

The Ecclesiological Precepts of Saint Theodore the Studite

*In Response to Mr. Tsingos**

I

The present year saw the publication of a voluminous doctoral dissertation by Vasilios A. Tsingos, entitled *Ἐκκλησιολογικὲς Θέσεις τοῦ Ἁγίου Θεοδώρου τοῦ Στουδίτου: Αὐθεντία καὶ Πρωτεῖο* [*St. Theodore the Studite's Ecclesiological Precepts: Legitimacy and Primacy*] (Thessaloniki: Orthodoxos Kypsele Publications, 1999, pp. 406).

After a lengthy “General Introduction” (pp. 15-37) followed by three chapters in which the author makes a laborious effort to delineate the teaching of St. Theodore the Studite (Chapter 1, “Regarding the Church” [pp. 39-143]; Chapter 2, concerning the “Sources and Bearers of Ecclesiastical Authority” [pp. 145-246]; and Chapter 3, on “The Primacy of the Bishop of Rome” [pp. 247-359]), Mr. Tsingos’ dissertation ends with “Conclusions” and a “Summary” [in English—*Trans.*] (pp. 361-366, 367-368), a detailed bibliography (pp. 369-394), and an index of names and subjects (pp. 395-406).

He emphasizes that St. Theodore’s “teaching” with regard to the aforementioned issues “has a unique ecumenical significance” (p. 8), and it is clearly his assertion that the Saint’s “views” should be regarded as a substantive response “to the fundamental, thorny, and hotly debated issues and problems that have occupied and continue to occupy the entire Church and professional theological research, as well as the contemporary ecumenical movement,” since by way of “Studite doctrine,” the tradition and experience of the Church, which constitute “the ultimate criterion for any kind of concord or disagreement...in an era of inter-Christian dialogues,” are reformulated (p. 366).

We do not intend at present to undertake a critical analysis of Mr. Tsingos’ entire work, since our space is limited; it behooves us at this juncture, however, to point out, on the one hand, that Mr. Tsingos has not fully convinced us of the scientific objectivity and integrity of his scholarship *vis-à-vis* the manner in which he approaches and analyzes his subject matter; and, on the other hand, to express our great astonishment at his well-nigh total failure in dealing with the “thorny” issue of whether or not St. Theodore became a schismatic in his struggle for the Truth.

II

More specifically, Mr. Tsingos intentionally entangles himself in

an artificial, complicated, and contradictory set of problems of Western provenance, in order to confront a dilemma—non-existent in the Orthodox tradition—that can be captured by the following question: In times when the law of the Gospel and canonical order are blatantly subverted (as in the heresy of Moechianism), or false doctrine is put forth (as in the heresy of Iconoclasm), *what does it mean to break communion with those who are infected with heresy?*

Mr. Tsingos occupies himself with solving this non-problem, in his endeavor, firstly, to “save” the reputation of St. Theodore, about whom it is implied (though not explicitly stated) that he may have become a schismatic—albeit temporarily—in his struggle against heresy; and secondly, to strike a blow against the Old Calendarist anti-ecumenists, who are, in his view, truly and fundamentally schismatics and who wrongly invoke the authority of St. Theodore, since they do not correctly understand him and, consequently, do not rightly emulate him.

It is, therefore, clear that the methodological foundations of Mr. Tsingos’ dissertation fall short, as far as this issue is concerned (and his treatment thereof runs to dozens of pages), in that the book ends up being, in essence, an attack against those who oppose the heresy of ecumenism (a heresy which encompasses the calendar question), while his critical survey of the subject matter is biased, since it makes forays into contemporary (even partisan) history, with all of its “excesses” and “deficiencies,” which excesses and deficiencies were assuredly not unknown in St. Theodore’s time as well!

III

Further, in what is, in fact, an anguished endeavor, Mr. Tsingos refutes himself, from a methodological point of view, on three very fundamental grounds.

