

2008
Lenten Reader:

***Sweeter than Honey:
Orthodox Thinking on Dogma and Truth***

by Peter Bouteneff

The texts in this booklet are selected from *Sweeter than Honey* by Dr. Peter Bouteneff, Assistant Professor of Dogmatic Theology at St. Vladimir's Seminary and editor of the "Foundations Series" of St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. That series draws on the riches of the Orthodox tradition to address the modern world. In this particular book Dr. Bouteneff explores the view of the tradition on the idea of Truth, relating it to contemporary thinking and culture.

These excerpts will often appear disjointed and are a poor substitute for reading the book. But, with the prospect of Dr. Bouteneff's visit to our church on March 29 and 30, details of which are in the March Crossroads, these excerpts are offered to give those without the time to read the entire book an opportunity to understand the breadth and complexity of the issues that are addressed in it. While it has been designed as a Lenten reader, there are more excerpts than number of days in Lent and so your reading might extend beyond the Lenten season into the Paschal season. At the same time, you might skim this booklet, finding sections that interest you, marking them up with comments and questions that you might bring up during the three opportunities to meet with Dr. Bouteneff when he comes to Holy Cross.

Orthodox Church of the Holy Cross
Medford, NJ
www.holycrossmedford.org

Testifying to the faith and creativity of the Orthodox Christian Church, the Foundations series draws upon the riches of its tradition to address the modern world. These survey texts are suitable both for preliminary inquiry and deeper investigation, in the classroom or for personal study.

INTRODUCTION

(1) Orthodox Christianity makes a stunning claim: the teachings found in Scripture interpreted within the community of the Church are true. What's more, they are not merely true for the community that produces and receives them but simply *true*. They describe the way things really are.

Three challenges:

(2) *Religious pluralism is a challenge.* Many faith traditions claim to be teaching the truth but are apt to come to opposing conclusions. Any person aware of the surrounding world is struck by the fact that people of wisdom and goodwill often believe and teach radically different things about life and its meaning. Many conclude that no single religious teaching could possibly claim to be *the* truth, particularly if that means saying that some teachings or some people are wrong. (11)

(3) *Postmodernism is a challenge.* The intellectual climate current in universities works on the principles that no teaching can claim absolute value and that no text can claim absolute authority. This stems partly from the conviction that words—our only hold on reality—have no fixed meaning. More broadly, in the media and in popular culture, people's good intentions to respect one another's beliefs and lifestyles often

turn into moral and intellectual relativism. (11)

(4) *Fundamentalism is a challenge.* In reaction to pluralism and postmodern relativism, some people have tended to build walls thicker and higher, to establish religious and cultural identities in opposition to others, and to back them up with violence, whether doctrinal or physical. The fanatical approach to absolute truth, which we witness in a particularly sharp way today, leads many to swear off convictions altogether. (12)

(5) An Orthodox Christian is left in a quandary: How do I dare claim that my faith community speaks the truth when so many other reasonable and wise people claim otherwise? How do I dare claim, without being a fanatic, that my community's teachings are true in some way for everyone? How do I dare even converse about truth when our words—particularly words like God or salvation—can take on such vastly different meanings? (12)

(6) If the first half of the book is concerned with establishing the existence of truth and grounding it in the person of Jesus Christ, the second seeks to build on that foundation by exploring how the Orthodox Church discerns and formulates its teachings. How does the Church arrive at conclusions that it considers the truth about God and the world? Here, too, there are several challenges. *Expressing concepts that are ultimately unknowable and unprovable is a challenge.* We claim to say meaningful, even binding, things about God, but how do we square this claim with the fact that God is unknowable and beyond human expression? Doesn't God's ultimate unknowability make it impossible to make assured statements about him?

Identifying the sources and expressions of truth is a challenge.

From where do we derive our beliefs and teachings about God and the world? An informed observation of the natural world can lead us to good conclusions about the relationships we have with God, with each other, and with the natural environment. But what informs that observation? What are the texts, rites, and symbols that we consider truth-bearing, and why do we give them priority over other sources?

Correctly understanding these sources of truth is a challenge.

It's not enough to identify these sources. We have to decide who understands them correctly and why. The Bible is not self-interpreting; the same Bible leads different people to radically different conclusions. How do we read and understand it and the other sources of our theology? (13-13)

(7) I have written this book for Orthodox Christians seeking to make their faith more real and engaged, as well as for anyone wondering how an Orthodox Christian might think about truth and dogma. . . . This book is also about the value of dialogue, of agreement and disagreement. One of my main theses is that true knowledge and genuine communication are possible. Once upon a time, this was not such a radical claim. But it means that real agreement and real disagreement are also possible. Where we disagree, therefore, let us engage our differences and take them seriously, since some of our divergences can be about matters of life and death. Dogma and truth, sweeter than honey, are such matters. If we are honest with each other, both our convergences and our divergences can lead to profound reflection within our faith

communities and in ourselves. They will lead to real, respectful, and possibly transformative encounters. But let it all be based on the agreed-on understanding that there is such a thing as truth, and that it can be known. (15-16)

PART ONE: DOGMA AND TRUTH

DOGMA AND TRUTH: FIRST THOUGHTS ON KNOWING

(8) Taking dogma as truth, then, can be challenging. When we believe dogmas, not just because they're dogmas but because we consider them to be actually true, conveying the truth about the world, about its Creator, about humanity and its situation, the results can be revolutionary. At that point, we realize that we had better come to know these teachings and take them seriously. If they really do convey the truth about life, we want to seek it, and seek to understand it. (20)

(9) In seeking the truth, however, we need to be prepared for revolution, and this can be frightening. Once we start to wrestle with the teachings of the Church as if they are absolutely true, we realize that we might have to change. We might have to rethink our lives, behave differently, reason about the world differently. Change might be uncomfortable, but consider it we must, because otherwise we may be in denial about reality. And yet, the liturgy of the Church reveals a craving to know the truth, God's truth. At Matins and at Vespers—the morning and evening prayers of the Church—we sing the verses from Psalm 119, “Blessed are you, O Lord, teach me your statutes! . . . enlighten me with your precepts!” So we regularly beg God to help us to know and understand his statutes, his commandments, his precepts—because these are the grounding of the world that he

created. We want to be coming to know and comprehend the truth, and to live by it. That's how we understand dogma. It is true. (20-21)

(10) Seeing truth as "fact" is a start. But to get to the truth about truth, we have to see it as far more than sheer fact or accuracy. When John Keats said that beauty is truth, and truth beauty, he was onto something. He was linking truth with something beyond just the veracity of things; in his case specifically with aesthetic experience, something we feel and perceive, engage with, something that is beautiful, good. There is a great deal to be said about the relationship between truth and beauty. But for now I want to highlight just one point: Truth is something you enter into a relationship with. (21-22)

