers wrote in Latin, Greek, Syrian, Coptic, Armenian and other languages and thus enriched not only the literary and cultural heritage of the nations but also became the true founders of Christian culture. They knew each other’s works in their original languages and, therefore, in addition to accepting the national culture expressing and forming the spirit of a particular nation, their works represent the true and original Catholicism, which means true universality.

An important part of the spiritual-cultural dialogue is the fact that these authors were educated in the disciplines of the ancient Greek and Roman cultures, from which they drew knowledge to enrich the spiritual life of Christians. Many of them were philosophers, historians, mathematicians, physicists, astronomers or physicians. In this way, they influenced the spiritual, intellectual and social life of people in the Middle Ages.

4 Ethos of Dialogue

The pluralistic reality of their world inspired early Church authors to create an ethos of dialogue, which is also a big topic of the highest importance in our times (Dojčár 2018, 40–49). Early Church theological spirituality was substantially pluralistic, which is demonstrated by the testimony of the many schools of spirituality as well as by theological attitudes towards different opinions inside the Church and within the framework of its relations with non-Christians.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons offers us a testimony in this regard (Karabová 2015, 29–31). According to him, the spiritual unity of the Church is demonstrated through the differences among nations and languages. Inner communion (*communio*) with the Church of Rome represents a unifying element, because “every Church should synchronize with this Church due to its more powerful authority” (Irenaeus 1974, Book 3, Chap. 3, Para. 2). However, Irenaeus did not put emphasis on uniformity. Ecclesiastical *communio* is demonstrated through big differences in rites, spiritual movements traditions and theologies. Thus, the Lyonese theologian believed that differences help achieve unity, even confirm it, because the more this unity is capable of expressing itself in a diversity of liturgical practice, the deeper it actually is. The Church Fathers were against an external uniformity that restrains rich diversity (Lichner 2012, 61–68).

In this spectrum, we direct our attention to the texts from the early Church period that are important for a proper understanding and potential development of Jewish-Christian relations. Unfortunately, it is true that some texts of the Fathers are very harsh towards Jews, even if we wanted to justify it by their literary nature and protection from proselytism.

The existence of anti-Judaism represents a tragic reality of our history. That is why it is necessary to emphasize that healthy Christian spirituality cannot be based on anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism (Krauss 1892, 122–157). Examples from early Christian authors may be a very important impulse for a new theological reflection on Christianity’s relationship to Judaism and their mutual interconnection that is vital for Christians and would exclude any hints of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

It must be noted that it was precisely the renewal of patristic studies that brought about a positive change in Christianity’s relationship to the Jewish nation at the Second Vatican Council, thus influencing this mutual relationship.

5 Some Inspirations for the Theological Study of Spirituality

Early Church authors are also important because of their universal spirituality, which interconnects the profession of faith with the concrete life of believers. In this regard, it is necessary to remember that charity, as we know it, has Judeo-Christian roots – they were Christians who transformed what André Boulanger called *euergetism* – from Greek *euergetéō*, “doing good deeds” (1923, 20). Early Church homiletic texts thus testify not only to the struggle for the profiling of orthodox teaching but also to the constant struggle against corruption, usury and slavery and to taking up collections for the poor and those affected by various epidemics. For St. Basil the Great, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Augustine, St. John Chrysostom or Leo the Great, charity originates in one’s personal relationship with Christ. The homilies of these authors strongly remind us that true Christian spirituality must have direct impact on social behavior. Therefore, according to the Church Fathers, Christian is an individual with pronounced social attitude.

John Chrysostom, the archbishop of Constantinople, was not only a renowned speaker and theologian but also a reformist and a man with charitable social attitude. In his *Homily no. 50* inspired by the Gospel of Matthew, he reminds his listeners that God does not need any golden vessels but our golden souls. He does not forbid donations to the temple, but he suggests that almsgiving should precede them, because he likes it more. He clearly says that it is necessary to feed the hungry in the first place and then we can decorate the altar of God with the rest. He invites believers to reflect over the Christ who walks by as a vagabond and pilgrim with no place to stay. Instead of letting him in, we decorate the floors, walls and column chaplets, and we refuse to see him shackled in the prison (Johannes Chrysostomus 1862, col. 508–509).

The awareness of this message is directed at Christians who are actively involved in helping professions. Through the study of early Christian literature, they realize that charity or social service is of Judeo-Christian roots and belongs to authentic Christian existence. The duty of clergy to actively search for people in need and look after them as well as to create financial resources to help the sick and the poor was emphasized even by the most ancient Church councils. Judeo-Christian tradition integrated biblical values into social life, mainly through practicing the deeds of mercy and almsgiving. We can mention a number of sermons in which Pope Leo the Great in the 5th century regularly encouraged believers to offer a helping hand to the poor during the Lenten period, or the social and spiritual activity of Pope Gregory

6 Spiritual Impulses for the Renewal of Theology

the Great during the 6th century epidemic in Rome that was a part of the so-called *Plague of Justinian*. For early Christian authors, social work represents one's personal relationship with Christ. Multiple religious orders with social or educational missions adopted this kind of inspiration.

I would also like to point out that several theologians who dealt with topics related to the discovery of America and the current situation in South and Latin America drew their views from the Church Fathers in order to condemn several forms of colonialism and misguided evangelization as well as a deeply-rooted social injustice that in their opinion was inconsistent with the spirit of the Gospel. For instance, Bartolomé de las Casas relied on John Chrysostom, Ambrose and Augustine (Brading 1984, 513–534).

