



310. June 13/26, 1981 St. Tryphillius of Cyprus

Categories : [Letters](#)

Date : October 10, 2016

Dear Father Michael [Azkoul],

Christ is in our midst!

Thank you for your letter. I am frankly happy to see someone with your views on Blessed Augustine willing to do something besides hit him (and all of us who have any respect for him) over the head.

You ask for cooperation on what seems to be a “thorough study” of Bl. Augustine. I really wonder about the value of such a study—for someone who wishes to expose the source of “Western influence” in Orthodox theology, this detailed analysis itself seems so terribly Western!

If your attempt is to find our Augustine’s real place in the Orthodox Church, I think your approach is all wrong. It assumes that “we moderns” are the ones who can do this—that we can “know better” than anyone in the Orthodox past. I don’t think so. I have a deep distrust of all of us who are writing on theological subjects today—we are more under “Western influence” than anyone before, and the less we are aware of it, the more obnoxious our “Westernism” becomes. Our whole cold, academic, and often disdainful approach to theology is so remote from the Fathers, so foreign to them. Let us admit this and try not to be so presumptuous (I speak for myself also).

I have no time (and probably not the sources) to find out how much St. Photios or St. Mark read of Bl. Augustine. I would suspect that St. Photios had read rather little apart from the texts under dispute, and St. Mark probably more (in fact, St. Mark can probably be shown to be under Augustine’s “influence” in some way if you search hard enough!—his disciple Gennadius, after all, was the translator of Thomas Aquinas into Greek). Undoubtedly their respect for Augustine was based on the general respect for him in the Church, especially in the West from the very beginning.

And this brings up the only real question I think you might fruitfully research: what did the Western Church think of Blessed Augustine in the centuries when it was Orthodox? The West knew him as one of their own Fathers; it knew his writings well, including the disputes over them. What did the Western Fathers who were linked with the East think of him? We know St. Cassian’s opinion—he challenged (politely) Augustine’s teaching on grace while accepting his authority on other questions. St. Vincent of Lerins’ argument is more with the immoderate followers of Augustine. In neither case was there talk of “heresy,” or of someone who was totally un-Orthodox. St. Faustus of Lerins—if anyone, he should be an enemy of Augustine, but the evidence seems to the contrary. St. Caesarius of Arles, St. Gregory the Great—admirers of Augustine, while not following his



exaggerations on grace. I don't mention some of the enthusiastic followers of Augustine.

There is room for research here in Latin sources, but no research can overthrow the obvious fact (it seems to me)—the Orthodox West accepted him as a Father. If he's really a "heretic," then doesn't the whole West go down the drain with him? I'm sure you can find enough signs of "Western mentality" in Gregory the Great, for example, to disqualify him as a Father and Saint in the eyes of many of today's Orthodox scholars—he also is accepted in the East on the basis of his general reputation in the West, and on the basis of his Dialogues (which I'm sure a few would now question as having a right to be called an Orthodox book).

I think the "heresy hunt" over Augustine reveals at least two major faults in today's Orthodox scholars who are pursuing it:

1. A profound insecurity over their own Orthodoxy, born of the uncertainties of our times, the betrayal of ecumenism, and their own purely Western education. Here Augustine is a "scapegoat"—hit him hard enough and it proves how Orthodox you yourself really are!
2. An incipient sectarian consciousness—in attacking Augustine so bitterly, one not only attacks the whole Orthodox West of the early centuries, but also a great many Orthodox thinkers of recent centuries and today. I could name you bishops in our Church who think like Augustine on a number of points—are they, then, "heretics" too? I think some of our anti-Augustinians are coming close to this conclusion, and thus close to schism and the formation of an "Orthodox" sect that prides itself on the correctness of its intellectual views. A number of people have already left our Russian Church Abroad for the Mathewites after being infected with this consciousness (not just over the issue of Augustine—the Mathewites are more pro-Augustine than anyone in our Church—but over the whole idea of "intellectual correctness" as an ideal).

I myself am no great admirer of Augustine's doctrines. He does indeed have that Western "super-logicalness" which the Eastern Fathers don't have (the same "super-logicalness" which the critics of Augustine today display so abundantly!). The one main lovable and Orthodox thing about him is his Orthodox feeling, piety, love for Christ, which comes out so strongly in his non-dogmatic works like the Confessions (the Russian Fathers also love the Soliloquies). To destroy Augustine, as today's critics are trying to do, is to help destroy also this piety and love for Christ—these are too "simple" for today's intellectuals (even though they also claim to be "pious" in their own way). Today it is Augustine; tomorrow (and it's already begun) the attack will be on the "simple" bishops and priests of our Church. The anti-Augustine movement is a step towards schism and further disorders in the Orthodox Church.

Let us assume that one's exegesis of Romans 5:12 is incorrect; that one believes like Augustine on the transmission of original sin; that one knows little of the difference between the "transcendent" and the "economic" Trinity and sometimes confuses them. Can't one still be Orthodox? Does one have to shout so loudly one's "correctness" on such matters, and one's



disdain (and this disdain is strongly felt!) for those who believe thus? In the history of the Church, opinions such as these which disagree with the consensus of the Church have not been a cause for heresy hunts. Recognizing our fallible human nature, the Fathers of the past have kept the best Orthodox views and left in silence such private views which have not tried to proclaim themselves the only Orthodox views.

I myself fear the cold hearts of the “intellectually correct” much more than any errors you might find in Augustine. I sense in these cold hearts a preparation for the work of Antichrist (whose imitation of Christ must also extend to “correct theology”!); I feel in Augustine the love of Christ.

Forgive me for my frankness, but I think you probably welcome it. I have spoken from the heart, and I hope you will not pass this letter around so it can be put in various “files” and picked apart for its undoubted shortcomings.

May God preserve us all in His grace! Please pray for us.

With love in Christ,
Unworthy Hieromonk Seraphim

P.s. An important point I didn't specify in the letter above—the extreme criticism of Augustine show such a lack of trust in the Orthodox Fathers and bishops of the past who accepted him as a Father (including the whole Orthodox West before the Schism). This lack of trust is a symptom of the coldness of heart of our times.