

Article

# Patristics Confined in a Cocoon: Where Did We Go Wrong?

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**Abstract:** This article is a personal reflection on the current state of Patristics in Australia, focusing on its debatable effectiveness in both Church and society. It discusses the manner in which the subject of Patristics functions as a specialized subset of knowledge within theological colleges and in a very limited number of universities, meaning that its accessibility is almost exclusively via formal educational providers. The more specialized the mode of delivery becomes, however, the more the role and relevance of Patristics appears to be diminishing over time. While that is not an Australian characteristic alone, the author argues that the purely tertiary nature of Patristic learning today is a feature of the local landscape that ought to be surveyed. As it currently stands, the subject is disconnected from preceding levels of education and indeed from other possible means of popularizing the subject for a broader audience who, otherwise, are not likely to encounter the Church Fathers in any meaningful way. This implies a fundamental question about how such a situation arose in the first place and became part of the *status quo*. The discussion is broadened through a presentation of certain key features of Patristics in the Eastern tradition.

**Keywords:** Church Fathers; secondary schooling; tertiary theological education; Gregory the Theologian; Photios the Great; patristic translations; consensus patrology

## 1. Introductory Remarks

Having been asked to reflect on the field of Patristics in Australia today, the result is undeniably subjective, and it is hoped that the reasons for this will become apparent. These reflections are drawn from both sides of the classroom over the years, but also from personal perceptions about whether our broader society is imbued or engaged with the subject generally. The purpose of this article is not to add another Patristics article to many finer ones that can be found in journals and books of the English-speaking world. It is rather to make quite straightforward observations about the present state of the field for the sake of its future. In other words, this is not an exploration of a particular Patristics topic, but of Patristics itself. At least, it is one person's appraisal of the effectiveness and penetration of one subject in one country. The following observations may not apply in any other part of the globe.

The contention here is that Patristics has become an in-folded activity, enwrapped in the silk cloth of academic garb. It is a possession neither of the ranks of citizenry nor of the average person in the pew. This assertion is either an exaggeration (if evidence to the contrary can be produced) or a mere recognition of the state of affairs. The more sudden the recognition, the greater the wonderment that it was not more obvious beforehand, hence the choice of the word 'cocoon' to describe the situation in which Patristics finds itself. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and it is certainly not intended as a condescending description. Cocoons are places of metamorphosis. Beautiful, living creatures arise from them. They represent the struggle that must precede the ability to fly. The choice of the analogy for Patristics is not to imply that what occurs in the cocoon is somehow deprived; it is just that it seems to be such a small space in relation to the wider world.

The subtitle also begs the question about who "we" are or to whom the "we" refers. Any answer to that will seem presumptuous, especially as there was no consultation process in the preparation of this paper. Notwithstanding, the use of the first-person plural is



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safer, from a moral point of view, when ascribing blame for anything that went ‘wrong’. For those who are involved in any way with the teaching, communication and publication of Patristics, it is very difficult to speak of the origin of the problem in the third person, hence the use of ‘we’. It implies everybody who is involved in these modes of delivery while also acknowledging that there is no personal blame for choices and priorities that have been carved out in past decades. Everyone who teaches does so with the best intentions, but finds themselves to be part of a much larger academic environment that lies mostly beyond their personal control. Finally, if the outcome did in fact go ‘wrong’, as the subtitle states, this is not to suggest that there was necessarily a time when everything was ‘right’. The ‘wrongness’ is a matter of degree; it refers rather to a wrong direction, which, in this case, is the diminishing impact of Patristics over time.

The argument put forward here is that Patristics in Australia, to which this special volume is dedicated, (1) is restricted to tertiary education, (2) does not involve students of primary and secondary education due to certain practical factors, and (3) engages a very small proportion of the Christian faithful and an infinitesimally small percentage of the Australian population as a whole. Therefore, in this very depiction of the problem, the answer to our title’s question is already met. In other words, the question ‘Where did we go wrong?’ receives its reply in the factual information that one can readily confirm concerning the small numbers of persons involved and, consequently, the small orbit of the Patristic enterprise. Of course, the quantitative parameters should not negate the qualitative aspects, which no one would seek to deny. Yet, the issue that is posed by the title is a quantitative one. It has to do with the narrow base of people who are able to become familiarized with, and then potentially enter, the field from the earlier stages of education (this is the vertical axis), but it also pertains to the almost impermeable interface between the specialists and non-specialists (on the horizontal axis). The method adopted to explore and tackle the topic will be, first, to outline the situation in Australia at present, together with the practical factors affecting it. Secondly, this paper will present several distinctive features of Patristics as practiced and understood in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Finally, examples of patristic material that have been introduced into school textbooks in Greece at both the primary and secondary levels are offered in order to inform the discussion (see Appendix A).

## 2. The Situation in Australia—Some Practical Limitations

Beyond those who are directly involved, or happen to have acquired an interest in it, the awareness of the subject of Patristics among the general Australian populace could probably best be described as opaque. By this, we do not mean that the content of the subject is unfamiliar, but that its very existence and parameters are so. This is despite the fact that Australia has in recent years produced outstanding scholars in the field (and I think here of John Chryssavgis, Doru Costache, Pauline Allen and the prolific translator Charles Hill). The anecdotal evidence for the lack of awareness derives from the reaction of otherwise well-meaning people who politely request alternative words or phrases in order to understand exactly what Patristics is. This normally morphs into a brief dialogue containing some variants of the phrase ‘the study of the Church Fathers’.<sup>1</sup> First-year students of theology may encounter the term for the first time in their syllabus, unsure about whether Patristics is the same subject as Patrology, or about how either relate to the really ‘essential’ topics of a theological degree, such as Biblical Studies or Systematic Theology.

As a formal subject, one may first consider where it is offered. In Australia, the offering occurs at the tertiary level: at the Greek Orthodox and Coptic Orthodox Theological Colleges,<sup>2</sup> the Australian Catholic University, other Catholic institutions, the University of Divinity and the Sydney College of Theology. Not only is the sum of such providers of education in the Church Fathers quite limited in comparison with the entire spectrum of Australian tertiary institutions, but the combined numbers of enrolled students of Patristics within the mentioned institutions would have to be measured in the dozens—not in the hundreds and certainly not in the thousands—within any academic year. In addition,

variations in understanding about what exactly constitutes the Patristic era may further affect the field of study in tertiary settings. In Western countries such as Australia, that era is typically confined to the early Church or, at its longest estimation, it is sealed with the name of a most distinguished Church Father: John of Damascus (eighth century). Yet, for the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the so-called 'Patristic period' is unthinkable without the inclusion of the late Byzantine Fathers right up until Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century, to mention nothing of others who followed. There is, then, an obvious point of divergence between traditions. It is strange to think that:

- (a) The very 'object' of Patristics, i.e., the line of demarcation between what (or who) is meant to be studied, is at variance depending on who is asked about it;
- (b) These variations are played out in the lecture rooms of colleges across multi-faith Australia, where layers of East and West meet in distinctive and harmonious ways.

In short, then, this is the first observation that could be made about Patristic studies Downunder: it is an area of specialization that was 'born and raised' as a tertiary endeavor. This could be said of other countries as well, of course, but the important thing to note is that it need not be a tertiary subject exclusively. As it stands, however, in Western societies, of which Australia is a shining example, Patristics is an area of learning for the smallest minority, even when compared to the size of the respective faith communities that endorse Patristic studies in the first place. In terms of the numbers of students and their teachers, Patristics has become a kind of sheep-pen, well-fenced by course fees and expensive textbooks, which few gain the opportunity to gaze at, let alone graze in. As an area of speciality within academia and theology, it has become a subset within a subset; a body of knowledge that is open to all people but which, strangely, is not readily available to them. Occasionally it breaks out in a reverse direction towards the public through conferences, symposia,<sup>3</sup> videos and reading material, but even then, it normally does so in a technical language that is not geared for newcomers. Needless to say, however, introductory publications do exist and they are pleasant exceptions to the general rule (e.g., [Chrestou 2005](#)). Another notable exception, originating in the United States, is the initiative undertaken many years ago by St Vladimir's Seminary Press. Its Popular Patristics Series is to be commended since, in the words of the publisher, it aims to provide readable translations for a wide audience. Having that audience in mind, the series is embellished with brief introductory essays by scholars to provide both spiritual and intellectual benefit.

