

†Archimandrite Justin Popović (1894-1979)^(*)



Twenty years have passed since the repose in the Lord of the blessed Fr. Justin (Popović), the well-known Serbian Orthodox clergyman and theologian, who was loved, honored, and continues to be honored by all Orthodox Christians, regardless of nationality and background. And this is the case, because he was distinguished as a universal, contemporary, unerring teacher, guide, and defender of the Faith, who experienced in his life and described with unparalleled vitality the path from man to the God-Man, from the created to the Uncreated, from the mortal to the Immortal, and from the ephemeral to the Eternal.

His entire life and work was nothing other than—in his own blessed words—a “*witness to Apostolic and Patristic Orthodoxy as the Theanthropic mystery of Christ and the mystery of the salvation of the world in His Body, the Church*” (letter dated 6 August 1978).

His martyric love for Christ, the Saints, and the Church permeates every word and thought of his work, because he had acquired the “*mind of Christ*” and a unique “Christ-sense” concerning the purpose, end, and “*pleroma*” (fullness) of all things and creatures, visible and invisible, which were brought into being by Christ, and which will also inevitably conclude in Him.

With the whole strength of his soul, the Christ-loving Fr. Justin stressed that the saving Truth of Christ—which is preserved in His Body, the Holy Orthodox Church—regenerates and transforms those who accept it with humility and simplicity and live mysteriologically, simultaneously cultivating the holy evangelic virtues—especially faith, humility, repentance, prayer, love for all, and patient endurance in tribulations—, for in this way they are united with Christ: they are “Christified.”

For this reason, Fr. Justin passionately battled against errors and heresies, and always maintained a critical attitude towards deviations from the Truth of the Gospel, even on the part of persons of high standing in the Church, when he would perceive changes to those things that have been passed down to us.

He was particularly cutting, in the last years of his life, in his stance against ecumenism, that modern-day “*panheresy*,” as he was the first to characterize it, and rightly, as such.

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Fr. Justin was born on 25 March, 1894, the Feast of the Annunciation of the *Theotokos*, to a clerical family in Branje, in southern Serbia, and was named Blagoje [“Announcer of the Glad Tidings”—*Trans.*] at Holy Baptism, in honor of the Most Holy *Theotokos*.

From 1905 to 1914, he studied at the Seminary of St. Sabbas in Belgrade. At that time, he was bonded with his spiritual Father, the then Hieromonk and seminary instructor, and later Bishop of Ohrid and Zica, Nikolai Velimirovich († 1956)—that celebrated Apostolic man and modern-day Chrysostomos of the Church—, who initiated him into the profoundness of the Christian life and inspired in him a great love and yearning for the eternal.

From that time on and until the end of his life, Fr. Justin would without fail daily read, apart from other things, three chapters from the New Testament.

In 1916, he was tonsured a monk and received the name Justin, in honor of the Holy Martyr Justin the Philosopher.

In 1920, he was Ordained a Deacon and, in 1922, a Priest, by Patriarch Dmitry of Serbia.

The young Hieromonk Justin, with his exceptional intellectual and spiritual gifts, full of life and energy, and by nature restless, studious, and philosophic, completed his studies in Russia, England, and Greece, where, in 1926, he submitted his thesis, “The Mystery of Personality According to Saint Macarios the Egyptian,” and was awarded a doctorate in Theology. Among other languages, he knew Greek and bore an unbounded love and respect for all things genuinely Orthodox and Greek.

He taught Patrology, Dogmatics, Liturgics, and Hagiology at the Seminaries of Karlovici and Prizren. From 1930 to 1931, he worked with Bishop Iosif of Bitolj towards the organization of the Orthodox Church of Czechoslovakia, which was threatened by Uniatism.