(11) Taking cues from the Scriptures, the Christian goes still further. Truth is linked to a way of life, one that is in concert with the way things really are. Truth is not just something that we learn; it is something that we do, how we live. Truth can be an action, an activity. St Paul writes in Ephesians 4.15 about "speaking the truth in love," or at least that's how it's commonly translated. The Greek here uses truth as a verb—*aletheuo*—so that Paul is really talking about "truthing" in love. That means speaking, thinking, and acting rightly, truly, honestly—and with love, lest we forget the *relational* dimension of truth. The Scriptures speak in the same breath about walking before God "in truth, with a true heart" and doing "that which is pleasing in the sight of God." (22)

(12) But Jesus goes one step further when says to his disciples, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14.6). What could he mean? He could mean simply that he speaks the truth and is trustworthy. Some say that this pronouncement shows Jesus in an unattractive light: he sounds so full of

himself! And he excludes other expressions of truth. But a genuine follower of Jesus Christ interprets these words only in their fullest sense, to refer to absolute truth itself: Jesus links truth not only with salvation, freedom, and action but also with his own person. This is remarkable, to be sure. But Christians can believe no less. (23)

(13) All of this means that if we are seeking the truth of the world, the reason, logic, and integrity that underlie the world, we are in fact seeking the one in whom all things hold together, the one in whom we live and move and have our existence, the one by whom the universe came to be—Jesus Christ. (25)

(14) Scripture also speaks of the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of Truth" (Jn 14.17; 15.26). This Spirit, Jesus says, guides us into all truth. How does the Spirit do this? By leading us to Jesus (Jn 16.13–14). St John even says that "the Spirit *is* the truth," in the sense that the Spirit is the witness to Jesus Christ (1 Jn 5.7). The Spirit of truth is the one who shows us who Jesus is—the Logos-Word and Son of God the Father. (25-26)

(15) According to this line of thinking, everything that is true, whether or not it is said by a Christian, is true because of Christ; anything that is approaching truth is approaching Christ. And everyone who is doing the truth is making some kind of approach to Christ, whether or not they name him as Christ. As Christ himself says, "Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice" (Jn 18.37).

Card-carrying, Bible-reading Christians do not hold a monopoly on truth. People of all backgrounds and faith traditions can and do come to right conclusions about created reality and about God himself. But where this happens, whether in the person of a Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, or Buddhist, we point to Christ, and we locate the

fulfillment of that truth in Christ. This is how we apply our belief that Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. (27)

(16) The universal application of this teaching has led some to speak of “implicit” or “anonymous” Christians.⁷ The idea of “anonymous Christianity” suggests that when people believe things that are true and live in God’s grace (“doing the truth”), even they if employ names and terminology that are not explicitly Christian, they draw nearer to Christ and are enlightened by Christ, “the true light who enlightens *every* human being” (Jn 1.9, my emphasis). This doesn’t mean that everybody is a Christian, whether they know it or not. It only means that when they are doing or believing the truth, they are drawing closer to Christ.

There is something attractive, inclusive, and inviting about this idea. While preserving the universality and uniqueness of the person of Christ, the idea of the anonymous Christian respects truth and goodness wherever it is found. It rings true, for looking through the right eyeglasses, we see profound and joyous convergences in the thought, teaching, and mystical experiences of the world’s religious traditions. Some have attributed these convergences to a trait embedded in humanity—a collective subconscious that has evolved as a result of our “wiring.” But what if these convergences exist because of a single, actual truth? What if that truth is the truth of Jesus Christ? (27-28)

(17) Whenever, in any question or pursuit, one approaches verity, genuineness, reality, a right way, a true approach, or a true answer, one approaches Christ. Better put, wherever there is truth, genuineness, reality, it’s because of Christ. This is why St Paul can write to the Philippians, “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely,

whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4.8). Because in thinking about these things, Paul says, our minds are on Jesus Christ. In the next chapter of the same letter he says, “Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light, for *the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true*” (Eph 5.8–9, emphasis added). (32-33)

(18) The personalization of truth was not exactly a new idea, even during the New Testament era. The Old Testament Wisdom literature (e.g., the book of Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon) shows that, especially in the three or four centuries before the coming of Christ, in a hellenized Near East, Wisdom could be personified, as a “she” (e.g., Prov 1.20; 4.6; 7.4; and 9.1) or an “I” (Prov 8.22–31). The authors of these books understood that a relationship with a “she” or a “he” is going to be very different from a relationship with an “it.” (37)

(19) The law, for the Hebrew, was an object of love. The first of the psalms says that the blessed or happy person delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night. Such a person is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. That is because in understanding the law, he understands what is what, and as a result he is at peace with others, with God, and with himself; he is strong and sure.

Look at Psalm 19.7–10:

*The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the Lord is sure,
making wise the simple;*

*the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is
pure, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is clean,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true,
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than
gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey, and
drippings of the honeycomb.*

This certainly sounds different from the average approach today to law or dogma. (37-38)

(20) Dogma (general truth) or dogmas (which are expressions of that truth) do not describe a code, a set of fixed and sterile rules. Rather, dogma describes and defines reality, what is. Dogmas give a true understanding of God, creation, and human personhood. They orient our lives. From dogma, we derive an understanding of reality, an ethos of life, an understanding of how to live, how to stand in relationship with God, the cosmos, the other, and the self. In other words, they tell us how to “do the truth.”

(21) To live in harmony with God, with the world, with others, and with ourselves, we need this. We want it. It’s our lifeline, our gold, our refreshment, our honey. We ask for it in the liturgy all the time. Again, “Blessed are you, O Lord, teach me your statutes. Blessed are you, O Master, make me to understand your commandments. Blessed are you, O Holy One, enlighten me with your precepts.” (39)

TRUTH AND RELATIVISM: IS ANYBODY WRONG?

(22) Proclaiming that Jesus Christ is *the* truth sounds exclusive. Well, it is, and it isn’t. There’s a profoundly inclusive dimension to identifying Jesus with the truth, for it affirms and includes everyone and everything that is true, just, beautiful, and good. The other part of that claim, however, is that together with all that is true, there exist things that are untrue, unjust, ugly, and bad. Furthermore, if Jesus is the truth, then salvation—the promise of eternal life in communion with God himself through knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2.4)—comes through Jesus Christ alone. (43)

(23) Aside from being a citizen of my particular time and place—the twenty-first-century West—I am led to many of my questions, as well as some of my answers, by conversations with friends and family, many of whom are either decidedly non-Christian or have fallen away from a committed involvement with the Church. On those occasions when we talk in some serious way about my status as a believing Christian, it’s interesting to see what people find most shocking. The words “committed Christian” or “believing Christian” have become so common that nobody really thinks on what they mean. So my partners in conversation can be shocked to realize that I actually believe this stuff to be the truth about God and the world. It’s all the more repulsive to people when the implications are teased out: “Does believing this to be the truth mean that you believe that contradictory teachings are *wrong*?”

