

Fanaticism and Syncretism*

*Two Dangerous Extremes and the
“Royal Path” of Orthodoxy*

New Year Encyclical
for 2003

Beloved children in the Lord:

At the outset of the New Year of Salvation 2003, I pray wholeheartedly that this period of time will be pleasing to God and that we will all feel an ever-increasing sense of responsibility and reverence towards the truth of our Faith; may there also be a constant increase in our participation in the life in Christ, through the intercessions of our Lady *Theotokos* and of all the Saints.

The events that have occurred since the tragedy of September 11, 2001, to date, as well as those which are still unfolding, confirm an assertion that I made last year: that “humanity has clearly entered into a new and critical era, which gives rise to pointed and agonizing issues.”¹ In the globalized society of our day and, in particular, at the very dawn of a new century and the third millennium, two very ominous dangers have come to the forefront: fanaticism and syncretism, both of which appear in many forms.

On the right is found *fanaticism*, which is typically politicized, extremist, and xenophobic. With its recourse to violence, aggressiveness, and bigotry, it completely destroys the Orthodox ethos, which is an ethos of love, compassion, receptivity, reconciliation, hospitable-ness, freedom, and moderation. On the left, we find *syncretism*, which is excessively permissive, compromising, dialectical, contrived, and worldly. It minimizes the importance of Orthodox dogma, which limpidly demarcates the realms of truth and error, of the Church and the world, of Light and darkness, of Christ and Satan.

Our most holy Orthodox Church, as the “Royal Path,”² is situated precisely in the middle, steadfastly avoiding temptations and dangers from the right and from the left, which threaten to adulterate her charismatic witness, that veritable “Truth and Life” which the God-Man affirms Himself to be.³

Fanaticism, aggressive and bigoted, is not a product of some lack of coöperation between religions; nor will interfaith coöperation succeed in confronting it effectively, or at its roots, as some suppose. Tolerance *per se* is not what is asked of the Church, the duty of which is

to maintain a *missionary* outlook towards the religions of the world—though it certainly must be encouraged at the level of governments and humanitarian movements. And there, too, we should not foster any illusions; indeed, toleration is neither easy to attain nor to preserve, since there will always be two uncertain factors to reckon with—namely, human passions and the Devil.

The Orthodox Church knows only one kind of peace: that which proceeds from the cleansing, illuminating, and sanctifying Grace of the Holy Spirit, which heals the passions and puts the Devil to flight. It behooves Shepherds of the Church, instead of pursuing some chimæra by means of interfaith coöperation, to work night and day to make their flocks truly Christian.

Patristic teaching on this subject is unanimous: When a Christian has the peace of God in his heart, then the entire world around him is at peace.

Today, the teaching of St. Seraphim of Sarov, deriving from his own experience, is timely as never before:

I beseech you, my joy—said the peace-loving *Staretz*—I beseech you, acquire the spirit of peace.... It brings peace to the soul, and, at the same time, it brings peace to all mankind and to nature, as well.... Acquire inner peace, and thousands of souls around you will find peace.⁴

St. John Chrysostomos also abruptly awakens us from the lethargy of spiritual negligence by his preëminently social and missionary message:

No one would be a pagan—thunders the Saint—if we were such Christians as we ought to be. If we kept the commandments of Christ, if we suffered injury, if we allowed advantage to be taken of us, if being reviled we blessed, if being ill-treated we did good. If this were the general practice among us, no one would be so brutish as not to rush to embrace the true Faith.⁵

Orthodox Christians should have a heightened sense of responsibility and reverence towards the Truth of the Faith, as well as “a consciousness of the exclusivity of the truth: we believe in the only truth and participate experientially in the only saving Faith.”⁶ This consciousness of exclusivity will never give rise to fanaticism, because a genuine *Mysteriological* union with the *Theanthropos* makes us true Christians, engendering genuine feelings of love, humility, and guilelessness towards our fellow man.