Specialists in any field are inclined to talk and write in a manner that caters to their colleagues, i.e., other specialists. This is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it is to be expected. Patristics scholars are no different in this regard. The problem is that, whereas other fields of learning may have a raft of educational options to introduce the layperson to their ideas—in addition to the specialist avenue—Patristics seems to depend on the latter. All of this begs the question about how the subject is taught or learnt. Its increasing specialization produces fine lectures and publications, yet the flipside of specializing is that the total pool of available knowledge can become scattered, so to speak, in multiple and minute details, often at the expense of more comprehensive overviews. The result is that, while greater interest is generated for those who already have an interest, there is less success in stimulating it among those who do not. In other words, it is difficult and rare to go from a position of 'zero knowledge' to becoming an enthusiast in the area of the Church Fathers. It seems that the students of today come to Patristics because it is a subsidiary of theology, the so-called queen of sciences. Other avenues, which are less significant but nonetheless legitimate, have apparently been bypassed. For example, apart from their strictly doctrinal contributions, the Fathers warrant attention on account of their fortitude, their contribution to the history of ideas, their upholding of education, their efforts towards social justice, their charity and wisdom—all of which belong to the non-religious sphere as well.

If one were to maintain that the Fathers are deserving of a broader readership or audience, beyond Church boundaries, then the corollary of that would be to ask: Why have these outstanding personalities of world history been confined to tertiary study alone?

This is just another way of asking why they are not introduced to younger ages, within a school setting. The answer to this eludes us collectively, probably because the question has not been squarely asked. If the opinion of the Fathers themselves could be sought, and if we could generalize, they would certainly agree to let the children come to them, which is to come to Christ; “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” (Matt 19:14). There may be a counter argument that many other areas of learning are excluded from primary and secondary education, only to be stored up for those who might choose them at a later date. Might not law and medicine be examples of such exclusions, and with good reason? Yet, even medicine builds upon the sciences of biology and chemistry that are introduced at earlier stages of learning. Law too, or at least several facets of it, has been introduced into high schools through so-called ‘legal studies’ (Kamvounias 1994, n. 21),<sup>4</sup> not to mention the host of extra-curricular activities that were always there to nurture the budding lawyer, such as debating and public speaking.

Pedagogically, then, there is an elephant in the room, and it has to do with when young minds should be introduced to the Church Fathers. However, before grappling with that, the underlying issue is about who decides, or is entitled to decide, on such fundamental matters. Is it the responsibility of a circle of Patristic scholars and lecturers? They would be genuinely occupied with their own core professional tasks, and far too modest to see themselves in the role of ‘gatekeepers’ of knowledge, or of policy-makers in institutions of learning other than their own. Alternatively, should this be yet another area in which government legislators intervene? Nobody, including the legislators themselves, would think so. Yet, as far as school curricula are concerned, this is a highly complex area for which departments of education are responsible and have the final word, and no one else. In Australia, the matter becomes more complex given that primary and secondary school education are the responsibility of the State governments,<sup>5</sup> whereas higher education is the realm of the Federal government. Added to this are the various categories within the school system itself, namely, (1) state or government schools, which are by far the most numerous; and (2) non-government schools (encompassing so-called ‘private’ schools, ‘independent’ schools and the extensive system of Catholic schools).<sup>6</sup> Of these, the likelihood of introducing course material relating to the Fathers would be least in the government schools, and greater in other schools. The confessionally based schools have religious classes that could make references to a Church Father or Mother, but this would be the result of a teacher’s discretion rather than an objective prescribed in a syllabus. Then again, schools of most States that do not offer formal religious education classes (and which religion could they possibly choose to teach in a multi-faith society?) have a statutory obligation to allow representatives of religious groups to send their respective teachers—usually volunteers—to teach children of each faith in specially dedicated time slots, ranging from once a week to once a term.<sup>7</sup> As Peta Goldberg has stated,

Public schools in Australia are secular and therefore religious education is not part of the formal school curriculum at either primary or secondary school level. Nevertheless, every State and Territory in Australia has the provision for confessional religious instruction...In most instances, ministers of religion or their accredited representatives are the only people approved to enter the school to provide confessional religious education classes. (Goldberg 2008, pp. 241–71)

In fact, the non-sectarian character of the government schools is perfectly in line with the origins of Australia’s oldest and most esteemed universities. The University of Sydney (1850) and the University of Melbourne (1853) were established as secular institutions without faculties of theology, “a response to the sectarianism of the day and a reflection of post-enlightenment origins” (Goldberg 2008, p. 268). In our times, and in Wendy Mayer’s opinion, there are only two Australian universities that actively support Patristics: Macquarie University, due to the legacy of Edwin Judge who headed Ancient History there; and the Australian Catholic University, which has “a historical confessional interest”. The situation that can be observed nationally is mirrored internationally, given that the “study

of the humanities, let alone church history or historical theology, is under threat, and church attendance is in dramatic decline"; so, Patristics "barely registers on a university chancellor's, government's or society's radar" (Mayer 2021).<sup>8</sup> Robert McIver would add that theological education in Australia has proven to be "a miracle of survival" (McIver 2018, p. 43), taking place largely apart from government-funded universities, in small and under-resourced colleges that are typically denominational entities.

However, to return to the primary and secondary levels, it needs to be remembered that so many non-government schools were built on the foundation of various Christian denominations, having adopted a "catechetical or faith-forming approach for teaching religion in religious schools from the 1880s" (Goldburg 2008, p. 245). Yet, the greatest providers of education in these age groups are still the respective State governments. In government schools, the time restrictions and the informal character of limited religious education (between 30–60 min once per week at most) would enable the delivery of only the most fundamental tenets of the faith (biblical truths, in particular) rather than information about the personalities who embodied the faith throughout the centuries. Education in government schools must be non-sectarian due to the oddity of Australian society being very diverse religiously but at the same time not overtly religious.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, not all the Christian schools (of the independent or private kind) will value the Patristic contribution equally in order to find a teaching space for it. We are not to forget, though, that *secondary school* options in Religion or Religious Studies, which are generally geared toward Comparative Religion, could be tailored by individual schools or teachers to introduce the Mothers and Fathers of the Church.

A further consideration regarding the themes and topics of Patristics is to know *how* they will be taught. First of all, a clear selection must be made according to certain criteria. Choices must be made about which Fathers are to be taught and, of those, which writings are to be studied. It has already been stressed that the teaching of Patristics is a tertiary affair. The criteria preferred in one Church-based tertiary college will be different to those of other denominations, and the resultant choices will naturally highlight those differences. To repeat a common example: a Western approach may concentrate exclusively on the early Fathers of the first few centuries after Christ, whereas an Eastern selection will additionally explore others who wrote hundreds of years later, up to—and even including—our own time. If the personalities studied in Patristics are not confined to the early or middle centuries of Christianity, but are rather part of a linkage that reaches the present (according to the Eastern understanding),<sup>10</sup> then there is an added incentive for Australians to be interested in them. The Fathers need not be so distant chronologically as first thought. From the Australian viewpoint, the Fathers may well seem exotic, and their social environment foreign, because there are not yet local 'representatives' of that illustrious group. However, a new method of beholding the proximity of the Fathers, at least in *time*, would arguably be a source of encouragement for intellectual and spiritual immersion in them.

The disparity with which the Fathers belong to one period, according to some, but to later periods, according to others, is reflected in the choices of their works that are studied, published and footnoted in critical editions. To illustrate this, a quick search at the Library of Congress will produce approximately 100 titles containing the name of Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), which can include works by, or about, that author. However, a figure such as Gregory of Sinai (d. 1347), the consolidator of hesychasm, has very close to nothing in one of the largest library collections of the world (however, see the *Philokalia* (coll. Nicodemos and Makarios [eds. Palmer and Ware, vol. 4]) The same applies to Nicholas Cabasilas (d. ca. 1390) and countless others. Admittedly, the last two named Fathers left behind a smaller volume of writings than the 'big' names, but no equitable comparison is possible, even when the proportions of authored works are taken into consideration. There are other areas in which a Father can be evaluated, apart from authorship per se, such as the perceived impact and legacy of his life. One may also consider the mismatch between the relatively small number of English-speaking scholars who are paying attention to John

Chrysostom on the one hand, and the sheer extent of his works on the other, which fill no less than eighteen volumes of Migne's famed *Patrologia Graeca* (PG) series (=vols. 47–64). A casual search for bibliographies relating to the 'Early Church Fathers' will furthermore reveal that they outweigh those of the 'Later Byzantine Fathers' by a considerable amount. The attention given to the former group of Fathers at the 'expense' of others can be understood on account of their pivotal role in shaping Trinitarian theology and Christology during an unrepeatable era of Church history. The disproportionate concentration on persons and themes that have been analyzed many times before cannot, however, be so easily justified. After all, how many times can the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria be presented in a 'new' analysis?

