

## THE CONSENSUS OF THE FATHERS

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From time to time in the history of the Church, Holy Fathers found themselves on opposing sides of a question.

For example, it is a dogma of the Church that the Theotokos gave birth "without pangs." Yet there are Fathers who speak of "pangs" (Ss. Proclus, Chrysostom, Sophronius, et. al). Should one characterize these saints as heretical?

Let us examine the Life of St. Neophytus the Cloistered of Cyprus. The Monastery of the Cloister belonged to the diocese of Paphos. The bishop of Paphos, Bacchus, was among the leaders of a false teaching which affirmed that the body of Christ was corruptible after the Resurrection, which teaching Bacchus, as well as Michael Glykas, espoused. St. Neophytus called it a "novel division," and "a fiction of the mind of an evil demon". This teaching was also espoused by the Patriarch of Constantinople, George II (1191-1198), as well as a few other members of the Synod. Nevertheless, St. Neophytus did not break communion with his bishop over this, but left the transgressors to the judgment of God (an action which each of us should follow in the beginning stages of a supposed heresy). The saint wrote the following: "If anyone should attempt to contradict that which has been affirmed and to disputatiously confirm with disputation his own opinion and wisdom, I will not contend with him, for he most certainly has an opponent, that is, Him Who said, Behold I came to gather their works and words and thoughts, "to give to everyone according to his ways" [Jer. 17:10], (*Writings* III, 497-98).

It should be noted that a similar controversy existed from the sixth century, and was the subject of a long and bitter disagreement between St. Gregory the Great and St. Eutychios of Constantinople. Despite the fact that it was characterized as a heresy, the matter did not present a cause for severing communion and they are both Saints of the Church.

Also, did not St. Nectarius of Aegina teach the heretical Latin doctrine of the "satisfaction of divine justice"? And did not St. Gregory of Nyssa, "the Fathers of Fathers," teach something similar to the Origenistic doctrine of "the restoration [i.e. salvation] of all," as did St. Amphilochius of Iconium? Also, when he was a bishop in Constantinople, was not St. Gregory the Theologian fooled and taken in by Maximus the Cynic?

The point is, even eminent Church men and Saints have, at times, made mistakes.

In the Church, these mistakes are called "the human element." That is

why we Orthodox Christians affirm that we follow "the *consensus* of the Fathers."

We do not follow one Father to the exclusion of others. We are not divided into Basilians, Gregorians, Chrysostomians, Cyprianites or Athanasians — unlike others who are grouped into Lutherans, Calvinists or Zwinglians, for example. Any one man can err, but together, and inspired by the Holy Spirit, they form a "holy fraternity." As Father Michael Azkoul affirms:

"We follow the holy Fathers in everything," wrote St. Maximus the Confessor. "They instruct us in the beautiful heritage of our Faith" (*Pyrr.* PG 91 296-297; *Ep. XII* PG 91 465). They are exegetes of Scripture which is a closed book without them. The teachings of the Fathers do not in fact belong to them, but came from the grace which Christ granted them. "Our holy Fathers and Teachers," Maximus said, "owe to the Holy Spirit the truth which they spoke and which was spoken through them." The same power attributed to the Scriptures — "inspired by God" — is applied to them (*Ambig.*, 42 PG 91 1341).\*

As for the issue of Ecumenism, the matter is considerably different. Why? Because Ecumenists — whether they be Roman Catholic, Protestant, or "Orthodox" — now already share the sacraments among themselves; and, as we have demonstrated in other articles, in some jurisdictions of "World Orthodoxy", this is done with the official approval of the bishops. This, precisely, is the heresy of Ecumenism. So, if we continue imparting the Holy Mysteries to Orthodox who are members of these jurisdictions, we too will be participating in their heresy!

The heresies in the various non-Orthodox denominations have gone on too long, are too serious, too many, and too deeply imbedded. They are in stubborn and clear violation of "the consensus of the Fathers." By their official decisions, Orthodox Ecumenists mingle their beliefs with those of the non-Orthodox Ecumenists.

On our part, we desire only to walk in the footsteps not of mere men, but the Holy and God-bearing Fathers. They are the norm of traditional doctrine and the standard of Christian orthodoxy.

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\* *Once Delivered to the Saints*, Father Michael Azkoul, St. Nectarios Press, Seattle, p. 12. See also the article, "Our Fathers in Heaven," *Articles of Faith*, Part One, p. 18.