1) Although Mr. Tsingos essays to present St. Theodore as the interpreter of his own words, strangely enough, he neglects to mention those testimonies of the Saint which actually invalidate the conclusions that he draws in his dissertation. For example:

• *According to St. Theodore:* Once the “grievous false teaching” of the “Moechian heresy” had been “decreed” synodally—in the year 809, during the Patriarchate of St. Nicephoros—, the Saint urged Abbot Theophilos “neither to commune with these individuals [i.e., those who had issued the decree] nor to commemorate them in the [i.e., his] most holy monastery at the Divine Liturgy, because very grave are the threats voiced by the Saints against those who compromise with it [the Moechian heresy], even with regard to eating together [with such heretics].” Since this “heretical impiety” was proclaimed synodally, all of the Orthodox were to be bold “neither to commune with those of wrong belief nor to commemorate anyone having participated in the Moechian synod or being of like mind with

it,” since “the Divine Chrysostomos has declared loudly and clearly that not only heretics, but also those who commune with such people, are enemies of God.”¹

• *Mr. Tsingos’ dissertation: “a break in communion must be taken to signify [simply] a cessation in, and the absence of, human contact”*; “a break in communion does not necessarily entail for him [St. Theodore] non-communion in the Mysteries”; “in spite of his very sharp disagreements and clashes with [Patriarchs Tarasios and Nicephoros], he did not disavow them and, as he himself testifies, did not cease to commemorate them [!—*Trans.*]” (pp. 90 and 193 [*emphasis ours*]).

2) Since Mr. Tsingos fails to resolve the problem of St. Theodore’s “‘non-communion’ with the Church or his local Bishop,” which he deems an “intractable hermeneutical problem,” on account of a supposed scarcity of sources (p. 65), and since, as we have previously pointed out, he fails to present the Saint correctly as “his own interpreter,” he consequently fails to place him (or perhaps avoids placing him?) within the context of traditional opposition to heresy, with the result that the Saint is, to put it mildly, wrongly portrayed.

It is truly astonishing that, while Mr. Tsingos, “in the course of research” designed to determine the nature of the Saint’s “non-communion,” has recourse to “conversations with experts in philology, liturgics, and canon law,” in order to solicit “their contribution to this hermeneutical problem” (p. 91), he at the same time ignores (fails to invoke) Holy Tradition!

It is, at any rate, well known that St. Theodore, in taking a stand against the Moechians and the Iconoclasts, employed no novel or hitherto unheard-of strategy; refraining from communion with those in error is a distinctive mark, throughout history, of those Orthodox who have struggled against heresy.

It has always been a given that a “walling-off”² from heretical shepherds “for reasons of doctrine,”³ even “prior to a synodal determination [regarding their heretical status—*Trans.*],”² is an evident and well-known procedure, and one which is carried out “on the spot,”² carrying with it no penalties, but, on the contrary, inviting honors and commendations.²

For example, St. Sophronios of Jerusalem (†637) gave clear expression, some time before St. Theodore, to the Church’s policy towards those “who do not conform to the sound teaching of the Faith”:⁴ “If any should separate themselves from such, not on the pretext of an offense, but *on account of a heresy* that has been condemned by a Synod or by the Holy Fathers, *they are worthy of honor and approbation, as being truly Orthodox.*”⁵

St. Athanasios the Great, even earlier, very plainly and pointedly declared that, “*We are bound to refrain from communing with those*

*whose opinions we abhor.”*⁶

And, finally, St. Basil the Great emphasized, in his defense of Sts. Meletios of Antioch and Eusebios of Samosata, that “I should certainly not have admitted them to communion even for a moment, if I had found them a stumbling-block to the Faith.”⁷

3) It is evident that Mr. Tsingos reaches his erroneous conclusions because he made no effort, first and foremost, to understand in depth the meaning of “schism” or the true ecclesiological meaning of a “walling-off” from error.

For, to be sure, we look upon schismatics, literally and in actuality, as “those who have estranged themselves from the Church”⁸ and “have withdrawn [from it]”⁹ “through schism”;¹⁰ insofar as schismatics “have broken away from the body of the Church,”¹¹ and insofar as they have taken this step “over ecclesiastical issues that are capable of solution,”¹² they are truly worthy of condemnation, with all of its consequences.