There are of course various categories of Patristic writings: epistolography, apologetic treatises, anti-heretical tractates, hermeneutical works (homilies and commentaries), catechetical discourses, poetical verses, mystical expositions and those called *neptic* (on the soul's ascent to God). Two of these categories have, in turn, given rise to the names we apply to entire groups of writers, hence the Apologists and Neptic Fathers. Academia has made tremendous contributions in all these categories. However, there are others which, for whatever reason, do not appear to receive the same degree of attention. These include hymnographical and liturgical works—not to mention the Divine Liturgy, in its several versions, the authorship of which has been attributed to specific Fathers.<sup>11</sup> The Canons of the Church are also largely overlooked as works of the Fathers collectively (having been produced in regional and ecumenical Synods) and, to a lesser degree, individually.

### 3. Distinctive Features of Patristics in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition

Given the inseparability of Patristic studies and theology, the words of Gregory the Theologian (Nazianzus) (329–90) concerning the latter may have significance for our treatment of the former. With a critical eye, one could substitute his critique of the manner in which theology was conducted in his day for an equivalent criticism of the way Patristics is conducted in ours. In his *First Theological Oration* (ed. Reynolds), Gregory states:

The next thing is to look to ourselves, and polish our theological self to beauty like a statue. The first point to be considered is: What is this great rivalry of speech and endless talking? What is this new disease of insatiability? Why have we tied our hands and armed our tongues? We do not praise either hospitality, or brotherly love, or conjugal affection, or virginity; nor do we admire liberality to the poor, or the chanting of Psalms, or nightlong vigils, or tears. We do not subdue the body by fasting, or go forth to God by prayer; nor do we subject the worse to the better—I mean the dust to the spirit—as they would do who form a just judgement of our composite nature. We do not make our life a preparation for death, nor do we make ourselves masters of our passions.

In this quotation, one sees an affirmation of several major concerns of a single Church Father which, this paper would argue, are representative of the concerns of the Fathers as a whole. To become "masters of our passions" rather than to engage in "endless talking," and ultimately to make our entire life "a preparation for death (cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 67E),"<sup>12</sup> are all tied to a true realization of "our composite nature". The only tangible heirloom we possess, i.e., all that we can rely upon retrospectively, are the Patristic *texts*. Although this is an unavoidable reality, the texts should not be viewed in isolation, otherwise their authors will appear as theoreticians or dogmatists and little more. Of course, doctrine is a key concern in those writings. It could not be otherwise, given that the defense of correct doctrine constitutes a big part of the very definition of a Church Father. Ignatius of Antioch (second century) would be one of the first to use the term 'heterodox' in contradistinction to 'orthodox' so as to underline the importance of correctness of faith. As he would put it, "Do not be led away by foreign [heterodox] doctrines and fables" (Μὴ πλανᾶσθε ταῖς ἑτεροδοξίαις μηδὲ μυθεύμασιν, in *Epistle to the Magnesians* [ed. Lake] 8). Yet, this exhortation, and doctrinal concerns in general, must be held in balance with the Fathers' permanent plea toward action, which goes far beyond an elementary exposition

of this or that terminology. Often, the form of action relates to asceticism on a personal level, but its communal dimensions should not be disregarded.

In the ninth century, Photios the Great (ca. 810–91) is the Patristic personality credited with shifting a good deal of emphasis away from the purely ascetic and dogmatic concerns that were characteristic of Fathers previously. With Photios, a spotlight is placed upon culture per se. In this light, the Christian seeker was to be enriched through knowledge of the classics and with a greater grasp of the tool of language. He therefore produced his own *Lexicon* for students who would meet in his home in the years prior to his elevation as Patriarch of Constantinople (first in 858). He compiled his most renowned opus, the *Myriobiblos* (or *Bibliotheca*), to review not only Christian writings, but also other great literary and historical works of the past, reaching as far back as Herodotus and as widely as *The Life of Pythagoras*. He underlined the value of action for the benefit of society at large. There had been earlier concerns in areas such as social justice, as illustrated in the life and writings of Basil the Great (*Homily to the Rich*: “I will tear down my barns”) and John Chrysostom (Four Discourses: “On Lazarus and the Rich Man”). However, Photios upheld the value of direct involvement in civil affairs in particular, without which it is questionable whether a person can be virtuous at all, according to his words:

By nature, people ascribe virtue to the life which rejects activity, but this is not so, in my opinion. Because virtue that is exercised in political life with political works and political words, is the very thing that also exercises the soul, such that it becomes stronger... However, the learned who remain on the sidelines, though they may philosophise with great severity concerning justice and temperance, take terribly inappropriate measures when they are forced to take action. (*Myriobiblos* 242 [this author’s trans.])

Photios highlighted the importance of virtue enacted in the community by asking what Themistocles was meant to do in the face of real danger. Was he to “gather the Athenians in the Pnyca and speak to them about the ideas of Plato... to teach them about the being which always is, and has no genesis? In that case, the Athenians would have immediately lost genesis, being and everything else!” (*Myriobiblos* 248). Educational concerns are another important part of social consciousness. While they were not, of course, unique to Photios, he advocated that children’s learning should in fact be *enjoyable*, and in so doing conceived forward-thinking directions for the educational process. His stated purpose of education was “to educate the children in such a way that it would be a source of pleasure to them while young and an enduring companion in their later years” (*Letter of Advice to Protospatharios Michael* [ed. Valettas 1864], Epistle 149).

In the ninth century also, John Scotus Eriugena appeared in northwest Europe (815–77). A contemporary of Photios who came from a diagonally opposite corner of the European continent, Eriugena has been described as “the first Western scholar who methodically studied Greek church fathers” (Laos 2015, p. 35). He translated the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, Gregory of Nyssa (*On the Making of Man*), and Maximus the Confessor (*Ambigua*) into Latin, effectively bringing knowledge of these works to the West. The division between the Fathers of the ‘East’ and readers in the ‘West’ would gradually erode; geographic, linguistic and even doctrinal borderlines were gradually crossed by what appeared to be a growing interest in the ‘spirituality’ (a term the Fathers did not employ, ironically) represented by these texts. The attraction may have been mutual during this period, but it did not operate equally in both directions; interest in Eastern writings was greater in the West than demand for Western writings was in the East. This we know by the volume of translations, and then publications, that were being made from the Greek originals—culminating, one might say, in the PG series of 162 volumes in 1866 under the supervision of an enterprising French priest named Jacques Paul Migne. In the reverse direction (from Latin into Greek), the Byzantine monk and scholar Maximus Planudes (1260–ca. 1310) translated the *De Trinitate* by Augustine of Hippo, and tracts written by the sixth century philosopher-statesman Boethius, together with translations of Ptolemy’s *Geography*, the essays of Cicero and the poetry of Ovid. Based on its track record, then, Pa-

tristics would seem to have the capacity to connect Christians of various traditions more readily than other branches of theological studies—including even Biblical studies.<sup>13</sup> Traditionally, there have been more amicable gatherings around the dining table of Patristics than there have been around the breakfast bar of New Testament Studies. And although it may not figure highly in the average list of Protestant studies today, it is a curious fact that the term *Patrology* (a synonym for Patristics) was first coined by the Protestant theologian Joannes Gerhard (d. 1637),<sup>14</sup> by which he simply meant the lives and works of the Church Fathers (Van Geest 2014, p. 81).<sup>15</sup>

A further consideration relates to whether speaking about the Patristic texts is sufficient. In a conference held in Athens in 1936, the renowned theologian and clergyman Georges Florovsky proclaimed the necessity for Orthodox theology to “return to the Fathers” and to be released from the “Babylonian captivity” of a theological language and mindset foreign to its own (Kalaitzidis 2010, p. 5). Florovsky’s exhortation sounded much more radical then than it does now. The ‘return’ has taken place to a large extent, and it behoves those who have a love for the field, decades later, to re-examine constantly what the return should and should not involve. Unless, that is, one really means an Odyssean return—a journey fraught with dangerous adventures, which culminates in the main hero being unrecognizable even to his closest kin. As one contemporary theologian has put it, “a theology of repetition that is satisfied simply with a return ‘to the sources’ or ‘to the Fathers’ cannot respond to the manifold challenges of the post-modern pluralistic world” (Kalaitzidis 2010, p. 29) and it might be best to heed the experience of Gregory the Theologian in “coining new names for the sake of clarity” (καινοτομήσαι περι τὰ ὀνόματα σαφηνείας ἔνεκεν, *Oration.12.* 39). As a result of the above, the translation of Patristic texts in centuries past was good in principle, but it was not sufficient; it required the *vox patrum* as well, “for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6). Today, not only in the Australian context but also internationally, the words of the Fathers rest rather impassively on pages. By this we mean either their subjective treatment by analysts, in the absence of the living voice of the Fathers, or else their weak impact due to there being little scope to present them in truly relevant ways. The task now is not to coin new terms necessarily, but to devise new avenues for understanding the Patristic ethos and intention.

