



International Annunciation-St. Justin-Conferences

The Method of Interpreting the New Testament in the Exegetical Writings of St. Justin of Ćelije

Hieromonk Iriney Pikovskiy
Sretensky Theological Academy Moscow

Abstract:

Saint Justin of Ćelije is one of the most outstanding theologians of the Serbian Orthodox Church of the 20th century. He composed a number of commentaries on the New Testament, which have received merely scant consideration. Thanks to his studies at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy, he was familiar with Russian literature. At that time, commentaries on the New Testament by Saint Theophan the Recluse were popular in Russia. Comparing the exegetical method of Saint Justin with the approach by Saint Theophan, one can see that they both used similar Greek and Russian Patristic sources; both sought to create a “spiritual” commentary on the Scripture. Their goal was to present the Bible as a book of life, a guide to everyday moral behavior. The research presented in this article shows that, in highlighting the commandment of love in the Gospel of John, Justin (Popović) sought to present true love as impossible without asceticism. His entire exegetical work was devoted to the task of showing that only through ascetic efforts and the “acquisition” of the Holy Spirit does love become perfect, capable of extending to all mankind and of banishing narcissism and egoism.

1. Introduction

A great ascetic and spiritual writer of the 20th century, the Venerable Justin of Ćelije (Justin Popović; 1894-1979) is known for his zeal in defending the doctrine of the Orthodox Church. His major work “Dogmatics of the Orthodox Church” (1932-78) was highly respected by theologians in Serbia; it was used as a textbook on the Holy Scriptures in the theology departments at some American universities as well as in seminaries worldwide. As is well known, St. Justin knew several ancient and modern languages (Greek, Russian, English, German, French) and translated into the Serbian language not only theological writings, but also contemporary philosophical essays. His first draft of a dissertation was prepared on “Philosophy and Religion of F. M. Dostoevsky” (1922-23). The very choice of a topic related to an outstanding Russian writer indicates that Father Justin had a deep respect for Russian culture and was capable to read books and articles in Russian.

In what concerns his exegetical writings, unfortunately, we could find only two special papers: “Comprehensive Love. Features of the Interpretation of the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament in the Works of St. Nicholas (Velimirović) and St. Justin (Popović)” by Oleg Yanshin (in Russian, 2006)



International Annunciation-St. Justin-Conferences

and “Hermeneutical Principles of Archimandrite Dr. Justin Popović” by Vladan Tatalović (in Serbian, 2010).

Analyzing the ways in which Fr. Justin (Popović) interpreted Holy Scripture, Oleg Yanshin compares him with St. Nikolaj Velimirović. Both prominent theologians of the Serbian Church believe that the humanity of God is “the main motif of the entire New Testament” and “the basis of its apostolic teaching” (Velimirovic 2004, 287). Both theologians, as Yanshin notes, connect “love” with a virtuous life, “with the fulfillment of all moral and ethical norms developed in antiquity and enshrined in the Holy Scriptures as divine commandments” (Yanshin 2006, 108-109).

Exploring the hermeneutical principles of Archimandrite Justin, Vladan Tatalović notes that the Serbian Doctor of Theology’s commentary on Scripture is like “an exegetical tool in the spirit of the ancient Egyptian desert” (Tatalović 2010, 17). This is why it is helpful, when studying his writings, to refer to the “Apophthegmata patrum”, known in Russia as “Otechnik” or in Serbia as “Starechnik”. When the twentieth century brought an explosion of scholarly interest in hermeneutics in the West, theologians at Belgrade University were not able to present any unique hermeneutical principle of their own. They were merely able to evaluate Western studies in view of their agreement or disagreement with the tradition of the Orthodox Church. Unlike his colleagues, Father Justin proposed a charismatic principle of exegesis that rejected «Bible criticism» as a waste of time. In explaining his own method of exegesis, Father Justin emphasized the need to offer a genuinely Orthodox response to that method as well as the need for Orthodox clergy leading an ascetic life (Tatalović 2010, 19).

Up to this day, St. Justin's exegetical writings have not been appreciated to the extent warranted by his theological standing. Seeking to remedy this failure, this study focuses on three aspects of those writings: 1) on St. Justin’s purpose in interpreting the New Testament, 2) on his manner of presentation, and 3) on the peculiarities in the content of his exegesis. Both in view of St. Justin's time of life and in view of the ascetic orientation of his writings he is quite close to the Russian saint Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894). It makes sense to compare the writings of both zealots of Orthodox piety with one another. Leaving aside biographical information about Bishop Theophan (Govorov), this study sets out with some remarks about the life of Archimandrite Justin (Popović).