However, Orthodox “walling-off,” which is undertaken “for a certain period of time,” does not lead to “non-communion” with the Church, but to “non-communion” with heretics, who, even if they maintain an administrative or institutional relationship (or unity) with the Church, “are not the Church of God,” according to St. Theodore, since “they are not the Church of the Lord”; indeed, it is precisely the heretics who are not the Church, and all those who commune with them are “themselves in truth” cut off from the Church.¹³

In his discussion of these problems, Mr. Tsingos should not have disregarded a basic ecclesiological principle: that the foundations of the Church’s unity are not administrative and institutional, but Eucharistic and charismatic; a Bishop who preaches heresy, being thereby classified as a “pseudo-bishop”¹⁴ and a “pseudo-teacher,”¹⁴ can neither constitute the center of the Eucharistic Assembly nor fulfill the duties of a Shepherd, since he is already a “wolf.”

Only under such conditions was it possible for St. Cyril of Alexandria—and this, indeed, prior to the Third Œcumenical Synod—to encourage the Orthodox flock in Constantinople thusly: “Keep yourselves untainted and blameless, neither communing with the aforementioned [Nestorios], nor paying any heed to him as a teacher, should he persist in being a wolf instead of a shepherd.”¹⁵

IV

Finally, given these three very fundamental grounds, on the basis of which Mr. Tsingos methodologically and theologically refutes his own position, it is only natural that he misinterprets the consequences of an Orthodox notion of a walling-off; consequently, he imagines that anti-ecumenists have somehow “been misled into ‘departing’ from the fold of the Church and into creating independent ecclesiastical factions and groups”—that “they usurp the Church’s leadership

and form competing and parallel movements, even founding another ‘church’” (p. 91).

It is truly sad that Mr. Tsingos ignores the fact that the Orthodox who have walled themselves off from the ecumenists have *never* declared that they have established another church (!), but are profoundly aware that they comprise, as St. Theodore puts it, the “confessing flock of Christ” (p. 104) in resistance, and that they function as administrative structures by *oikonomia*, provisionally, and “owing to pressing needs” and certainly *ad referendum* to a unifying Orthodox council or synod.

St. Theodore is very clear and instructive in this matter:

In times of heresy, owing to pressing needs, things do not always proceed flawlessly, in accordance with what has been prescribed in times of peace; this seems to have been the case with the most blessed Athanasios [of Alexandria] and the most holy Eusebios [of Samosata], who both performed Ordinations outside their respective dioceses; and now, the same thing is evidently being done while the present heresy persists.¹⁶

• These are our observations for the present. God willing, we shall return to this subject again.

* Source: *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XVII, Nos. 2 & 3 (2000), pp. 16-21.

Notes

1. St. Theodore the Studite, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XCIX, col. 1048CD and 1049A (Epistle I.39: “To Theophilus the Abbot”).

2. Cf. *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CXXXVII, col. 1068 (Fifteenth Canon of the First-Second Synod). • Also, see the interpretation of this canon by Bishop Nikodim (Milash).

3. Balsamon, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CXXXVII, col. 1069B.

4. St. Theodore the Studite, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XCIX, col. 1120A (Epistle II.1: “To the Iconoclast Synod”).

5. St. Sophronios of Jerusalem, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXXXVII.3, cols. 3369D-3372A.

6. St. Athanasios the Great, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXVI, col. 1188B (“To Those Who Practice the Solitary Life and Who Are Established in Faith in God”).

7. St. Basil the Great, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXXII, cols. 992-994 (Epistle 266: “To Peter, Bishop of Alexandria”).

8. Zonaras, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CXXXVIII, col. 585D.

9. St. Basil the Great, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXXII, col. 669A (First Canon).

10. *Ibid.*, col. 668B (First Canon).

11. Zonaras, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CXXXVIII, col. 584B.

12. St. Basil the Great, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXXII, col. 665A (First Canon).

13. St. Theodore the Studite, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XCIX, col. 1065CD (Epistle I.43: “To His Brother, Joseph the Archbishop”).

14. Cf. *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CXXXVII, col. 1068B (Fifteenth Canon of the First-Second Synod).

15. St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXXVII, col. 125B (Epistle 18: “To the Clergy and People of Constantinople”).

16. St. Theodore the Studite, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XCIX, col. 1645D (Epistle II.215: “To Methodios the Monk”).