We tend not to see the Fathers in terms of the purpose that they set for themselves. These purposes were soteriological. There is a temptation instead to impose our own career-minded harvesting machine over them in order to extract whatever matches our own purposes on an individual or denominational level.<sup>16</sup> This is doubtless a generalization of the matter, but the germ of truth within it appears to be growing in the Western world. The Fathers have spoken of salvation in Christ as a healing of human nature’s wounds. By way of a response in freedom, the healing process is synonymous with purification in order to “see and hear in a spiritual manner” (πνευματικῶς βλέπειν καὶ ἀκούειν), to use a phrase of Symeon the New Theologian (*Hymns of Divine Eros* 4, [Sources *Chrétiennes* 156, 192]). Gregory Palamas comes in a long tradition that upholds a therapeutic view of the spiritual life. One may evaluate any resemblances between the following Palamite quotation and current Patristic emphases:

Because the soul is known in three powers, the rational (λογιστικόν), the spirited (θυμικόν) and the desiring (ἐπιθυμητικόν), and it is ill in all three of these parts, Christ reasonably commenced the therapy from the last, which is the desirous aspect. The spirited or incisive aspect is fuelled by the desirous aspect when it is not fulfilled, and the imperfection of the rational aspect derives from the defects of the other two. And the incisive can never be healed unless the desirous is first healed, nor can the rational part be healed unless the former two are healed beforehand. (*Letter to the Nun Xenia* [PG vol. 150, col. 1061])<sup>17</sup>

Yet, before any discussion of soteriology can take place, there is the reality of the Resurrection.<sup>18</sup> Unbelievably, even the most central message of the sacred Scriptures, and of the Fathers who interpret them, can be lost amid the intellectual noise. It is not that the Resurrection should be ‘analyzed’ more by commentators; it cannot. The issue is rather



whether the Fathers are read in the light of the Resurrection that colors and illuminates all that they say and do. To lose the core of the Gospel via complicated mental gymnastics is a danger that “somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so [our] minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ” (2 Cor. 11:3).<sup>19</sup> The new—and newest—‘interpretations’ of a finite number of Patristic writings produce, over time, enough layers to render the original texts illegible, metaphorically speaking. Instead of offering infinitely new interpretations of a finite number of texts, one wonders whether it might be preferable to offer a finite number of interpretations in edifyingly new ways.

Truth, being an experiential matter, invites a different methodology. This additional and essential, but largely ignored, dimension of experience shall not be elaborated upon, given the divergent approaches of the so-called ‘East’ and ‘West’ that can only be alluded to here. Suffice it to say that, although the very term ‘experience’ carries with it subjective connotations, the experience of the ecclesial community is *not* a subjective matter, precisely because it is an experience held in common. The experience of the Fathers is but a magnification of this reality, such that we should firstly understand the *consensus patrum* in terms of their common experience of God, and only secondarily in the more typical way as a collection of doctrinal truths held in common. The term *Logos*, so central to the Christian message, implies an experiential understanding of truth through participation (*methexis*), while the Latin term *ratio* “means the individual ability to syllogistically arrive at a comprehensive exhaustive understanding of truth” (Laos 2015, p. 35). It has therefore been said, and with good reason, that the sound patristic approach to truth is eucharistic. It is centered upon the Eucharist. It is participation, not speculation, and a shared experience. If it were not so, faith would be reduced to an ideology, and the Fathers to ideologists.

The late scholar Stylianos Papadopoulos (1933–2012),<sup>20</sup> who did much to popularize the subject of Patristics in his home country Greece, pointed out a further obstacle in its path. This was the blurring of the distinction between Fathers and ecclesiastical writers. This, he said, explained the increased use of terms such as ‘Christian literature’ rather than ‘Patristic literature’. All this reveals a deeper uncertainty about who qualifies to be called a Father at all (see Parry 2015, pp. 3–10). Papadopoulos wondered if there could really be a ‘definition’ before offering his own as follows: the Church Father is the bearer of the tradition of the Church who, through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, expresses the broader experience of the truth for the purpose of countering a certain crisis faced by the Church (Papadopoulos 1977, pp. 2–3). This last point (countering a crisis) recasts our attention to a point already made, which is that we are referring not to a group of theoreticians as much as to people of action, people who first experienced an inner action of the Holy Spirit before heeding the call to action. According to the above definition, dealing with a crisis in the life of the Church becomes a *criterion* of what it means to be a Father. Indeed, although there may be a few exceptions to that rule, it is true that the writings we possess are the result of their authors’ defense of specific doctrinal matters amidst a specific crisis, with great anguish and often personal cost. One need think no further than the fate of Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580–662), who was tortured on imperial orders *inter alia* for not accepting Monothelitism, the heterodox belief that Christ had only one will.

All of this raises questions, once again, about the exact function of the Fathers. Do they perform an essential function, or an ornamental one? A perfectly logical response is that everything necessary for salvation is already contained in the Holy Bible. There are, in turn, two ways of looking at this, neither of which contradict the premise of the completeness of Scripture. In the first way, the Fathers are useful as *exegetes* of Scripture. This aligns well with Gregory Nazianzus, who spoke about those:

who have handled the holy Scriptures, not with indifference or as a mere pastime but by opening up the letter of the text and looking into the inner meaning ... to see the hidden beauty (τὸ ἀπόθετον κάλλος) there, and have been illumined. (Fifth Theol. Orat. [Homily 31.21])

The second way involves the realization of the pledge made by Jesus Christ:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. (John 16:12–13; cf. 14:25–26)

In other words, the revelation of divine truth is an ongoing process (cf. Nazianzus, *Orat.* 31.26 on the Holy Spirit). This is not a contradiction of the uniqueness of all that was revealed in the incarnate Logos, but lies, in fact, in complete accord with it. Thus, John of Damascus would write:

Where can you find in the Old Testament or in the Gospel explicit use of such terms as ‘Trinity’ or ‘*homoousios*’ or ‘one nature of the Godhead’ or ‘three hypostases,’ or that Christ is ‘one hypostasis with two natures’? Yet, the meanings of these things are found in other phrases contained in the Scriptures, which the fathers have interpreted for us. (*Third Oration on the Holy Images*)

The Trinitarian nature of salvation and revelation, and its ‘unfolding’ in time, is beautifully expressed by Photios, as follows:

You [Lord] uncovered part of the truth to us, but He [the Paraclete] will guide us unto all truth. Having been initiated by You, we have need yet of wisdom and power and truth. And when He attends, He grants each of us inexhaustible enjoyment of all things. If You, therefore, the enhypostatized wisdom and truth, teach these things, it would not be appropriate on our part to have uncertainty that the Spirit is deserving of both greater honour and glory. (*Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit*, para. 25 [my trans.])

This brings the reasoning about the role and identity of the Fathers round full circle. The end point is partly joyful and partly sorrowful, reflecting the complex reality of Patristics in our time. It has been summed up very well in the following couple of sentences:

Today, despite the strong interest in the Fathers, these great figures are usually regarded as exceptional authors but rarely as instruments of the Holy Spirit towards a broader and fuller exposé of the divine truth. This situation demonstrates that, at present, Patrology is not on its true path and that, while we have much research on the Fathers, we do not have *Patrology* or, when we have it, it is atrophic. (Papadopoulos 1977, p. 83 [my trans.])