(24) The conversation often runs along the following lines:

Friend: The whole area of religion rests on mystery, by definition. After all, as the title of the cult film puts it, “What the *bleep* do we know?” Furthermore, there are many different religions, and all of them seem to

include equally wise people. To me, that means that all religious truth claims are equally valid.

Self: Well, many religious claims may be valid; many may be quite true. But I don't believe them all to be equally true. In fact, I believe some of them are simply false.

(25) **F:** I find that really outrageous! Don't you realize how offensive that is to other faith traditions? Do you believe that you are wiser than the world's billions of Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims?

S: This isn't a question of mine or anyone's wisdom. And it's not as if we all disagree on everything—not even nearly. You and I have spoken many times about all of the convergences among the many religious traditions. But there are certain points where we simply can't all be right. And one of these main points centers on Jesus Christ. Is he God's unique Word, the Savior of the world, or is he not?

(26) **F:** Does it have to be yes or no? Aren't there gradations of agreement on the matter, some of which would be less absolute?

S: Yes, I'd admit gradations. But notice that with each greater affirmation about Jesus, you leave behind certain traditions, certain teachings, and come to a point that is absolute. For example, just about everyone agrees Jesus was a good man. He taught love, he cared especially for the poor and disenfranchised, and he died a voluntary—and perhaps even sacrificial—death. Then you narrow things: He was a prophet. He was a great prophet. He was a “son of God” in that what he spoke was a real message from God. He was *the* Son of God, the Savior of the world, the Messiah foretold by the Hebrew prophets, the way, the truth, and the life, fully sharing in God's own divinity.

By the time you get to these last statements you are a Christian, and decisively not a Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, or Hindu. At that point, if you really believe it, then you *disagree* with a statement such as, “Jesus is related to God but in no way beyond how Moses, Buddha, Mohammed, or Mother Teresa were related to God.” You believe that such a statement is wrong.

(27) **F:** So you're saying, for example, that all of Judaism is wrong? Don't you realize that anti-Semitism is based on this attitude?

S: I believe that the view that Jesus is not the promised Messiah is an incorrect view. Is that belief in itself violent to Judaism? There's a difference between being non-Semitic and being anti-Semitic; otherwise simply being a believing Christian would by definition be anti-Semitic. Can I not believe that someone's tradition is mistaken on a key point, without being hateful or violent about it?

(28) **F:** No, I don't believe you can, because your belief—or rather your conviction—is an ideological violence to the other. That kind of violence leads in an unbroken continuum to hatred and physical violence. You know, Peter, I really can't believe that a thinking person today can be as intolerant as this. Haven't human beings lived through enough in history to realize that anything we say or believe has to be provisional, that it's always possible that we are wrong? Furthermore, haven't you read enough critical theory to be convinced that there can only be truths within and for particular communities? The claim to universality is simply childish.

S: Of *course* I can be wrong, and maybe I am. But I don't think so, and I would be lying if I said I did. Here the dialogue may

continue along more or less interesting lines of reasoning. (45-47)

TRUTH AND STORY: DOES HISTORY MATTER?

(29) Some years ago I was in the midst of a long and relaxed conversation with a good friend—a priest and scholar from Russia. Then, as the conversation took an uncomfortable turn, tension filled the room. We were talking about some of the Old Testament accounts—I think they were about Noah and Job—and I remarked that I couldn't understand why some people absolutely insist that these events occurred exactly as written. "Why do some people need to believe that every one of these stories actually happened, as if they could be captured on a video camera?"

But it turned out that this was in fact his position. "How could you suggest that they didn't happen?" he said. "They are in the *Bible!*" To him it was blasphemy to suggest that these are "mere stories." "Are you saying that everyone who has believed in these accounts throughout history has been wrong? That you are smarter than they are?" He was shocked and bothered, and so was I, by how our discussion was turning out. "Next thing you'll tell me," he said, "is that Jesus wasn't historical? That he didn't live or die or rise from the dead?" I said, "No, I won't tell you any such thing. Because I believe as you do, that Jesus did live, die, and rise from the dead. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are exactly what all the scriptural narratives point to. Let me ask you, though, why the "historic fact" of these stories is so important to you. It seems to me that the Fathers were primarily interested in the stories themselves, rather than their historicity."

He then took a more positive tack. "Do you know how I know that these things

actually happened, that Adam and Job and Jonah and Noah really lived through exactly what is written about them? It is because I am a priest, and I hear confessions. And I hear these very stories lived out in the lives of people who tell me their lives. I hear Job in the poor woman who lost her husband and son in Chechnya. I hear Jonah in the seminarian who is considering abandoning his studies . . ."

I was stunned to hear him say this. "Father! You've just cited one of the main reasons why the question of whether they actually happened *doesn't* matter. They are true stories." And so our conversation steered onto a new track. (73-4)

(30) The point of the anecdote that opened this chapter (which, I should hasten to tell you, was based on actual events!) was to show that stories can convey truth independent of whether they actually occurred. We've always known that. Fables, for example, are stories that don't pretend to recount events that happened but which nevertheless speak truth. There may not have ever been a village plagued by a wolf and a mendacious boy, but the idea of "crying wolf" rings true across time and place. Parables come closer to home, since they are among the chief means by which our Lord, according to the Gospels, conveyed the truth about God and his kingdom. Parables speak by way of metaphors, sometimes phrased as similes: "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed . . ." "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field . . ." Other parables are stories: the prodigal son, the publican and the Pharisee.

We tell and retell these stories. We read them in the midst of the church. We compose and illustrate children's books about them. They are the subjects of great works of art. The characters come to life for

us. They ring true, and so they come to be real for us. (80)

(31) As we approach an answer, one thing is sure: the Scriptures were to them, as to us, holy and inspired, and they engaged them deeply, both as a whole and part-by-part. What would St Paul answer if we were to ask him, “Did Adam and Eve exist ‘historically’ in the same sense that you and I exist?” Of course it’s impossible to know, but he might well say, “Yes,” and then immediately say, “But what kind of question is this, anyway?” He might then invite us to read his letter to the Romans, in which he writes clearly about Adam’s true function in the larger scale of things. In Romans 5, Paul puts “the one man” Adam at the beginning of sin and death in order to show that “the one man” Christ brings grace, righteousness, and life. Adam’s *function*, for St Paul, is to be a “type of the one to come” (Rom 5.14), a prefiguration of Jesus Christ. Adam—as “one man”—functions as the representation of the old dispensation, which is shattered by the coming of Christ. (See also 1 Cor 15.22, 45.) Adam’s historical existence is not the point. (84-85)