It was this attitude towards the truth that enabled Orthodox anti-ecumenists to detect, from the very outset, the syncretistic nature of the ecumenical movement and the calendar innovation of 1924. It should not escape us that the official inauguration of ecumenism in the Orthodox East also entailed syncretism vis-à-vis the Festal Calendar, insofar as it foresaw the acceptance by Orthodox and heterodox “of a unified calendar for the simultaneous celebration of the great Christ-

ian feasts by all of the Churches.”⁷

Moreover, within the purview of this festal syncretism, the so-called Pan-Orthodox Congress of Constantinople was convened, in 1923, as the final step towards the calendar innovation. Those participating in the congress emphasized, in particular, the necessity “of the simultaneous celebration of the [two] major Christian feasts of Christmas and Pascha by all Christians,” so as to effect “the rapprochement of the two Christian worlds of the East and the West in the celebration of [all of] the major Christian feasts.”⁸

It is quite obvious, therefore, that the adoption of the calendar innovation in 1924, as the practical first-step of ecumenism, reflected a diminished sense of responsibility towards the truth and a syncretistic mentality. This was confirmed by steps taken subsequently, thus confirming as eminently true the opinion of a distinguished Hierarchy of our day, who maintains that inter-Christian and interfaith ecumenism “is the greatest error of our age, the greatest and most powerful temptation.”⁹

I would like to conclude with a message of hope and love.

From what I have said above, it follows that the negative attitude of Old Calendarist Orthodox anti-ecumenists towards inter-Christian and interfaith ecumenism does not constitute fanaticism, but represents, rather, a rejection of syncretism and a God-pleasing adherence to the exclusivity of the truth.

The Holy Synod in Resistance is not indifferent to the truly sacred demand for the union of divided Christians; nor does it oppose efforts to bring about reconciliation in a severely fragmented world.

What we *do radically reject* is the ethos of the syncretistic ecumenical movement, which is literally a “defilement of dialogue,”¹⁰ as a well-known university professor has stated.

Our responsibility for the Truth, our union with the Truth, and our witness to the Truth constitute the most fundamental expression of love for the world and preserve the hope of both East and West. This is why we struggle, and this is why we will continue to struggle, by the Grace of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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President of the Holy Synod in Resistance*

* Source: *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XXI, No. 1 (2004), pp. 23-26. Though somewhat dated, the importance of this Encyclical has nonetheless prompted us to publish it on the cusp of 2004.

Notes

1. See “New Year Encyclical for 2002.”
2. Cf. Numbers 20:17-21:22.

3. Cf. St. John 14:6.
4. Irina Gorainoff, *Άγιος Σεραφεῖμ τοῦ Σάροφ (1759-1833)* [*St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833)*] (Athens: “Tinos” Publications, n.d.), p. 255.
5. Homily 10 on the First Epistle to St. Timothy, §3, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXII, col. 551.
6. Stylianos G. Papadopoulos, *Ὁρθοδόξων Πορεία—Ἐκκλησία καὶ Θεολογία στὴν τρίτη χιλιετία* [*The Course of the Orthodox: Church and Theology in the Third Millennium*] (Athens: 2000), p. 134.
7. “Synodal Encyclical of the Church of Constantinople to the Churches of Christ Everywhere” (January 1920), in Basil K. Stavrides, *Ἱστορία τῆς Οἰκουμενικῆς Κινήσεως* [*A History of the Ecumenical Movement*], *Analekta* of the Vlatadon Monastery, No. 47 (Thessaloniki: Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies, 1996); 3rd ed., p. 334.
8. Dionysios M. Batistatos (ed.), *Πρακτικὰ καὶ Ἀποφάσεις τοῦ ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει Πανορθοδόξου Συνεδρίου, 10 Μαΐου-8 Ἰουνίου 1923* [*Proceedings and Decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Congress in Constantinople, 10 May-8 June 1923*] (Athens: 1982), pp. 56, 57.
9. Metropolitan Hierotheos of Navpaktos and Hagios Vlasios, “Διαχριστιανικός καὶ διαθρησκευτικός συγκρητισμός” [“Inter-Christian and Interfaith Syncretism”], *Ἐκκλησιαστικὴ Παρέμβαση*, No. 71 (December 2001), p. 11.
10. Chrestos Yannaras, “Ἡ βεβήλωση τοῦ διαλόγου” [“The Defilement of Dialogue”], *Ἡ Καθημερινή*, 17 March 2002, p. 10.