After deliberating on several theoretical qualities of Patristics, one wonders how it all translates into practice. Personal experience in the classroom has highlighted the various strands of interest and expectations that will inevitably exist among a diverse group of students. While some will approach the topic in the manner described immediately above, i.e., as the study of “great figures” and “exceptional authors,” it is also quite plain that others are seeking “instruments of the Holy Spirit”. This is particularly true when dealing with the so-called later Byzantine Fathers, such as Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022) and Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), whose names and works are synonymous with a description of the experience of the divine life. Students may try to read their works as a handbook, so to speak, of how they too might enter into that newness of life. This pursuit of course is not to be shunned, but rather encouraged, if conducted with the right presuppositions. The writings of Symeon, especially, being deeply personal and uniquely autobiographical, lend themselves to much reflection about how a Taboric experience can be possible so long after the Transfiguration of the Savior. If such an experience could occur 1000 years after Mt Tabor, as it did with the New Theologian, why can it not occur again another 1000 years after that? For we know what a thousand years is equivalent to in God’s sight (cf. 2 Pet 3:8).

As a consequence, the field of Patristics can offer not only strictly doctrinal focal points but also an experience of the spiritual path. This is because the Fathers walked that path before us. It would be fair to say that a portion of students are now drawn by the appeal of this latter factor, which is receiving increasing emphasis. This is not an ‘additional’ aspect of the tradition but an essential part of it. When the Christian life is viewed in terms of a

process of purification, illumination and sanctification, it then has an allure that it would not otherwise have. That allure, of which our nominally Christian societies are so often deprived, feeds the discussion in many tutorials and essays, particularly when its rightful place is brought to the fore in the lectures. It is one 'competitive advantage' that Patristics has over other subjects in the course of a tertiary theological degree; students are provided with an opportunity and several conceptual tools in order to grapple with questions of their own spiritual growth. They may see a personal path within an ecclesial setting, if they had not seen one previously. They may also come to acknowledge a fresher connotation of spiritual discipline in relation to discipleship. A balance is therefore struck between an academic approach and, at the same time, the legitimate concern of students to find whatever is applicable to their own development as persons.

#### 4. To Conclude

We have identified several reasons for which the field of Patristics in Australia exercises a narrow range of influence amid the faithful and among the broader population. These include the limited number of opportunities that are available for formal study in the Church Fathers, which unfortunately do not include the younger years of school education and are therefore necessarily restricted to tertiary education. Among the tertiary sector, a student would typically have to be enrolled in a Church-based theological college in order to have the opportunity to choose a relevant course. Only rarely would such an opportunity be available outside that circle of learning, unless it had been incorporated into a Studies of Religion course within a university (public or private). Apart from these provisions for formal learning in Patristics, there do not appear to be many others to attract people towards it, even as an informal area of interest. We do not see much evidence, for example, of the subject being popularized or presented in lay terms such that the non-specialists might begin to savor the wisdom that the Fathers can offer them as well. In the second section of the paper, an attempt was made to present several essential features of Patristics in the eastern Orthodox understanding. This was designed not as a digression, but as a point of reference for a possible reassessment or revitalization of the subject vis-a-vis current practices.

It has been stressed that Patristics has become a subset within a subset of learning. Those who do not find themselves under the banner of theology will rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to encounter the Fathers in any meaningful way. Their paths will not cross. In precisely this realization lies the ascertainment that the community of faithful have allowed for an outcome that no Christian would have hoped for, and few would have foreseen. We have collectively, even if unintentionally, gone wrong somewhere in the not-so-distant past. Circumstances of history and civil government have no doubt contributed to this. For the Church obviously does not function as an island in the world. Yet, without implying any kind of moral failure by use of the term 'wrong', there must at least be an objective acknowledgement, based on all the above, that we have taken the awareness, availability and overall appeal of Patristics into misguided directions.

At the same time, the Australian situation presents a further complexity in so far as the various tiers of its education system, both horizontally and vertically, simply *cannot* accommodate a syllabus in Patrology in the ways that other societies might, as this will either grate against its secular foundations or else be seen as favoring one Patristic perspective over another. In a multifaith society such as Australia's, there cannot be any solution that appears to be even remotely 'confessional', which is to say, denominational. The onus for education in this field therefore lies where it always belonged: on the shoulders of the faithful people of God, both clergy and lay, hence the endurance of formal Patristic studies as an almost exclusively Church-based effort. With the passage of time, it has become an increasingly tapered affair, relying in a very specialized way on the slender overlap of Church and higher education. For better or for worse, the cocoon that confines Patristics also produces the silk of the academic robes which the subject appears to be clothed in today.

The problems described above should not all be perceived as unique to Australia. The gradual de-Christianization of public life and policies in regions of the globe that were once strongly Christian, the allure of new technological means of human communication, the individualization of what used to be a communal and eucharistic approach to the truth, coupled with the erosion of support for studies in the classics right around the world, and the fading knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin as a consequence of that are all likely causes of the diminishing role and relevance of Patristics in the lives of everyday men, women and children.

Yet, so as not to end on a bleak note, all parties involved in the nurturing and teaching of Patristics might also look towards a future stage, in God's time, when the cocoon will have been discarded and the butterfly will have flown.

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## Appendix A

### *The Church Fathers in Text Books for School-Age Children: An Overseas Example*

The following examples are taken from textbooks that are available to students of primary and secondary education in Greece, and which are accessible through the website [ebooks.edu.gr/ebooks](http://ebooks.edu.gr/ebooks) (accessed on 6 December 2023).

The textbooks cited below commence from Year 3 of primary school until the end of high school (known as Year 12 in Australia), and are part of the students' studies in their own religious tradition through the subject called *Thriskeftika* (Θρησκευτικά). The excerpts have been translated into English especially for this paper.

No claim is made concerning the teaching methods employed or the effectiveness of the material upon the students' learning experience. Nor is it implied that these curricula can be used as a model for students of equivalent age groups in Australia. In the first section of this article, several characteristics of the Australian school system were presented which would not only make a uniform religious syllabus impossible, but which would also reject an overtly denominational content for it. One basic reason for which the curriculum of one country could not be copied by the other is the different religious complexion of each society. The Australian population is not only multicultural but also very diverse in terms of religious affiliation, and so the student population would reflect a very wide range of Christian denominations as well as world religions. This fact alone would make the introduction of a subject on the Church Fathers problematic for obvious practical reasons. On the other hand, the situation within the school system in Greece still reflects a population that is overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, of the Orthodox Christian faith. Exceptions have arisen due to the arrival of migrants and refugees in Greece in recent years, affecting some pockets of Athens in particular (where the Orthodox children in a small number of classrooms might be a minority among the new arrivals). Most schools in the country are state-run and there is an obligation upon them, according to the Greek Constitution (art. 16:2), to offer instruction in the Orthodox faith. Individual students can be exempted on certain grounds. Consequently, no attempt should be made to compare such dissimilar situations. This is why, as mentioned, the aim is not to offer a model.

The example of overseas education in a single educational and geographic area is offered in order to illustrate the principle that Patristic studies can be introduced in an elementary way at a very young age, and that there is no pedagogical reason to restrict this practice to students of higher (tertiary) education. It is easy to discern below how this principle has been laid out according to the various grades of both primary and high school. The Patristic quotations that have been translated below are quite effectively interspersed

with numerous Scriptural passages and color illustrations, such as sacred icons, in the relevant textbooks.

Finally, it is noteworthy that students who complete the mentioned grades will have encountered no less than 80 references to, or quotations from, the Eastern Church Fathers by the time they have completed their final year of schooling.

(A) 3rd Grade Primary School—The World of Religion and Faith (ed. by Eleni Maraki).

1. There is first a two-page introduction on the Three Hierarchs, and on each individually: Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and John Chrysostom (pp. 32–33).

2. An icon of the Three Hierarchs appears, together with a small section titled ‘Wise sayings’ (Σοφά λόγια), samples of which are translated here.

Basil the Great:

“Just as bees gather nectar from the flowers, you can do the same with the things you read. Keep what is good and beneficial”.

Gregory the Theologian:

“Education is the greatest good. This has helped us to worship God. We should not neglect education, but rather consider ignorant and illiterate those who do”.

John Chrysostom:

“I will say that someone loves me, not only when he praises me, but also when he corrects me”.

“The rich person is not the one who has many things, but the one who has no need for them”. (p. 34)

3. The *Apolytikion* hymn of the Three Hierarchs is presented in both the original form in which it was composed but also in an easier modern Greek rendition (p. 35).

4. Finally, there are listed several suggestions for activities, e.g., inviting students to express their thoughts when observing the relevant icon, but also to learn to chant the hymn with their teacher.

(B) 4th Grade Primary School—Discovering icons, people and stories (Ανακαλύπτουμε εικόνες, πρόσωπα και ιστορίες).