(32) For Orthodox, then, the Old Testament doesn’t function as a history book or as a science text. We believe it’s a book that exists to point to Christ, to give understanding about who Christ was and what he achieved through his life-giving death. The New Testament, for its part, wasn’t written as a cold recitation of uninterpreted events. Merely recording the “historic facts,” to the extent that it’s possible, wouldn’t have been enough to convey the gospel for all to see. The apostles saw everything Jesus did and still didn’t understand and internalize the meaning of it all until after he was crucified, when their minds were opened to who he is and how the Scriptures spoke of him. They *then*

recounted the events in the Gospels in such a way that reveals Jesus’ fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture, his significance for us and for our salvation. The Gospels simultaneously recount and interpret the events of Jesus Christ’s life....There is no slippery slope to reading Scripture this way. There’s only an upward slope at whose pinnacle are the cross and the empty tomb. (88-89)

(33) But what makes a text inspired? What does it mean that “all Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim 3.16)? The *amanuensis* model (an amanuensis is a scribe, a secretary) has it that Scripture was narrated by God and taken down by the scriptural authors. But the inspiration of Scripture is greater than a dictation exercise; it is the entry of God into human history. It is God’s action through the hearts, minds, and hands of the people who wrote things down using the language and imagery of their time, people who compiled oral narratives and liturgical incantations, people who edited previous versions of such compilations. Furthermore, the inspiration didn’t stop at the composition and compilation (redaction) of the texts but continues as certain texts were selected over others as authoritative. Inspiration continues, too, in the reading and interpretation of these texts. To suggest that the Genesis creation narratives, for example, are an interweaving of material from a variety of sources (as at least one theory has it) does no disservice to the idea of inspiration. Rather, it makes inspiration into something all the more real, concretely lived out in the complexity of history. (90)

(34) It has been said that the overwhelming popularity of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, C. S. Lewis’ *Narnia* stories, and the Harry Potter phenomenon has to do with the fact that, intentionally or not, they resonate deeply with the one true story, the

story of the Son of God who was made man for us and for our salvation, lifted up on the cross of his own accord, and raised from the dead. Lewis himself often makes the point that stories and myths, both in the Bible as well as outside it, bear truth insofar as they resonate with this true story. An advocate of this theory is John Granger, an Orthodox Christian who was so struck by the Christian message woven deeply into the Harry Potter novels that he wrote two vivid and literate books on the subject. (93)

(35) Truth, story, myth, history, allegory, typology: what do these all mean? Can't we just read our Bible *simply*? Maybe we should all just spend more of our time with the kinds of people who are utterly untouched by these categories and questions. Yet the times in which we live demand the kind of inquiry I've been sketching here. We live in an age when the categories of truth, fiction, and myth are both clearer and more muddled than ever. We are obsessed with finding "the truth behind the myth," and yet, the Lord of the Rings trilogy notwithstanding, we've nearly lost the meaning and effect of myth. In our age, too, debates about creation and evolution, or creation as evolution, rage in the public square, and fundamentalist readings of Scripture are gaining in popularity. We owe it to ourselves to bring to the fore questions about the nature and function of story. These questions can be a part of our maturing into a faith that penetrates the whole of our being. (96)

**PART TWO: DISCERNING
DOGMA**

**KNOWING THE UNKNOWNABLE: IS
THEOLOGY POSSIBLE?**

(36) The truth about God, to which the Spirit is leading us, is awesome. More than that, it's incomprehensible. The Bible teaches that God is unknowable in his essence: God's unknowability is one of his inherent characteristics. If we think about it, it's impossible to know *anyone* fully, to their core, in such a way that nothing will ever surprise us about them. It's impossible even to know ourselves.

So when it comes to knowing the God who is above and beyond everything that exists, and who brought everything into being out of nothing, we are talking about a radical unknowability. No one and nothing has created God: he simply is. This is why the name he reveals to Moses is nothing more and nothing less than "I AM" (Ex 3.14). (99)

(37) But back to basics, our being made in God's image means that, even if God is radically other than us, we are also quite profoundly related to him. This, we say, is why a relationship with God in Christ is so organic to our very being. A Christian believes that the true home of every human being is in God, the God of Jesus. It means, too, that we can go a long way toward knowing God by knowing ourselves and by knowing the created world, since it is an expression of God's being (Rom 1.20). The Church's ascetical writers consistently teach that the contemplation of nature is a way of coming into communion with God and into knowledge of God. (101)

(38) In the Church we understand this mind of ours, this free, and creative intellect, to have been given us by God as an instrument to help us come to know him and to share in his life. As you can see, the word *nous* is therefore important for us to understand: it is a key to understanding human nature and to justifying the whole enterprise of theology. It allows us to try to express with human

words and human concepts things that are inexpressible, because we believe that we've been given the faculty, and therefore the responsibility, to do so. We acknowledge the limitations of our reasoning capabilities, and we are called to transform and renew our minds. But at the same time, we are supposed to *use* our minds, to think, to reason about both divine and created things. Doing so properly, in prayer and in communion and council with others, is an act of genuine reverence to God. (102)

(39) All of this is to say: although God is an unknowable mystery and we shall never know him in his essence; although we are limited, created beings with limited words and limited capacities for understanding; although we are fallen and prone to distorted vision; we know that we are made in God's image, we trust that we are being led to the truth by the Holy Spirit, and we know that God reveals himself to us in his energies. And so we can go a long way in expressing things about him which we believe to be true. We trust, too, that our very lives and salvation are bound up with searching for and coming to know these things, insofar as they bring us into communion with God himself. (103)

(40) Why do theology?..... Theology isn't just a defense against heresy, however, even if the heresy might have helped to elicit it. Theology enriches our lives. Theology enriches our praise of God. Etymologically, that's what *orthodoxy* means: the *right* (ortho) *praise* (doxia) of God. We believe our theology to be the truth, that salvation is bound up with knowledge of the truth. We owe it to ourselves to know whatever we can about God, his Christ, his Spirit, and his creation. The purpose of our continued theological reflection and refinement is, as Vincent says, to believe "more diligently," to continue to hand down what we have

received, and to do so in ways and with words that speak to people in their own times and places. (105-106)

(41) Asceticism is a way of reshaping the distorted image in us and recovering the God-given mind-heart that seeks the truth through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So we're back to a point made in chapter 1: seeking the truth and living rightly are inextricably bound to each other. The Church Fathers constantly repeat, "This is the knowledge of God: the keeping of God's commandments." The pursuit of theological truth entails living purely, or more precisely put, being *on the road to purity*, for one never arrives at purity of mind-heart or achieves it in a final way. Being on the way is all that is asked. (110)