2. Sacred Scripture and the Life Path of Archimandrite Justin

“Blagoje” - that was the name of the future saint before his monastic tonsure. From 1905 to 1914, he studied at St. Sava's Seminary in Belgrade. At the age of fourteen he began to read the Holy Gospel regularly. Apparently, from that time he made it a rule for himself and others to read three chapters of the New Testament every day. This rule he adhered to himself for the rest of his life, and he recommended it to others. The time of his seminary studies was characterized by a conscious youthful awakening to the mystery of life and the meaning of existence. At this age, young Blagoje, like the young man in the Gospel (Mt 19:16; Mk 10:17), asked himself the most serious evangelical question: “What must one do to acquire eternal life?” To this basic question he often returned throughout his life, especially in his conversations with young people. As Bishop Athanasius (Jevtić) notes, “Blagoje's conscious interest in the holy and living word of God in Holy Scripture went beyond seminary subjects and examination requirements; for him it was a search for daily bread for life and



International Annunciation-St. Justin-Conferences

exploits, a search for answers and spiritual food for his soul, hungry and thirsty for God, hungry and thirsty for the fullness and meaning of life both here on earth and in eternity” (Jevtić 2004, 17). All his subsequent exploits and his entire ascetic and theological life illustrate to how much the Word of God, which is “sharper than any two-edged sword” (see Heb 4:12), meant to him.

St. Justin's period of study in Russia was limited to one year (1916). But certainly, his stay at the best theological school in the country at that time, at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy, had considerable influence on him. Here he grew spiritually, familiarizing himself with the works of Russian saints. A special spiritual closeness united him with saints Sergius of Radonezh and Seraphim of Sarov. Already then Justin realized that “Orthodoxy, as Dostoevsky suggests, is not just churchliness and rituals, it is a living feeling... In reality... in it... there is only the image of Christ” (Popović 2021, 222).

After World War I, starting in 1921, Father Justin taught New Testament at the St. Sava Seminary of Serbia. At that time, his lectures on the New Testament for seminarians had not yet been published; they were distributed in student notes. Before each lecture on Scripture or other theological subjects he prayed warmly and with tears: “O Most Sweet Lord, by Thy holy evangelist and apostle, fulfill the Gospel in me, a sinner, and teach me what and how to speak” (Popović 2004, 35).

With the outbreak of World War II, when the University of Belgrade was temporarily closed, he devoted his stay at the monasteries of Kalenić and Ravanica to the New Testament (Nikiforov 2012, 596-603). His interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of John, the three Epistles of the Apostle John the Theologian and the seven Epistles of the Apostle Paul were published after his death. These exegetical commentaries amount to over a thousand pages.

3. The purpose of interpreting Scripture

Father Justin's basic hermeneutical principles are outlined in his essay “Why and How to Read the Holy Scriptures”. In the first paragraph of this short article, he explains his attitude to the divine inspiration of the Bible: “The Holy Scripture of the New Testament is the biography of God incarnate in the world. It describes how... God the Logos revealed God's plan for the world and God's love for the world ... Everything that this world and the people in it need, God has said in Scripture... If you do not find in the Holy Scriptures an answer to one of your questions, it means that you have either asked a meaningless question or have failed to read the Holy Scriptures and deduce the answer from them.” (Popovic 2000, 7). For him, the Gospel and the Epistles of St. Paul are, first and foremost, a guide to the spiritual life, to be followed in practice in all important situations.

Fr. Justin therefore reads the Holy Scriptures as the biography of every human being, without exception. Here everyone can find himself, see his virtues and faults, see the way from sin to sinlessness, the path a man may take, either towards God or towards the devil. Here is the whole history of sin and sinfulness, as well as the whole history of justice and righteousness. In Scripture we find the cure for the vices and food for the virtues: “If you are good, Scripture will teach you how to become better; if you are sensitive, it will teach you angelic tenderness; if you are clever, it will teach you wisdom.” (Popovic 2000, 8). “It is, in the words of St. Chrysostom, like a fragrant root, which smells the stronger the more it is crushed” (Ibid.).

