

## The School of Paris and Eucharistic Ecclesiology in the Twentieth Century

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### *Introduction*

It is a great honor and a very great joy to be able to speak to you here, at Saint Vladimir's Seminary, about the School of Paris and in particular about the ecclesiology of Father Serge Bulgakov. I have the feeling that the time for discussion is coming back in the Orthodox world. The polemics about sophiology in the 1930s, then the advent of the Cold War, and finally the collapse of Soviet communism all contributed, on both sides of the Atlantic, to some great thinkers moving away from each other – thinkers such as Georges Florovsky and Serge Bulgakov, Alexander Schmemmann and Paul Evdokimov, John Meyendorff and Olivier Clément. Today, the Orthodox world is free politically and a consensus has emerged that Orthodox ecclesiology can be only eucharistic: in such a context it is as if the continental drift of Orthodox theology has been stopped! In such a context, from New York to Paris and Moscow, one rediscovers the enormous potential of the School of Paris to give a response to the crisis of Orthodox thought, to the crisis of the ecumenical movement, but also more generally to the crisis of the modern world.

Everyone knows indeed that the Orthodox world is going through a difficult crisis, not least because, in the face of so many pressing problems, already more than ten centuries have passed since all Orthodox bishops met in a general council. You here at Saint Vladimir's know how problematic is the situation of the Orthodox Church of America and how much

the ecclesiology of the neo-patristic synthesis, at the same time universalist and territorial, can bring satisfactory answers neither to the other Christian churches nor to the Orthodox Christians of America. Today Orthodoxy cannot call upon the Turks or Stalin to explain the impotence of its “pentarchic” or “koinonic” vision of the Church.

Insofar as I do not wish to speak for more than forty minutes – not least because I realize that you already know the principal personalities who formed the School of Paris and taught there more or less a long time ago: Bulgakov, Florovsky, Schmemmann, Evdokimov, Meyendorff, Clément – allow me to proceed in the following way. First, I will start by briefly recalling some general truths about the School of Paris. Then I will present a short overview of sophiological ecclesiology according to the wish of Peter Bouteneff. Finally, I will finish by exposing a certain number of consequences of the revival of the Orthodox ecclesiology which occurred within this School. As this talk cannot be exhaustive, allow me at the outset to recommend that you read about the School of Paris in the books Michael Plekon devoted to the question.

### *The School of Paris: a Symbolic Reality, a Place of Memory*

The School of Paris is a reality difficult to identify. It cannot be conceptualized. I would say that it is a movement, a symbolic reality, which the French historian Pierre Nora calls a “place of memory.” But the collective memory is not very precise: nobody really knows when it starts and when it finishes. Some, like Alexis Kniazev, traced it as far back as the Mohyla Academy of Kiev!

The memory tends also to associate with the School of Paris thinkers such as Vladimir Lossky or Nicolas Berdiaev, who never taught there. Conversely, one tends to forget that Alexander Schmemmann and John Meyendorff, because of their departure to the United States after the war, did in fact teach at Paris and did credit their formation in Saint Serge with a good share of their creativity and their engagements with the many topics of their scholarly writings.

Some of the difficulties in coming to an understanding of the nature and role of the Paris School are not always entirely or exactly theological, but often explicitly political. Thus, for example, George Florovsky vigorously opposed Serge Bulgakov in 1936–37; and in the case of the socialist George Fedotov and the monarchist Kiprian Kern, we see political factors at work to such an extent that Fedotov was excluded from the Institute in 1938! And they were very sharp in the ecumenical world, in particular between Anton Kartashov, favorable in 1935 to intercommunion with the Anglicans within the framework of Fellowship of Saint Alban and Saint Sergius, and Vassili Zenkovski, who was hostile toward the proposal.

Nonetheless, as Job Getcha wrote recently, the School of Paris is indeed a coherent whole, not unlike the schools of Antioch and Alexandria in the fourth century. The School possesses a collective memory of the last several decades, preserving many important fruits of the work of, and association between, such figures as Bulgakov and Florovsky, and Berdiaev and Schmemmann. These relationships reach out beyond Paris: in the USSR one adds the figure of Mérejkovski, whose anti-communism was so influential on his generation; in the United States, Paul Valliere recalled that Bulgakov and Florovsky find their spiritual roots in Soloviev and Boukharev. In all cases, in spite of often vast differences and sometimes virulent criticism of one against the other, figures as diverse as Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky, Nicholas Lossky, and Zenkovsky, on the one hand, and the “idealists” on the other – Berdiaev and Bulgakov in particular – are held together in their common association with the Paris School.

Given such a diverse group, one must ask Why? First of all, it is enough to point out the very significant historical fact of a common spirit, especially when under attack. In 1937, all the professors – except, notably, Florovsky, who had moved to Serbia at the time – of the Saint Serge Institute supported the sophiological thought of Bulgakov against the attacks of Metropolitan Serge of Moscow and those of the synod of the Russian Church Outside Russia. But Florovsky returned to teach at St. Serge in 1938. He agreed not to reconsider the question further given the intellectual victory gained within