(42) Conciliarity is, to put it minimally, give and take with others; maximally, it is communion with Christ in and through the Church. We may think of conciliarity both historically and geographically, for one dimension of conciliarity is a communion with history. Our pursuit of the truth about God is done in council with Scripture and with those who reasoned together in history, whose reasoning is seen by the Church as right and true. Isaac Newton famously said, "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." We study those who lived and wrote in the past in order to benefit from their collective wisdom. But our pursuit of the truth is also done in council with others alive today, wherever they may be located. We discuss our theological reflection with each other, checking it with each other and with each other's understanding of the Church's tradition. (111-112)

(43) We will reflect more on these key principles later in this book. But for the time being, we ought to bear in mind that the

pursuit of theology—the pursuit of knowing the unknowable—must be done by people who are striving to live and think rightly, seeking also to live and think in communion with the Church, that great council which is Christ’s own body. (115)

**“THE SPIRIT WILL GUIDE YOU INTO ALL TRUTH”:
THE MECHANICS OF DOCTRINE**

(44) Here are the kinds of questions we’ll be exploring:

- What is meant by the promise that the Spirit will come to guide us?
- What is the truth that would be revealed, and to whom would it be revealed?
- How did the Church’s teaching come to be formulated?
- And how do we discern which teachings are indeed true and guided by the Holy Spirit?

These are important questions because we believe that the Church is that society within which the truth is taught. We believe that the teachings of the Church are true, that they are inspired by the Holy Spirit. The problem is, of course, that anyone can say that he or she was guided by the Holy Spirit to some belief or action. The Holy Spirit, as we know from Scripture, “blows where it wills” (Jn 3.8). The Holy Spirit is beyond our grasp, which makes claiming guidance from the Spirit all the more awesome—but also all the more open to misuse. It is an awesome thing that a person, even a church, can be led by the Holy Spirit. We ought to be struck by the terror of such a claim: when we make it for our Orthodox Church, we have to be able to back it up. (118-119)

(45) St Paul came onto the scene after Pentecost. But he knew full well how he and

his fellow preachers were able to communicate the wisdom of God: it was by the Holy Spirit. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, he writes that in preaching the crucified Christ, he is imparting a wisdom that “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived.” These things, he says, “God has revealed to us through the Spirit” (1 Cor 2.9–10). “Now,” continues Paul, “we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, so that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit” (vv. 12–13). (120)

(46) The Holy Spirit is thoroughly and consistently associated with the guarantee of the inheritance, the continued understanding of truth after Christ’s ascension. As Paul writes to his fellow minister Timothy, “Guard the truth [literally, the *paratheke*, or “good deposit”] that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us” (2 Tim 1.14). So it is that the disciples, having been given the Holy Spirit, felt empowered to discern and preach the truth. And that truth, as I’ve repeated, is Jesus Christ. He is the one by whom we know God and the mystery of God’s will; he is the one in whom all things hold together. And he is the one to whom the Spirit leads us. As soon as Jesus says that the Spirit will “guide you into all the truth,” he explains that the Spirit “will glorify *me*” (Jn 16.13–14). It’s by the Spirit alone that we understand who Jesus is; we don’t know him as Lord, as divine, except by the Spirit (1 Cor 12.3). (120-121)

(47) While guarding against an idealized view of church history, we do emphatically take the position that God guides us, that he works with the sinful members of the Church, and that the Church itself is a holy body. Quite clearly this is an interpretation

of faith. When we recite the Nicene Creed, we say, “I *believe* in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church,” making it an article of faith professed alongside our faith in “one God, the Father,” “one Lord, Jesus Christ,” and “the Holy Spirit.” In placing our faith in the Church, we are trusting that in and through all of the complexity of history, in and through the sinners that all of us human beings are, God is at work, making the Church what it is: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. (123-124)

(48) Another way of putting it is that the Spirit leads us to true theology through dialogue. Much theological writing takes the form of an exchange between two people or parties....Then there is the dialogue of persuasion. The early Christians had to be apologists; in other words, they had to explain themselves to an establishment which had some serious misconceptions about them..... Thus it is that the history of ideas, and the history of the formation of doctrine, is a history of dialogue, of interaction. This is one way the Holy Spirit works within people in particular places and particular times, in the nitty-gritty of history, to elicit what we identify as right-praising, right-teaching Christian theology. (125,129)

(49) This preliminary investigation leaves us with some important questions. If it's all a matter of give and take between various right and wrong positions over history, how do we know which ones are true and which are false? Who makes that decision, and on what authority? Who was to say, and on what basis, that St Cyril's teaching was right and Nestorianism was wrong? In answering such questions, we frequently speak about the Church as if it were a person.... When we speak in the name of the Church, we're not far from that dangerous place I alluded to earlier in this chapter, where people are

liable to claim that their opinions are of the Holy Spirit.

We are on a treacherous path when we say too easily that the Church or the Holy Spirit agrees with us, for we just might be making them in our own image. (130)

(50) We need to keep two things in mind about the Church:

1. The Church is the body of Christ (Rom 12.5; 1 Cor 12.12, 27; Eph 4.12; 5.23). This means both that Christ is the head of the Church and that the Church is somehow continuous with the person of Christ and his mission.

2. The Church is composed of particular members, human beings who have been baptized into it. The Church is therefore a council of persons, wherever they exist or existed, and whenever they live or have lived. There's a certain paradox to these two dimensions of the Church. The Church, as Christ's body and bride, is inherently holy and pure; it is sinless (Eph 5.25–27). Yet it is composed of people like us, all of whom are sinners. We fall short of holiness. We make mistakes, we sin, and, what's more, we are liable also to do so corporately and in the name of the Church itself. But despite having sinners as its members, the Church is sinless. How can we make sense of this paradox? (131)

(51) How do we know when the Church is speaking? One factor we've discussed is conciliarity: I cannot reason or speak in isolation and be sure that I speak in the name of the Holy Spirit. I rely on conciliarity with others. But that can't be the only safeguard, because I can easily find a group of people who reason as I do; we can start a website and a blog and we're off, beginning what could be our own corporate

delusion. So how do we know when the Church is speaking?....

To discern whether a teaching is of the Church, our primary criterion is Scripture, the preeminent written expression of God's word. However, we read Scripture "in the Church," which means we read it in light of the Church's tradition. We look to the Church Fathers, and perhaps especially to the distillations of the patristic writing found in the Church's universally received councils and in the Church's hymnography. We look also to other expressions of the Church's life—rituals, feasts, icons, and saints' lives. (132-133)

(52) Bishops, to give an important example, are vested with an authority resting in several dimensions. They preside over the Eucharist. They discern and apply the Church's canons in the particular situations placed before them. But a key part of the episcopal vocation is the discernment and communication of truth, of right theology; bishops are by definition teachers and keepers of the apostolic faith. St Irenaeus writes, "By 'knowledge of the truth' we mean the teaching of the Apostles; the order of the Church as established from earliest times throughout the world, the distinctive stamp of the body of Christ, preserved through the Episcopal succession: for to the bishops the Apostles committed the care of the church which is in each place."