5. An analogy of St John Chrysostom is provided on the value of prayer: Just as rays of dawn’s sunlight send wild animals into their hiding places, so does sincere prayer send rays of light to the mind, sending our wild habits to hide in their own den (p. 11).

(C) 5th Grade Primary School—The World of Religion (Ο κόσμος της θρησκείας).

6. A boxed paragraph titled ‘The Three Hierarchs on education and the teacher’ reads:

“Education according to the Three Hierarchs should be characterised by the following: freedom, love and respect. The personal character of the teacher, and the relationship of the teacher with students, are the basic factors in the educational process. The teacher should not be an egotist. He or she must acknowledge mistakes, be humble, democratic and employ dialogue”. (p. 23)

7. A title states ‘Sayings on the value of education’. What follows do not appear to be direct quotations from the authors and they are not referenced.

“Teaching in class should be pleasant, for this is the only way for knowledge to remain permanently” (St Basil the Great)

“Education is a superior art and science” (Gregory the Theologian)

“Education is very beneficial, but it requires constant effort in order for weaknesses and passions to be uprooted from the soul of the pedagogue”. (John Chrysostom) (p. 24)

8. A letter of John Chrysostom to a rich person states that a Christian noble is not known by his attendants, but by the help he gives to those in need (p. 72).

9. Basil the Great comments on the words “I will tear down my barns” contained in the Gospel according to Luke, reminding the person who wishes to store goods that “the extra bread you have belongs to the hungry, and the [extra] clothes you have in your cupboard belong to the one who has nothing to wear. So, when you do not help those who are in need, it is as if you have done them the injustice” (p. 73).

10. John Chrysostom describes the Church as the ark of salvation. However, he says, unlike the first Ark, which merely saved the animals without transforming them, the ark of the Church can receive someone who is like a crow and return that same person as a dove. The children are then asked to comment on Chrysostom’s comparison between the two arks (p. 79).

11. Arianism and Monophysitism are introduced as heresies, while mentioning the 1st Ecumenical Council in the year 325 and the prominent role of Athanasius the Great in all of this (p. 80).

12. An extract from Gregory Palamas’ *Homily 18 (On the Sunday of the Myrrh-bearers)* states: “Only when the sinner avoids associating with bad people, and begins to keep company with the righteous, will that person succeed in terms of justice and the salvation of his or her soul” (p. 81).

13. An extract of St Athanasius’ *Against Arians*: “We have been given a great gift by the Logos (that is, Christ), so that we are not deceived by appearances. Yet more than this, even when something appears to be unclear, we are able to interpret it through the grace of the Holy Spirit” (p. 84).

14. An extract of Basil the Great’s *Letter to Amphilocheus*: “Heresies have to do with those who are completely cut off and estranged from the correct faith, while schisms have to do with internal disputes for ecclesiastical reasons and they concern issues that can be resolved” (p. 84).

15. In order to introduce the period of iconoclasm, John Chrysostom is described as a “great Father of our Church” and is quoted as follows: “Our Church may experience difficulties, and struggle against every kind of enemy, but it is not possible for it ever to be defeated or destroyed” (p. 87).

16. Basil the Great *On the Holy Spirit*: “The honour attributed to the icon is given to the prototype” (p. 88).

17. Mention is made of the first major rift between the Church in East and West, and the strong reaction of Photios the Great to the demands of Pope Nicholas I (p. 90).

(D) 6th Grade Primary School—Discovering texts, monuments, places and events (Ανακαλύπτουμε κείμενα, μνημεία, τόπους και γεγονότα).

18. John Chrysostom: “The Old Testament preceded the New, and the New Testament interpreted the Old. Many times I have said that the two Testaments are two daughters and sisters serving the same Master. Christ is foretold by the prophets and proclaimed in the New Testament. The news is not new, because the old preceded it”. In this textbook, it is noteworthy that the reference is to the *Patrologia Graeca* series of Migne (PG vol. 50, col. 796) (p. 42).

19. John Chrysostom: “The purpose of the two Testaments is one. Our correction. That is why it presents not only those who were successful, but also those who were unsuccessful, so that we might imitate the former and avoid imitating the latter. In this way, we are led to virtue and diligence from both angles” (PG 56, 313–314) (p. 42).

20. John Chrysostom: “From the beginning, when God made people, he spoke directly with them in a manner that they were able to hear. In this way, he went to Adam, reproached Cain, spoke with Noah and was shown hospitality by Abraham... However, because humankind turned out to be unworthy to communicate with him, and as he wanted to renew his friendship with them, he sent them letters [the Holy Scriptures] just as one would to someone far away, and in this manner called all people to him” (PG 53, 27–28) (p. 43).

21. John of Damascus: “It is very beautiful and beneficial to study the Holy Scriptures. Because when the soul, like a tree planted near water, is watered with the Scriptures, it is nourished and produces ripe fruit, namely correct faith, and is decorated with evergreen leaves, namely actions that are pleasing to God... Let us do this with willingness and endurance. If we read something once or twice and cannot understand what we are reading, let us not be discouraged, but instead persevere and ask questions” (PG 94, 1176) (p. 56).

22. John Chrysostom: “He who once adorned that table is the one who adorns the Holy Altar table. It is not a human who makes the offered gifts the Body and Blood of Christ, but Christ himself who was crucified for us” (PG 49, 380) (p. 80).

(E) 1st Year High School—A life journey: the encounter between God and human through biblical narratives (Ένα ταξίδι ζωής: η συνάντηση Θεού και ανθρώπου μέσα από τις βιβλικές διηγήσεις).

23. St Basil the Great on gender equality: “We are, said St Ioulitta, made of the same nature as men... From the Creator, woman has been fashioned in such a manner that she can, equally with man, be receptive to virtue... As result, stability, power and patience were given by the Master in equal measure to men” (*On the Martyr Ioulitta and on Thanksgiving*).

24. Two paragraphs of Gregory of Nyssa appear on the plight of “countless homeless” and refugees who must knock on doors and whose “table are their folded knees” (*On the Love of the Poor and Charity*) (p. 30).

25. Two petitions from the Divine Liturgy of John Chrysostom are presented: “For seasonable weather, abundance of the fruits of the earth and fair weather;” and “For those who travel by sea and land, the sick, the suffering and their salvation, let us pray to the Lord” (p. 33).

26. Isaac the Syrian: “What is a merciful heart? It is a heart that is aflame for all of creation... Due to prolonged and intense compassion, the heart is squeezed and cannot bear any injury, even if it is small, occurring in Creation. This is why it prays constantly with tears for all irrational animals, the enemies of truth, and for those who damage it, asking God to protect and forgive them” (*Ascetic Works*) (p. 33).

27. Students are provided with a large extract of Chrysostom’s famous *Catechetical Oration on Holy Pascha* (p. 109).

28. John Chrysostom on social justice: “Don’t you blush from embarrassment when you describe as aggressive the person battling to earn bread? That person, although behaving so, is deserving of our compassion because the pressure of hunger forces him or her to wear the mask of aggressiveness [...] And I must say furthermore that the aggressor is really *you* because, even though you come regularly to church and you listen to my sermons, you none the less prefer gold and desires and human friendships in the marketplace, in preference to my own promptings” (*Commentary on Romans*) (p. 120).

29. John of Damascus: “We should know that God does not punish anyone in the future, but all people make themselves receptive to participation in God. Participation in God is delight, whereas non-participation is hell... For, what is hell, other than the deprivation of something which one intensely desires? In accordance with the proportion of desire, then, those who desire God feel delight, whereas those who desire sin feel torment” (*Against Manichaeans*) (p. 146).

(F) 2nd Year High School—The Church: a journey of life through time (Η Εκκλησία: πορεία ζωής μέσα στην ιστορία).

30. Basil the Great on the cenobitic life: “I call the cenobium the most perfect form of social co-existence, in which there is no institution of private ownership, there are no disagreements, while turmoil, rivalry, factions and feuds are kept at a distance. In this kind of society everything is held in common: God is common, the offering and pursuit of virtue is common, salvation is common... Which other social structure is equal to it? Which is happier?... One who is physically ill has so many people to share his or her suffering. One who is spiritually ill and exhausted has many to be served by and assist in his or her restoration of health” (*Ascetic Regulations*) (p. 44).

31. Over one page is presented on Justin the Martyr and Apologist, including his *Second Apology* in which it is stated that Socrates “was accused of the same things of which we [Christians] are accused. For, they said that he, too, introduced new gods [...] He encouraged people to accept the God who was unknown to them, saying ‘It is not easy to find the Father and Creator of all, nor is it safe to do so, or to speak about him to all’” (pp. 54–55).