To some extent, similar methodological principles were pursued earlier by St. Theophan the Recluse. For him, the purpose of interpreting Scripture was to offer guidance for the soul, a kind of



International Annunciation-St. Justin-Conferences

manual for the spiritual ordering of life. Therefore, the hermit of the monastery “Vyshenskaya Pustyn” did not primarily pursue a scholarly interpretation of the Gospel or the Psalms, “but rather to present an experience of how to turn the songs of David, used so prominently by the Church, into spiritual formation, drawing lessons from them for the ordering of one's thoughts and for a good disposition of the heart and the whole life” (Theophan the Recluse 2013, 4). On this basis, St. Theophan believed that biblical texts should not be interpreted so much as meditated upon and put into practice (Pikovskiy 2018, 143).

“How does one read the Holy Scriptures?” – Fr. Justin asks rhetorically. And immediately he offers an answer: “Prayerfully, with reverence, because in every word there is a drop of eternal truth, and all words make up the bottomless ocean of Eternal Truth. Scripture is not a book, but a life; because its words are ‘spirit and life’ (Jn 6:63), so they can be understood by making them the spirit of our spirit and the life of our life. It is a book to be read for a lifetime of practicing. It must first be experienced and then understood” (Popović 2000, 9). So, the experience of prayerful penetration into the essence of the Scriptures, a “soulful” disposition towards it, must precede any effort at rational cognition of the events, miracles, parables, recipes described. It is as though we were asked to put on the clothes of the evangelical speakers, to share their lives, to see ourselves “from within.”

To understand the essence of the Bible, one must make it one's own Word of God, soak in it, see the world through the eyes of the God-man Jesus. And this is impossible without the practice of constant re-reading of the Holy Scriptures, day after day. The study of the Word of God and the fulfillment of the Savior's words transforms a person into a relative of the Lord, as He Himself declared: “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8:21). There is a certain flavor of immortality in the Savior's words, which drips drop by drop into the soul of the Scripture reader and revives it from death to life, from perishability to impermanence. The Savior proclaims this by saying, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth My word, and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life.... and has passed from death to life” (Jn 5:24). “This means, – as Fr. Justin notes, – that by listening, by studying the word of God, you will know immortality and eternity... and if you believe that word with the fullness of faith, you have already learned what eternal life is and have passed from death to life. That is why the Savior affirms, ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that keepeth my word shall never see death forever’ (Jn 8:51)”.

So, as we can see, for St. Justin the purpose of reading Scripture is exclusively soteriological. The interpretation of Scripture must therefore be relevant, accessible to the understanding of those same simple laborers, fishermen, farmers, builders and soldiers, rich and poor, who once walked in crowds through Galilee, following Jesus to hear from Him the word of life. Because of this, Father Justin's lengthy interpretations of Scripture, in which there are constant repetitions of the same thought about the God-man Jesus, can be seen as “abundant in word” precisely because they are meant to impregnate the reader with the oil of divine wisdom, since the Word of God cleanses from sin (cf. Jn 15:3).

4. A method of interpreting the books of the New Testament

In contrast to the typical textbooks on Bible History or the Gospel published in Russia at the turn of the



International Annunciation-St. Justin-Conferences

nineteenth and twentieth centuries¹, Fr. Justin's account bypasses the issues of isagoge, i. e. the problems involved in determining times and places in which the sacred books were composed, authorship, composition and others. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Russian textbooks on Gospel history used to connect all four Gospels, compiling a kind of commentary-synopsis. Fr. Justin, in contrast, consciously opted for the model of patristic exegesis, commenting on each of the books of Holy Scripture separately.

All of Father Justin's exegetical writings follow the same pattern: Chapter by chapter, fragments of the New Testament text are interpreted in detail. For example, the exegesis of the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel is divided into two sections entitled "The Genealogy of Jesus Christ" (Mt 1:1-17) and "The Birth of Jesus Christ" (Mt 1:18-25). It ends with conclusions about what the first chapter of this Gospel teaches: "Jesus Christ is the God-man' – this truth is the foundation of New Testament theology." (Popović 2000, 31-32). Then the second chapter of the Gospel is examined, which is divided into three paragraphs ("The Wise Men from the East" Mt 2:1-12; "Fleeing to Egypt" Mt 2:13-15; "The Beating of the Children by Herod" Mt 2:16-18; "The Return from Egypt" Mt 2:19-23), and so on.