This is a high calling. But the bishop's authority is properly exercised in council, not only with other bishops but with the whole Church. In the Orthodox Church there is no eucharistic celebration by a bishop alone without a congregation. The teaching of the Church is not dictated infallibly by any single person, bishop or otherwise. Every person of the Church is responsible to both listen to the bishop and challenge him, should his teaching run counter to the apostolic faith he is charged to discern and

to preach. Theological creativity today is exercised throughout the Church; it is the product not only of bishop-teachers but also priests and lay theologians, an age-old Orthodox tradition. At any rate, the bishop's responsibility is to oversee the Church as a council. (137)

(53) We have now briefly sketched the criteria for assessing whether a teaching is genuinely "of the Church." But even if we have mastered these, it is still incumbent upon us to *explain* the Church's teachings, to show why we hold them to be true. Moreover, if any teaching is to be considered a dogmatic or binding teaching of the Church, we have to explain how and why it is truly a matter of our salvation. I will say more on this in the last chapter. But for now let's recall that we don't believe dogmas because they are dogmas; we believe them because we hold them to be true. And a key part of discerning the teachings of the Church is explaining them to ourselves and to each other, understanding their truth. We don't do this merely to cater to modern rationalism. The Church's mission to the whole world is to preach and explain to our hearers what we believe to be the truth. It's a matter of taking the Church's teachings to heart and engaging them in the whole of our being. This is what it means to be a faithful Christian, and a whole person. (139)

"HOW DO YOU READ?" GLEANING THE TRADITION

I have written in accordance with what I have understood both from contemplation on the Scriptures, and also from those who speak the truth, and a little from experience itself.

—St Isaac the Syrian, Homily 14

(54) These unassuming words of St Isaac the Syrian, taken from one of his ascetical homilies, are indicative of how people of the Church have gone about discerning theology. Note three basic points. The Holy Scriptures are mentioned foremost as the ground of theological reflection. One who seeks to reason theologically must be grounded, as St Isaac puts it, in contemplation on the Scriptures. Second, we do not stop at the Bible. We must listen to “those who speak the truth” (or, as another translation of the text has it, from “true mouths”); the Bible is an intricate and diverse collection of texts, requiring a right interpretation. As the eunuch said to the apostle Philip, “How can I understand the Scriptures, unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8.31).

Third, St Isaac acknowledges that our theological reflection also relies on our experience of life. Our perceptions and thoughts may delude us, and therefore they need to be checked. But we do not ignore our experience, our perception, and our mind. We bring them to the service of our understanding; theology should ring true to our experience. (141-142)

(55) The Bible is not simply one among a list of sources from which we come to know about God and the world. It is the authoritative written witness of God’s self-revelation. There is no truth in the Church that is not scriptural truth: nothing that isn’t based on what is given us in the Bible. All of the other expressions of the Church’s tradition—patristic, liturgical, conciliar, and canonical—must be shown to be biblical, even as their very function is to read and interpret the Bible rightly. (143-144)

(56) By specifying “Scripture *and* Tradition,” the two-source idea rightly retains the special place of Scripture among the authoritative sources. The problem is

that Tradition isn’t just a compendium of texts; it’s a way of reading Scripture. The word Tradition, it must be said, is used to cover many (too many) ideas, and I would propose the following attempt at summarizing the main ways we may conceive of Tradition.

Tradition is an *activity* or *dynamism*; it is the “handing down” or “handing over” of faith and practice from one person to another, one generation to another. It is an ongoing activity, which is why we continue to speak of “the living Tradition.” (144)

A Variety of Ways of Reading

(57) Bearing in mind this basic and vital point about the Christ-centered reading of Scripture, we ought to note that the Church interprets Scripture in a variety of different ways, all of which conspire to depict Christ. We have noted that the Scriptures encompass a great variety of genres: creation stories, parables, genealogies, histories, prayers, apocalyptic passages, prophecies, poetry, wisdom literature, and letters. Any single scriptural book may contain more than one of these types of literature; we do well to be conscious of them and read accordingly. Our exploration in chapter 3 of parts of the book of Genesis is an example of a reading that is attentive to the intended function of a text and to the Church’s use of it. Owing in part to this variety of genres in the Bible, the Church does not read it as one long string of undifferentiated data. Different texts have different functions and significance; a single text can also be read in various ways to glean from it different points. St Ephrem of Syria writes,

If there only existed a single sense for the words of scripture, then the first commentator who came along would discover it, and other hearers

would experience neither the labor of searching, nor the joy of finding. Rather, each word of our Lord has its own form, and each form has its own members, and each member has its own character. Each individual understands according to his capacity and interprets as it is granted to him. (152-153)

(58) Liturgical life is a vital component of the search for true theology. More than that: liturgical life, by which we mean the way of corporate prayer and sacramental participation, is integral to being human. The human person is by nature a being who praises and gives thanks to God, raising up all of creation to God. In more technical language, we can say that the human person is by nature a doxological, eucharistic, priestly being. This means simply that we are never more ourselves than when we are praising and thanking God, offering his world up to him. (157-158)

(59) The liturgical dimension of Orthodox Christian life is described by the gathering of the people of God for praise and worship, and for the offering of ourselves and each other and everything else up to God. This is the very nature of the gathering itself, and of the texts we say and sing and the liturgical actions we perform. All of this taken together constitutes a particular ethos of prayer, the foundation that underlies all of the cultural variations in what we see, taste, touch, hear, and smell in the liturgical life. This life, again, is the context for the learning of the truth, since it's the context for the hearing of the only truth that really matters: the saving gospel of God and his Christ. (160-161)

Scripture in the Liturgy

(60) We have looked at some of the different ways that the Church's tradition reads the Scriptures. That reading takes place not only through the writings of the Fathers and through the definitions and canons of the ecumenical councils, but also through the liturgy. In fact, taking into account how much the Psalter is read and cited in the liturgical services, as well as the readings and citations from the rest of the Bible, we can say that the vast majority of what is heard in Church is taken directly from Scripture. Let's look at some of the ways in which the liturgy works with Scripture.

Through Psalmody and Quotation from the Psalms

(61) A substantial portion of the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church takes the form of the recitation of the psalms. This is especially the case in monastic settings, where the daily offices are dominated by psalmody. (In a traditional monastic setting, the entire Psalter is read in church in the course of any given week.) In monastic settings as well as in parish contexts, the psalms are the blood coursing through the veins of the Church's liturgy.