32. Clement of Alexandria: “We accept that philosophy prepares one for the serenity of Christ; it trains the spirit, awakens intelligence and enables it to continue its search towards true philosophy. Just as it is possible for one to be faithful even if illiterate, in the same way we maintain that it is impossible for one to comprehend the entire content of faith without learning” (*Stromateis* [1.6]) (p. 55).

33. Here appears a single page biography and icon of Basil the Great (p. 56).

34. A didactic incident from Basil’s life is presented, based on a food shortage in Caesaria during which he saw that the rich were stocking their warehouses and the merchants were charging exorbitant prices: “Basil, with his fiery sermons, commenced a campaign against greed. He described those greedy and uncompassionate persons as being worse than wild beasts, as they did not respect their own kind, whereas the animals respect their own. Through his proclamations he was able to break down any resistance, and open the hearts and warehouses of his countrymen. As a result, many people were saved. Another great work was the *Basileias*; outside Caesaria, Basil the Great had built a small city with a hospital, orphanage, hostels, schools, workshops, special dwellings for the workers and workshops for the necessities of the city” (p. 57).

35. Here there is a page-long blurb and icon of Gregory the Theologian (pp. 57–58).

36. Gregory the Theologian’s poetic output is mentioned (amounting to 407 poems), mostly written towards the end of his life. An example of this is provided; an epigram of ten lines in honor of his friend Basil is also quoted (p. 58).

37. A one-page biography of John Chrysostom is presented together with his icon and the title “Rhetoric in the service of the truth” (pp. 58–59).

38. Here there is an icon of the Three Hierarchs together with information that, in the modern era, their feast day was dedicated to education in 1842, through the University of Athens. Since that year, the Three Hierarchs have been considered to be patrons of students and of learning generally (p. 60).

39. The *Apolytikion* hymn of the Three Hierarchs is provided in its original Greek together with a Modern Greek rendering (p. 60).

40. A half-page excerpt is presented from Basil the Great’s renowned *Address to Youth: On how they might Benefit from Classical Greek literature* (p. 61).

41. A half-page excerpt is presented from Gregory the Theologian’s *Epitaph for Basil* on the value of Christian education but also of *pre-Christian education (paideia)* which, it is claimed, many Christians look down on due to their mistaken impression of it (p. 61) (see Jaeger 1961).

42. Under the heading ‘Is it permitted for Christians to use violence?’, there are two quotations from Chrysostom: one from his *Homily in Honour of the Blessed Babylas* (“It is not right for Christians to destroy by way of deceit, force and violence, but to work for the salvation of people through persuasion, speech and gentleness”) and the other from *On not Publicizing the Sins of the Brothers* (“It is hubris towards God to ask him for things against our enemies”) (p. 62).

43. A paragraph describing Photios the Great is quoted from the *Life of Patriarch Ignatius* (p. 68 given).

44. Gregory of Nyssa describes the interest of the faithful of Constantinople during the Second Ecumenical Synod of 381: “It fills the whole city, the squares, the marketplace, the crossroads—all are discussing it with a frenzy. If you ask one shopkeeper for your change, he philosophizes about what is Begotten and Unbegotten; if you ask the price of bread, the reply is that the Father is greater than the Son; if you ask ‘Is my bath ready?’ the steward answers that the Son was created out of nothing” (*On the Divinity of the Son and the Spirit*) (p. 86).



45. Heading: The Church Fathers defend the Christian faith and interpret the Word of God Sub-heading: Who do we mean when we speak of 'Church Fathers'?

"The Fathers of the Church are those of its members who were recognized as authentic interpreters of Holy Scripture and guides of the faithful in Christian living. They contributed decisively to the definition, formulation and, chiefly, the defence of the faith. For this reason, the term 'Father of the Church' is often interchanged with 'Teacher' as a title of honour [names of several major Church Fathers are provided as an illustration]. The Orthodox and the Roman Catholics follow the principle of 'agreement' set out by Vincent of Lerins (fifth century), which is that the Church is to follow the teaching that was proclaimed by all Fathers or at least by a majority of them, with clarity, harmony and stability". (pp. 87–88)

46. A quotation from a modern writer appears above the icons of Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Palamas, stating "The Orthodox Church sees itself as the Church of the Fathers. The Church does not cease to produce Fathers, i.e., enlightened faithful persons who manage, with the help of the Holy Spirit and their own virtue and wisdom, to recapitulate and formulate once again the common and constant goal in the language of each historical period: the sanctification of the human person" (p. 88).

47. Here is a page on Athanasius the Great together with his icon (p. 89).

48. Augustine of Hippo appears on half a page together with his icon (p. 90).

49. One page is dedicated to the briefest quotes of Irenaeus of Lyons, Athanasius the Great, Chrysostom, Synesios of Cyrene, Isaac the Syrian, Maximos the Confessor and Augustine (p. 91).

50. Four excerpts from John of Damascus' *On Those who Oppose the Holy Icons* are provided (pp. 111–12).

(G) 3rd Year High School—The witness of the Orthodox Church in the modern world (Η μαρτυρία της Ορθόδοξης Εκκλησίας στον σύγχρονο κόσμο).

51. Quotations of Basil the Great (*On Those who gather Riches*), Gregory the Theologian (*On love of the Poor*) and Isaac the Syrian are presented (p. 18).

52. John Chrysostom is quoted on the topic of social justice (the same quotation from PG 60, 535–538 that was given in an earlier grade) (p. 40).

(H) 4th Year High School (Lyceum)—Orthodox faith and worship (Ορθόδοξη πίστη και λατρεία).

53. Symeon the New Theologian *Hymn 6* is quoted in both the original and modern Greek (pp. 9–10).

54. One paragraph is quoted from Chrysostom's *On the Canaanite Woman* regarding prayer (p. 21).

55. An excerpt is presented from Cyprian of Carthage, together with a reference to *De Catholicae Ecclesiae Unitate* in Latin (p. 45).

56. Justin the Philosopher's *First Apology* is cited to describe the way the eucharistic gathering occurred every Sunday (p. 46).

57. Here is an excerpt of Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechism 18* on the catholicity of the Church (p. 48).

58. John Chrysostom is again referred to, this time by way of his Homily 8 *On Repentance* which relates to the sanctifying power of the Church (p. 49).

59. Maximos the Confessor's *Mystagogy* is quoted regarding the meaning of the Divine Liturgy (p. 59).

60. Symeon the New Theologian provides a sentence on Baptism, taken from PG 155, 221 (p. 106).

61. Four excerpts are given from John Chrysostom on the topic of marriage as a mystery of love (pp. 112–13).

62. Students are made aware of Gregory of Nyssa's *On the name and profession of the Christians* (p. 133).

63. John of Damascus is quoted on the etymology of 'virtue' (ἀρετή) to underline that it is something freely chosen or elected (αἰρετή) (p. 137)

64. The passage that the textbook editors have chosen from Chrysostom's Homily 76:5 *On the Gospel of Matthew* is so beautiful that it deserves to be reproduced here in full:

"I am Father, I am brother, I am bridegroom, I am dwelling place, I am food, I am raiment, I am root, I am foundation, all that you wish, I am. Be in need of nothing, I will be a servant, for I came to serve, not to be served; I am friend, and member of the body, and head, and brother, and sister, and mother; I am all; only adhere closely to me. I became poor for you, and a beggar for you, on the Cross for you, buried for you; above I intercede for you to the Father; on earth I was sent as an ambassador from my Father for you. You are all things to me, brother, and joint heir, and friend, and member of the same body. What more would you want?". (p. 138)

65. Passages relating to free will are presented from the writings of John of Damascus (*Precise exposition of the Orthodox faith*, PG 94, 920b and PG 94, 924b), Maximos the Confessor (*Dialogue with Pyrrhus*, PG 91, 304c) and Gregory the Theologian (*Homily 14:25*, PG 35, 829a). Students are to discuss and offer reasons for which this (free will) is a basic feature of human nature (pp. 141–42).

66. Maximos the Confessor on love: "When someone offends you or ridicules you, guard yourself against angry thoughts, lest they separate you from love through sorrow, and transfer you to the realm of hatred" (p. 147).

67. Chrysostom's *Commentaries* on 1 Corinthians (PG 61.251) and 2 Corinthians (PG 61, 527) are cited in order to show the distinctions and similarities between lay people and clergy within the Church (pp. 154–55).