We can also mention a well-known example from the recent past. In the Slovak society, which suffered from nationalist oppression within the Austro-Hungarian Empire and was affected by belated industrialization, priests long enjoyed a reputation as humanists and advocates of the poor. In the first half of the 20th century, social questions belonged to the agenda of political Catholicism in Slovakia. Early Church tradition thus reminds us that good priests faithful to true Christian spirituality will not only proclaim the Gospel but will also be active in the social sphere – they will be humanists.

Early Christian spirituality is actually Christocentric. Jesus is constantly given to believers as a model of a true Christian and an ideal of sanctity. Christ's presence is then experienced particularly in the liturgical context of the Eucharist, prayer and biblical homily.

This Christocentrism of Christian spirituality, however, preserves a certain eschatological feature, because early Christians were dealing with a vigilant preparation for the Parousia, i.e. the second coming of Christ. Therefore, universal spirituality with an impact on people's concrete lives was not only oriented towards the person of Christ as a source of inspiration for life, but also had the already mentioned eschatological feature, since believers expected the second coming of Christ and his last judgement with consideration of their orthodox attitude and their generosity towards the needy. Christians basically believed that they do not belong to this world and they have no permanent place here.

The realization of this temporary condition marked with the expectation of Christ and helping the poor was subsequently reflected in people's ascetic spirituality. However, we need to explain that the word *ascetic* should be understood in its original sense of *cultivation and refinement of virtues*, not in the sense of deeds of strict discipline and self-restraint, as it was seen at the beginning of the Middle Ages. Ascetism was later developed as a way of life experienced by an isolated group within the Church, but in early Christian times, ascetism was a logical consequence of a Christocentric and eschatological view of Christian spirituality.

In this regard we again recall that early Church spirituality was deeply associated with theology. The fact is that medieval theology gradually became separated from the outer world, which was seen as a threat. At the same time – considering theology as a rational discipline – the distance that separated it from spirituality grew bigger. In this sense, a strong tendency not to talk about the faults of the Church was demonstrated in order to prevent others from taking advantage of them in the battle against the Church. The trans-

parent discourse of the Church Fathers and early medieval authors about the Church's mistakes thus points to the image of the Church drawn from the Holy Scripture and expressed by the term *Ecclesia permixta*. This term recalls the New Testament images of Church as tare and wheat, corn and chaff, good and bad fish.

Probably the best-known image of the early Church is the Church as a moon. According to this interpretation, the Church receives its light from Christ, because without it, it is dark. And just like the sun always shines on one side of the moon, Christ enlightens one part of the Church, while the other remains dark. The only source of sanctity and beauty of the Church is Christ.

The Church Fathers thus spoke about the gradual consecration of the Church, the contemporary sanctity of which is the sanctity of its head, Christ, while its ecclesiastical body is gradually sanctified (e.g. Augustinus 395, 446–447). Documents of the Second Vatican Council remind us of this patristic intellectual wealth, which has not yet been sufficiently integrated into the manuals of ecclesiology (*Lumen gentium* 8:3; 9:3; *Gaudium et spes* 43:6).

The literature of the early Church left us testimony about the cohabitation of systematic theological thinking and spiritual life. These two realities were separated at the end of the ancient era into two independent elements, and only after the Second Vatican Council the Church did representatives realize the tragic impact of this separation.

Among a great number of examples we can mention the preserved Eucharistic prayer in the *Didaché* (*La Doctrine des douze apôtres* 1978, 175–177), the letters of martyr Ignatius of Antioch, the poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus, the hymns of Ambrose of Milan or the prayers of Augustine in his *Confessiones*, the theology of which had been actually formed by prayer. It is remarkable that several council and post-council theologians, like Karl Rahner, Henri De Lubac or Emil Krapka, understood theology as theological meditation.

These texts remind us that Christian existence is deeply marked by the spirit of Christ do not present Christian teaching as something moralizing, but as a spiritual way of life. Probably the greatest expression of truly lived spirituality in early Christianity was the testimony of martyrs. Naturally, they did not want to die for the sake of death, but in death they demonstrated their proper faithfulness to Jesus Christ. This testimony was closely associated with the Eucharist – the Christian's source of life and strength, which helped him persevere in hardship with faithfulness to Christ. At the same time, we find there a source of spiritual impulse, according to which the possibility of martyrdom should not make Christians restrain from the world.

The spirituality of the Church Fathers is also important for the renewal of spirituality of Christian marriage and the Catholic priesthood. During several centuries, the early medieval monastic model of spirituality was seen as the only right way of experiencing both the sacraments mentioned above. Thus, the ideal of marital spirituality and priestly spirituality was understood through the prism of monastic spirituality, various forms of which had been offered to married couples and priests as a guide for their spiritual life. Ascetic-spiritual manuals described monastic life as the only possible form of salvation in this world, which actually excluded lay people and secular clergy who did not adopt the monastic way of life as the only guaranteed way of salvation (Lichner 2019, 49–58).

In conclusion, we suggest that various aspects of patristic inspirations for spirituality might be at help in reconnecting theology and spirituality in theological work, which can consequently provide impulses for the life of believers with the impact on contemporary society as a whole.

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