Through the Church's Lectionary

(62) The liturgy works with Scripture also in the way it selects texts for particular services. There are readings from the Old Testament, from the Epistles, and from the Gospels appointed for the daily and Sunday services throughout the year, as well as for particular feast days. The lectionary itself is a pedagogical tool. The Sunday Matins Gospel lessons, for example, are taken from the resurrection accounts to remind us that we are celebrating the Lord's resurrection.

*Through Hymns That Expound on
Scriptural Themes and
Readings*

(63) Many of the Church’s liturgical hymns are meant to illumine scriptural accounts. In the case of feast days, such as the Feast of the Meeting of the Lord (when the infant Jesus is presented to the temple and into the hands of Simeon the Elder), the hymns draw out the patristic teachings about Christ that are gleaned from the account of St Luke (2.22–40). They instill this account with a dimension that is both poetic and theological:

Today Simeon receives in his
embrace the uncircumscribed Word,
Supreme in being, borne on high in glory
upon the heavenly throne . . .
Simeon beholds thee as a babe, O Word
begotten of the Father before all ages . . .

Through the Homily

(64) Since the days of the early church, the homily has been an integral part of the liturgical gathering. The “Sacrament of the Word,” as Fr Alexander Schmemmann calls this portion of the liturgy, consists in the reading of Scripture, together with the homily. We say repeatedly that Scripture is not self-interpreting; its meaning isn’t always self-evident. The words of Scripture do not of themselves convey holiness; they must be read in a language that is understood by the people, and they must be followed up with words that assist in their integration in the life of the community. The preacher stands in the front of the congregation; he represents the Church and its conciliar tradition, its apostolic faith. This is an immense responsibility, one which ought to reflect an immersion in the life of the Church and prayerful study of its tradition.

*Through the Veneration of Scripture
and the Gospel Book*

(65) The Scriptures, particularly in the liturgical context, are an object of veneration for Orthodox Christians. The Gospel book, which rests at all times on the altar table, is itself an icon of Christ—sometimes bound in precious metals and jewels, and always bearing depictions of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ—for the words within are a textual icon of Christ. This book is the centerpiece of solemn liturgical processions and (especially during the Sunday Matins service) is brought out for veneration by the people. That means we kiss it as we do icons and other objects of love and reverence. (166-170 *passim*)

(66) “There is a doctrine which derives its trustworthiness from the tradition of the Fathers, which says . . .”¹⁷ Thus St Gregory of Nyssa introduces one of his teachings in a way typical of how the Fathers would preface the doctrines that they considered to be teachings of the Church. It also indicates something of the importance that anyone writing theology places on precedent; here that means the foundation laid by the Fathers. The Fathers of the Church are understood to be those who faithfully convey the gospel, preserving what was entrusted to them (the *paratheke* of 2 Tim 1.14), which is none other than the apostolic faith. Many of the Church’s treatises, including the definitions of some of the ecumenical councils, begin, “Following the Holy Fathers . . .” or, in the case of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, “Following the Divinely inspired teaching of our Holy Fathers and the tradition of the Catholic Church . . .” St Athanasius summed up the progression from the Lord, through the apostles, and the Fathers: “Let us look at that very tradition, teaching, and faith of the Catholic Church from the very beginning,

which the Lord gave, the apostles preached, and the fathers preserved. Upon this the Church is founded.”

(170-171)

(67) We read the writings of the Fathers with veneration. Abbot Vasileos again puts it well, saying that “in order to remain faithful to the Fathers’ spirit of freedom and worthy of their spiritual nobility and freshness, [we must] approach their holy texts with the awe in which we approach and venerate their holy relics and holy icons.” We read because of the authority and love vested in them by the Church over generations. We read them in the knowledge that many of them suffered greatly for their proclamation of the truth: some were exiled, tortured, or killed. And we read them in respect of their asceticism, the self-denial and struggle that almost inevitably characterized their lives. (175-176)

(68) The theme of conciliarity has loomed large in this book, particularly in this second half, which has had to do with the formation of doctrine and authority in the Church. By now it should be obvious that the life, structure, and doctrinal formulation of the Church are thoroughly intertwined with conciliarity. The Church is not a grouping of individuals but a communion of persons—persons whose very existence rests on relation to each other. When the Church speaks as Church, it speaks by gathering in council. (177-178)

(69) Councils are authoritative in the Church by virtue of two factors:

1. *Their convoking and composition.*

Official councils of the Church are summoned by the highest ecclesiastical (or in some cases political) authorities. Participants are those persons delegated by the Church to be the primary and

accountable teaching authorities—bishops, primarily.

2. *Their reception in the Church.* No council has authority in the Church unless it is accepted in the Church’s life. In the history of the Church there have been councils which, despite being summoned by the patriarch and featuring broad episcopal representation, the Church eventually rejected through subsequent councils.

The ecumenicity or universality of a council, therefore, rests both on the breadth of representation, from all of the churches, as well as on the universality of its reception. There is no canon stating that councils have authority over the Church. Once the Church *receives* the faith statements and canons of certain councils, it treats them as the sure ground of subsequent theological reflection, and it sings about them joyously in the liturgy. (178-179)

(70) Canons of the Church usually arise out of councils ... (and) describe norms that persons in the Church ought to conform to. Canons were not meant to be binding laws of the Church, although some do take on that character. Canons define standards and to this day serve within the Church as crucial points of reference to help decide matters in the ecclesiastical, theological, and moral spheres. Applying the canons today, gleaning from them the saving truths about God and his creation, is not always a simple matter. Two approaches to canon law need strenuously to be avoided. One is that of the legalist, who would see all canons on the same plane of authority, to be read “according to the letter of the law” as the Church’s rule book. The other is that of the anarchist, who would say that since canons are so obviously based in historical contexts, they can’t possibly apply in a unilateral way today and should be marginalized or even ignored. (180-181)

(71) The written lives of the saints are not intended as instruction manuals for life. If they were, they would probably include more of the saints' struggles with their passions and perhaps even some of their mistakes, rather than focus only on their perfection. Yet if we read them with some understanding of their function, we receive great insight into genuine Christian life and faith. We touch purity, and our own impurity is judged; we are exposed by their transparency to God and by their burning love. We are reminded of our own calling to be saints in our place and time. This is what happens both when we read saints' lives and also, more especially, when we come into contact with living saints in our own lives.