When interpreting a Gospel (of Matthew or John), only brief quotations in Serbian are given, not the whole text. Greek terms are cited in exegetically important places, for example, when Fr. Justin wants to emphasize that the Logos was originally "with God" (πρὸς τὸν θεόν; Jn 1:1): He is "with God", but is the Second Hypostasis of the Holy Trinity, possessing the fullness of power and divine attributes. Another such quotation is offered when he emphasizes that "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο; Jn 1:17) and He "has life in Himself" (ἔχει ζωὴν ἐν ἑαυτῷ; Jn 5:26) (Popovic 2001a, 8, 21, 64). Even in cases where Jesus Christ is not directly referred to, the selection of Greek terms is still contextualized by important dogmatic statements related to the Savior: "born again" (γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν; Jn. 3:3); "in the resurrection of life" (εἰς ἀνάστασιν ζωῆς) / "in the resurrection of judgment" (εἰς ἀνάστασιν κρίσεως; Jn 5:29); "strive (ἐργάζεσθε) not for food that perishes (τὴν ἀπολλυμένην), but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you, for on Him God the Father has set His seal (ἐσφράγισεν)" (Jn 6:27); "this is the work of God (τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ), that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent" (Jn 6:29) (Ibid., 41, 46, 65).

The same tendency to cite Greek terms in dogmatically important places occurs in his commentaries on the Epistles of the Apostle Paul. The only difference is that in some commentaries on Paul's Epistles the entire text of the New Testament is given at the beginning of each paragraph. According to the "Afterword" compiled by the editorial board of Father Justin's works, he cited his own translation because none of the existing Serbian translations satisfied him (Popović 2001b, 616).

Father Justin's commentaries contain no references to scholars contemporary to him. Neither in the text of the commentary nor in the critical apparatus do we find any references to scholarly literature. Instead, we often find references to the Church Fathers (John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Theophylact of Bulgaria and others) or to liturgical texts. Once Father Justin even refers to the popular Russian Akathist to Jesus the Sweetest (Ibid., 102). The following three examples from his Gospel commentaries illustrate how he sometimes repeats or retells word-for-word what the holy fathers of the golden age of patristics had to say. Judging by syntax and vocabulary, he must have used Russian translations.

Example 1.

¹ Cf.: Barsov M. 1893. *Collection of Articles on the Interpretative and Supervisory Reading of the Fourth Gospel*. Synodal Printing House; Ivanov A. I. 1886. *Guide to the Explanation of the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament: Review of the Fourth Gospel and the Book of Acts of the Apostles*. Bukharev I. 1899. *Interpretation on the Gospel of Matthew*. Tipography of G. I. Prostavkov; Kokhomsky S. V. 1904. *Explanation of the most important places of the Fourth Gospel*. Vol. 1-2. Parkov's Tipography; Bogolepov D. 1911. *Guide to the Interpretative Reading of the Fourth Gospel and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles*. Tipography of V. Checherin.



International Annunciation-St. Justin-Conferences

Commentary on Mt 1:1	St. John Chrysostom (John Chrysostom 1901, 20)	St. Justin of Chelije (Popovic 2000, 13)
Text in the language of publication	Но почему Матфей называет свое евангелие «книгою родства Иисуса Христа», тогда как оно содержит не только одно родословие, но и все домостроительство? Потому, что рождение Христа составляет главное во всем домостроительстве, является началом и корнем всех дарованных нам благ... Всего изумительнее, выше всякой надежды и чаяния, действительно, есть то, что Бог стал человеком; а когда это совершилось, то все последующее и понятно, и естественно.	Свети еванђелист назива своје Еванђеље «књигом рођења Исуса Христа», иако оно садржи не само Христов родослов већ и сав домострој спасења. То он чини стога, вели Свети Златоуст, што рођење Христово сачињава суштину целокупног домостроја спасења, као и почетак и корен свих дарованих нам блага. У ствари, најчудније и најнеочекиваније је то, да Бог постане човек. А када се то десило, онда све што долази за тим, и појмљиво је и природно је.
English translation	But why does Matthew call his Gospel “the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ,” when it contains not only one genealogy, but also the entire oikonomia (God’s housekeeping)? Because the birth of Christ is the main thing in the entire oikonomia, is the beginning and root of all the treasures given to us ... The most amazing thing of all, beyond all hope and expectation, is truly that God became man; and when this happened, then everything that follows is understandable and natural.	The holy evangelist calls his Gospel “the book of the birth of Jesus Christ,” although it contains not only Christ’s genealogy but also the whole oikonomia of salvation. He does this because, says St. Chrysostom, the birth of Christ is the essence of the entire oikonomia of salvation, as well as the beginning and root of all the treasures given to us. In fact, the strangest and most unexpected thing is that God becomes a man. And when that happened, then everything that follows is understandable and natural.