68. A quotation of Gregory the Theologian on the equality of male and female has him asking rhetorically: "Why do you legislate unequally, given that you are one body? Let us see something worse: did the first woman commit sin? Adam did the same! They were both deceived by the snake" (*Homily 37*, PG 36, 289–292) (pp. 156–57).

69. A second paragraph from Gregory the Theologian follows, touching this time on the issue of slavery (p. 157).

70. From Basil the Great, two sentences are provided concerning the equality of women with men (*On the martyr Ioulitta*) (p. 157).

71. Basil the Great's claim is that we are to become like children (Matt 18:3) in the sense of the equality that exists among them (*Shorter Rules*, 216) (p. 157).

72. Clement of Alexandria's brief quotation (from *Stromateis 7:12*) underlines that no one is to be looked at condescendingly according to the law of God (p. 157).

(I) 5th Year High School (Lyceum)—Christianity and Religions (Χριστιανισμός και Θρησκευμάτα).

73. John of Damascus is presented in an extensive quotation concerning the creation of the human person in both soul and body (*Exposition of the Orthodox faith*, 12) (p. 19).

74. A stimulating quotation of Basil the Great is provided: "Our admiration for the works of God is not diminished if we learn how one of these works came about" (*On the six days of Creation*, PG 29, 25) (p. 21).

(J) 6th Grade High School—Christianity and the modern world (Χριστιανισμός και σύγχρονος κόσμος).

75. Isaac the Syrian: "A merciful heart is one that is aflame for the entire Creation, for people, for birds, for animals etc". (*Ascetical Works*) (p. 20).

76. One page is shared by John Chrysostom and Basil the Great on the topic of wealth and greed (pp. 25–26).

77. John Chrysostom on the value of work: “Let us not be ashamed of manual labour [...] Idleness is destructive; work, by contrast, makes everything more useful. Knowing how much damage comes through idleness and the benefit of work, let us avoid the former and pursue the latter” (p. 32).

78. Ephraim the Syrian: “Woe to those who deprive the workers of their fair pay, because they are like those who shed blood” (*Oration on the Second Coming*) (p. 34).

79. John Chrysostom: “Wherever the husband and the wife and the children are connected through bonds of concord, friendship and virtue, there Christ is among them” (p. 36).

80. Another (unreferenced) quotation of Chrysostom is provided, emphasizing the value of love between a husband and wife, beyond which “nothing is more precious” (p. 37).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It occurred once, when asked about what Patristics is, that this author stated “it is the study of the *fathers*”. Whereupon the enquirer, who obviously misheard the reply, exclaimed with a mixture of surprise and affirmation “oh, it’s the study of the *farmers*”!

<sup>2</sup> These are as follows: St Andrew’s Greek Orthodox Theological College, Sydney; St Cyril’s Coptic Orthodox Theological College, Sydney (both are members of the Sydney College of Divinity) and St Athanasius College, Melbourne (a Coptic Orthodox member college of the University of Divinity).

<sup>3</sup> One positive initiative, of which the author has personal experience, belongs to St Andrew’s Greek Orthodox Theological College, Sydney. Patristic symposia have been organized there, not only for specialists but also for members of the public, since 2009. As the website of the College explains, these gatherings “originally took the form of a series of scholarly lectures delivered annually throughout the month of September, two every week. Since 2012, the annual symposia adopted the form of regular, two-day conferences. In the wake of the sixth session (2014), the conference has been biennial. From the outset, the symposia proved to be an open space for cross-disciplinary approaches to the Patristic phenomenon, and so they remain” (see online: [www.sagotc.edu.au](http://www.sagotc.edu.au), accessed on 30 November 2023).

<sup>4</sup> The rationale of the 2 Unit Legal Studies syllabus, however, was “not designed to prepare students for further study in law or to advise others about the law but rather to prepare them to participate effectively in everyday life” (doi:10.53300/001c.6019).

<sup>5</sup> Since the Federation of Australia in 1901, there are six Australian States, each with its own parliament, government and laws (Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia), and two Territories (the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory).

<sup>6</sup> According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2022 “the majority of students were enrolled in government schools (64.5%), followed by Catholic schools (19.7%) and independent schools (15.9%)”. Source: [www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release](http://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release) (accessed on 4 January 2024).

<sup>7</sup> These used to be known as Scripture classes, but are now called Special Religious Education (SRE) or Religious Instruction (RI) classes. It must be remembered that they are optional classes, and, in more recent times, the children in New South Wales can opt for non-religious ethics classes instead of SRE.

<sup>8</sup> Mayer does provide optimism nonetheless for an increased interest even in secular universities worldwide based on “the legitimacy afforded by the now maturing field of late antiquity” within which “patristics can be viewed either as an allied field or a subdiscipline”.

<sup>9</sup> According to the 2021 Australian Census figures, only 43.9% of the population identify themselves as Christian, down from 52% in 2016 (and 74% in 1991), while those who identify as non-religious are 39%, an increase from 30% in 2016. For an insightful overview of the data concerning religious affiliation, involving a great diversity of religious beliefs due to migration trends over recent decades, see the Australian Bureau of Statistics at [www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia](http://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia) (accessed on 4 January 2024).

<sup>10</sup> Several notable luminaries who lived in the last hundred years or so would certainly qualify as Patristic personalities. It is simply that the designation of ‘Church Father’ is so hallowed that it is normally applied only with the passage of a very great period of time.

<sup>11</sup> The Divine Liturgy ascribed to John Chrysostom is celebrated throughout the liturgical year in Greek Orthodox practice, while a second, ascribed to Basil the Great, is used ten times throughout the year. A third, bearing the name of Gregory the Theologian (Nazianzus), is more popular among other ecclesiastical jurisdictions. Regardless of embellishments that have occurred over time, or even questions of authorship, it is noteworthy that all Three Hierarchs have the distinction of being honoured as authors of ‘prayed theology,’ as represented in the most central act of the Church, which is the Eucharist.

<sup>12</sup> An obvious echo of Plato’s assertion that “true philosophers give thought to dying” (οἱ ὀρθῶς φιλοσοφούντες ἀποθνήσκειν μελετῶσι).

<sup>13</sup> As the late Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Australia Stylianos Harkianakis of blessed memory relayed to his students: “The Holy Bible unites all Christians, but as soon as we open it, it divides us!”

- 14 Otto Bardenhewer maintained, back in 1908 (Bardenhewer 1908, p. 2), that it is to Jerome (fourth century) that we owe the *idea* of a Patrology. That assertion may, however, reflect a conflation of the notions of ‘ecclesiastical writers’ on the one hand, and of ‘Fathers’ on the other.
- 15 Although the terms are used interchangeably in everyday usage, Van Geest outlines what he perceives to be the differences between Patrology and Patristics. His article points out that it was only much later that patrologists employed the methods of literary and historical criticism to determine the historical and literary influences upon the works of the Church Fathers.
- 16 With a touch of light-heartedness, we could add that the traditional *consensus patrum* is in danger of becoming *consensus partum*, where *partum* indicates profit or acquisition. According to dictionary definitions, moreover, *partum* is the accusative of *partus*, from *parere*, ‘to give birth to, bring into being’, hence the term *post partum*, ‘after childbirth’. Therefore, the attentive stance of listening to the consensus of the Fathers on matters of salvation, could either conjure the appropriate image of the spiritual birth that this is meant to provide, or else degenerate into an expectation of other kinds of profit—all through the reversal of just two letters.
- 17 Palamas’s terminology for the three powers of the soul are part of an extremely long linguistic tradition, as the very same terms can be found in Plato’s *Republic* (441E–442C).
- 18 The centrality of the Resurrection is lived out liturgically and hymnographically within the Body of Christ, the Church. An extract of one Resurrectional *Kontakion* hymn, among countless others that could be cited, exclaims straightforwardly: “The Saviour has come to those in darkness. Come out now, believers, to the Resurrection!” See online: [digitalchantstand.goarch.org/goa/dcs](https://digitalchantstand.goarch.org/goa/dcs) (accessed on 12 December 2023).
- 19 In certain newly minted but unacceptable views (in so far as they claim to be Christian views), the Resurrection is not an event that truly occurred, but only the symbolic way in which the Evangelists and disciples portrayed the memory of Jesus Christ in their own nostalgic imagination!
- 20 Papadopoulos became a monk of Mt Athos towards the end of his life, receiving the monastic name Gerasimos.

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