Particularly in the context of liturgy and prayer, the saints are people with whom we can experience a profound communion. They are the "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12.1). They act as intermediaries between us and God, and pray for us to God, whose company they already enjoy. They also stand with us; their icons in the church and in our homes remind us of their living presence. We have particular saints as our personal patrons and may have them as patrons of our families and our churches. We may have saints with whom we feel a particular kinship, owing to their example in our lives. Our tangible communion with the saints both living and departed is testimony to our faith in eternal life itself. (187-188)

(72) Just as the written lives of the saints are not biographies, so icons are not realistic portraits of Christ and the saints, nor do they function as documentary photographs of feasts and events. Icons are a way of conveying the meaning of what they depict. Icons, it is frequently said, are windows into the kingdom of heaven. This may be an apt metaphor. It indicates, for one, that icons are transparent to the reality they portray. Nothing in the icon should make one's gaze

stop at the icon itself: extreme colors, overly naturalistic depictions, overly emotional faces. The icon should always direct the viewer's gaze beyond itself. It is meant to show us the reality underlying the person or event, for icons depict transfigured humanity, which is what we are called to become. That is why they have also been called "theological contemplation in color." (189-190)

(73) Having said that, we must return yet again to our basic point: all of the sources, even the ones that are rightly reading Scripture, themselves need to be read rightly. As we've looked at each category, we've noticed a pattern. In all of the sources, we have to point to (1) what the category consists of, (2) how it relates to the other sources, and (3) what the texts actually mean in view of their linguistic, cultural, and ecclesiastical contexts.

Within all of this, there's certainly room for disagreement; one needn't look all that far on the Internet to see some of the intra-Orthodox discussions and arguments. But these shouldn't obscure the profound unity and integrity that holds Orthodoxy together in all of its diversity. For thanks be to God, within the Orthodox Church, even as we may discuss the meaning and application of various issues, we are spared debates about whether Mary was really a virgin, whether Christ is truly divine, whether he is really risen from the dead. Our debates are largely over things that have little to do with what really saves us. But when we do debate, or when we seek true teaching on new questions that arise in our day, we know exactly where to look. (193-194)

***CONCLUSION: DOGMA, DOGMAS
AND DOGMATICS***

(74) However, if dogma is defined as “God’s truth,” and if dogmas are expressions of dogma, it means that when we call a teaching “a dogma” or say that it’s “a dogmatic teaching,” we are declaring our belief that it is absolutely true, and that it is decisive for our salvation. The truth-bearing character of dogmatic teachings is both absolute and particular. It is absolute in that it’s not only true for Christians; it’s true for everyone. Yet it is particular in that Christian dogma is by and primarily for members of the Church. To illustrate: Jesus Christ is of the same divinity as God the Father and also of the same humanity as all human beings. This is a dogma about the man Jesus of Nazareth, who existed in human history in the first century of our era. It’s about who he was and is, and about what he was and is, in absolute fact. He isn’t both divine and human simply for us Christians; he is simply divine and human. (195-196)

(75) It is important, then, to distinguish among the teachings that are found within the life of the Church. Not everything that is taught by someone in the Church is dogmatically binding. Not everything that we read in one or another of the Church Fathers’ writings is a dogma. Nor is every rule described in Scripture dogmatic. There are many teachings or doctrines in the Church; far from all of them are official dogmas. What we have seen is that teachings are dogmatic when they are shown to have been clearly defined—usually by an ecumenical council—and have been universally accepted by all the Churches that recognize themselves as Orthodox. Thus we can say that wherever we find something that is taught clearly and consistently within the Church’s authoritative sources—Scripture, the Fathers, the liturgy, the

councils, their canons, and the icons—it can be said to be dogma. As seen in the last chapter, it is vital that we draw from the whole of the Church’s tradition to distinguish between teachings that are binding and those that are not. (197-198)

(76) To the joy of many, and to the regret of some, the Orthodox Church does not have a codified list of dogmas. There is not even an “Official Orthodox Catechism,” although several have attempted, at different times and in different styles, to compose one. Nonetheless we have guides. We have, as I have repeated, the ecumenical councils, whose theological definitions represent the Church’s agreed conciliar (and dogmatic) teaching. More broadly, as I have also noted, the Church presents us with its tradition (especially the liturgy and the patristic writings, as these read Scripture), with clear markers as to how to discern authoritative and salvific teachings within it. Although such discernment is our common task, great responsibility falls on the Church’s bishops, pastors, and teachers. We must trust that whoever is teaching us the Church’s theology and life—our bishop, our priest, our seminary professor, our mother, our church-school teacher—is seeing to it that they are in council with the Church. Such persons are accountable to the whole Church for what they are teaching, and we are responsible for holding them accountable through our own prayerful understanding of the Church’s tradition.

The Church’s reluctance to catalogue its teachings means that believers are, in effect, invited into a relationship, one that is characterized by both freedom and responsibility. Freedom, because we’re not simply following a checklist of rules but living in accordance with a vision of reality that the Church places before us. Responsibility, because it’s on us to discern

this vision and devote our whole lives to living according to its truth. (200-201)

(76) A word needs to be said about what we “do” with dogmas, that is, about “dogmatic theology.” We have seen how we discern dogmatic teachings within the life of the Church. But we are still left with formulas, with words, usually in ancient languages, which we translate into our own. These formulas must be resurrected from the dead letter and into living spirit. We must come to understand what they mean; we must be able to explain them to each other, across linguistic and cultural lines. If we can’t explain something to our nontheologically trained friends, parents, children, and coworkers, or in classrooms anywhere in the world, then we have some serious work to do, first of all within ourselves, to bring those words to life. (206)

Conclusions

(77) This book’s main point is that the dogmatic teachings of the Orthodox Church are true. That statement rests on the fact, pivotal for Orthodoxy, that Jesus Christ is *the* truth. Jesus is the one by whom all things were made and in whom all things hold together. When we approach or apprehend the truth about anything whatsoever, Jesus is there. He is the Logos—the sense, the reason, the grounding and unifying principle—of all that is. This means that Orthodox belief contrasts with trends in the dominant Western society today, which tell us that nothing can be authoritatively proclaimed as true, that no faith and no text may be understood as privileged over any other. At the same time, the fundamentalist sectors of the religious world insist that there is only one literal way to read its foundational texts, that there can be no tolerance for alternate views. Orthodoxy, as “the absence of one-sidedness,” steers the

course between fundamentalism and relativism. Its way is one of freedom and optimism. It rests in the conviction that the human person, though fallen, is not totally depraved of his or her innate goodness but is capable of hearing God’s gospel and comprehending God’s truth. Understanding is never just a matter of subscribing to a list of rules; it is vital conformity to Christ as he is revealed to us. This course can sometimes feel like sailing without a keel. And some, who expect of Orthodoxy a perfectly doctrinaire and monolithic faith and community, are surprised or even dismayed to encounter that freedom.

But we believe that this balance is the perfect antidote to both the relativism and the fundamentalism that so plague the world today. It is recognizing and following the one who is the resurrection, the way, the truth, the door, the bread, the light, and the life of the world. To him be glory, always! (209-210)