Fr. Justin resolutely turned down the pressing proposal made by Bishop Iosif and the Holy Synod of Serbia to be Consecrated Bishop of the newly-established Diocese of Carpathian Russia as an acknowledgement of his industriousness and his struggles in that region, by invoking his unworthiness, inadequacy, and lack of spiritual and charismatic experience and wisdom!

He maintained a spiritual bond and friendship with Metropolitan Anthony (Krapovitsky) (†1936), the first Chief Hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad—which then had its headquarters temporarily on Serbian territory—and with Fr. John (Maximovitch), the future Holy Archbishop of Shanghai and San Francisco († 1966), who was greatly endowed with spiritual gifts.

Already well-known for his talent as a writer, Fr. Justin issued, in 1932, the first volume of his three-volumed *Dogmatics* and, in 1934, was appointed to teach Dogmatics at the Theological School in Belgrade.

During this time, he wrote scores of books and articles. With his fiery preaching and documents, he presented the greatness of our Faith and led multitudes of believers to awareness and repentance. He became well known as an illumined and discerning spiritual guide and an outstanding Confessor.

His theology was not “academic,” but always vivid, charismatic, liturgical, compunctious, and prayerful; for he himself did not theologize reflectively, but rather in prayer and with tears of repentance and joyful sorrow in Christ, literally “suffering” the things Divine.

After the end of the great war and the Communist domination of his country, he was dismissed from his position at the University as an enemy of the regime. After a period

of being unsettled, he ultimately became, in 1948, the parish Priest and Confessor at the Convent of the Holy Archangels in Čelije Valjevo, where he performed his duties in confinement and strict surveillance by those in power.

There, for thirty whole years, he served Liturgy daily; for, as he himself said, he derived all of his strength from the Holy Mysteries. He lived in strict asceticism, prayer and fasting, studying, writing, and translating, guiding and confessing the Sisterhood and his countless spiritual children from all over Serbia and abroad. This had as one of its consequences that the Convent in Čelije serves, today, as a model of monastic life for all of the other monasteries in Serbia.

Aside from his famous *Dogmatics*, the most important of his many writings could be considered to be his hermenetical commentaries on the Gospels according to Sts. Matthew and John, on the Epistles of the Apostle Paul and the General Epistles of St. John, and his twelve-volume Synaxarion.

In 1974, his monumental work, *The Orthodox Church and Ecumenism*, was published, in which he exposes the teaching of the Church and juxtaposes it with the humanism of the West, which is bereft of the Spirit and which gave birth to the panheresy of ecumenism.

In special Memoranda (1970 and 1977), Fr. Justin inveighed against the “Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church,” which was organized by ecumenist Hierarchs of the Phanar, and against the participation of the Serbian Church in the “World Council of Churches” (13 November, 1974).

It is truly a blessing that many of his works are also available in Greek.

He reposed in sanctity on the Feast Day, again, of the Annunciation of the *Theotokos*, 1979 (Old Style). Since then, his grave has been a place of pilgrimage not only for the much afflicted Serbian people, but for all Orthodox Christians.

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Fr. Justin is considered by many to be perhaps the greatest Orthodox theologian of our times.

He lived through and dealt with the contemporary problems of the Church in a Patristic manner and ethos: with the Theanthropic methodology of the Holy Fathers. Using modern problematology and terminology in his handling of the various challenges of his age, he brought into timeliness the renewing and revolutionary message of the Holy Fathers, Christ the God-Man, and the salvation through repentance in the Church as the only way out of all dead ends.

He followed the lead of the Holy Fathers in all of the circumstances of his life, because he dearly loved them and studied them systematically—especially Sts. Athanasios the Great, John Chrysostomos, John of Damascus, Symeon the New Theologian, Macarios the Egyptian and Isaac the Syrian—, which is why we can rank him among their blessed chorus, as a living extension of their lives and teachings.

For that matter, God has already glorified his genuine, faithful, and humble servant, Abba Justin, even by miracles, which are being spread in collections and accounts about him.

May his prayers accompany and support us!

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