Example 2.

Commentary on Jn 1:3	St. Cyril of Alexandria (Cyril of Alexandria 2001, 478)	St. Justin of Čelije (Popovic 2001a, 12)
Text in the language of publication	Сын, как Единородный, все содевает, при содействии очевидно и соприсутствии Ему Отца и Святого Духа... А соприсутствует Сыну Отец, думаем, не как бессильному сотворить что-либо	Свети Кирил Александриски благовести: Бог Логос као Јединородни Син очигледно све ради уз сарадњу и у саприсуству Оца и Светога Духа. А Сину саприсуствује Отац не као немоћноме да ишта



International Annunciation-St. Justin-Conferences

	из существующего, но как всецело сущий в Нем (Сыне) по тождеству сущности.	уради од постојећег, него као сав будући у Сину истоветноћу суштине.
English translation	The Son, as the Only Begotten, does everything, with the obvious assistance and co-presence of the Father and the Holy Spirit.... And the Father is co-present with the Son, we think, not as being powerless to create anything from what exists, but as being entirely present in Him (the Son) by the identity of essence.	St. Cyril of Alexandria is preaching: God the Logos as the Only Begotten Son obviously does everything with the cooperation and co-presence of the Father and the Holy Spirit. And the Father is co-present with the Son, not because he (the Son) is powerless to bring anything into being, but because the being of the Son is of one essence (with the Father).

Example 3.

Commentary on Mt 4:3	St. Theophylact of Ohrid (Theophylact of Ohrid 2010, 65)	St. Justin of Ćelije (Popovic 2000, 84)
Text in the language of publication	Но ты спросишь, что за грех было сделать из камней хлеба? Итак, знай, что послушаться дьявола в чем-либо – грех.	Запиташ ли ти, вели Блажени Теофилакт, какав је то грех претворити камење у хлебова, онда знај: послушати ђавола ма у чему — грех је.
English translation	But you will ask, What kind of sin was it to make bread out of stones? So, know that obeying the devil in anything is a sin.	If you ask, says Blessed Theophylact, what kind of sin it is to turn stones into loaves, then know: obeying the devil no matter what – is a sin.

The publishers of St. Justin of Ćelije's commentaries on the Gospels cite many such passages which illustrate his reliance on the Fathers of the Church. However, in the editions of his interpretations on the Apostle Paul, no such references to the holy theological literature are mentioned. Here Father Justin sometimes refers to the "apostolic method" "preserved forever in the holy Orthodox Church through the holy spirit-bearing Fathers" (Popovic 2001b, 38), or he speaks of the "conciliar mind of the Church" (Ibid., 39) without mentioning names. Only once he notes in passing that the thoughts he borrowed had resounded in the works of such God-bearing and God-wise Fathers as Athanasius the Great, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, Macarius the Great, John Damascene, Simeon the New Theologian, and Gregory Palamas (Ibid., 384). In his commentaries on the Pauline epistles, St. Justin thus appears as seeking to reflect on those fathers "in their spirit", leaving aside specific references.

His approach here resembles the one of St. Theophan the Recluse, who also did not worry much about accurate bibliographical details, focusing instead on rendering the Holy Scriptures understandable for, and available to the memory of the average reader: St. Theophan, after all, was the first theologian in Russia who dared prepare a lengthy commentary on all the epistles of the Apostle Paul. It is not likely that St. Justin knew his writings, since the works of St. Theophan appeared in print relatively recently and he had not yet been glorified, while Justin gave preference to reading the works of already canonized saints of the Church.



International Annunciation-St. Justin-Conferences

However, a few examples will be sufficient to show that, despite their difference in style, both saints write “in the same spirit.” They appeal to related moral and ethical categories. They write in different words, but essentially offer the same message:

Example 4.

Commentary on 1 Co 2:4	St. Theophan the Recluse (Theophan the Recluse 2006a, 45-46)	St. Justin of Ćelije (Popovic 2001b, 11)
Text in the language of publication	Во Христе Иисусе — неисследимое богатство духовное. Которые верою прилепляются к Нему, тотчас получают все существенное, что необходимо для того, чтобы быть настоящим христианином.	«Благодат Божја» сва је присутна «у Христу Исусу», као оваплоћеном и очовеченом Богу Логосу... А у благодати је свакоме дато све што је потребно за освећење и спасење, сва богатства божанска и вечна.
English translation	In Christ Jesus there are unknowable spiritual riches. Those who by faith cling to Him, immediately receive all that is essential to being a true Christian.	"The grace of God" is all present "in Christ Jesus", as the incarnate and humanized God Logos... And in grace everyone is given everything necessary for sanctification and salvation, all divine and eternal riches.

As can be seen from Example 4, both ecclesiastical exegetes understand “the grace of God” (1 Co 2:4) as the grace of faith in Christ the Lord, which makes believers partakers of all spiritual benefits. The persons that Bishop Theophan (Govorov) refers to as “Christians” or “true Christians”, Archimandrite Justin (Popović) refers to as “members of the Church” or those who are “in the Body of the Church”. In both cases it is assumed that believers participate in the Church’s Sacraments, primarily the Eucharist.

Example 5.

Commentary on 1 Co 9:27	St. Theophan the Recluse (Theophan the Recluse 2006a, 440-441)	St. Justin of Ćelije (Popovic 2001b, 148)
Text in the language of publication	Выставляет он [Павел] последние [телесные подвиги] потому, что указывал пример в себе в исправление поблажки телу, и потому, что когда умерщвлено и поработщено тело, то и душа будет исправна.	Живот вечни у Богу, — то је наш циљ... Ради тога хришћани ударају на себе разне подвиге и муке. Они муче тело своје подвизима поста и молитве и непрестаног еванђелског труда, да оно не би постало легалиште грехова и страсти.
English translation	He [Paul] performs the last [bodily feats] in order, through	Eternal life in God, – that is our goal.... For this reason, Christians perform various feats



International Annunciation-St. Justin-Conferences

	his own example, to establish the need to correct the indulgence of the body, because, when the body is mortified and enslaved, the soul will also be reformed.	and inflict sufferings on themselves. They torment their body with feats of fasting and prayer and constant evangelical effort, so that it does not become a resting place of sins and passions.
--	---	--

As seen in Example 5, both holy writers emphasize the importance of fighting the passions of the flesh. Here it is not a matter of torturing or destroying one's body, for the body is not an enemy to man but "the temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Co 6:19). Rather, all turns on having the body submit to the mind as its master, - and again, not to a master in the sense of a tyrant, but as a teacher and educator. Indulgence of the body leads to a relaxation of the mind, a weakening of zeal for God, a weakening of the spiritual life, a withering of the soul. To prevent this from happening, faith in Christ alone is not enough, we need a feat of abstinence from idle pleasures and vigilance of the mind over one's passions.

Example 6.

Commentary on 2 Co 6:6	St. Theophan the Recluse (Theophan the Recluse 2006b, 277-278)	St. Justin of Ćelije (Popovic 2001b, 448)
Text in the language of publication	ἐν ἀγνότητι - в чистоте, в непорочности. Здесь он [Павел] понимает или целомудрие (телесное и сердечное), или чистоту во всем (нравственную, чистоту побуждений, вообще чистоту совести), или нелюбостязательность (Феофилакт), или то, что он и Евангелие проповедовал даром (святой Златоуст).	ἐν ἀγνότητι - У каквој чистоти? У чистоти срца, у чистоти душе, у чистоти савести, у чистоти живота. Речју: у чистоти од греха, од свега греховног; у чистоти од ђавола, од свега ђавољег. Јер у чистом срцу борави Бог, и чисто срце види Бога, зна Бога, живи Богом. Чистота срца је последица живота по Еванђељу, живота у еванђелским врлинама.
English translation	ἐν ἀγνότητι – in purity, in blamelessness. Here he [St. Paul] means either chastity (of body and heart), or purity in all things (moral, purity of motives, purity of conscience in general), or modesty (Theophylact), or even that he even preached the Gospel without charge (St. John Chrysostom)	ἐν ἀγνότητι – In what purity? In purity of heart, in purity of soul, in purity of conscience, in purity of life. In other words: in purity from sin, from everything sinful; in purity from the devil, from everything devilish. Because God resides in a pure heart, and a pure heart sees God, knows God, lives with God. Purity of the heart is a consequence of living according to the Gospel, living in the virtues of the Gospel.

Without collusion, Bishop Theophan and Archimandrite Justin thus begin their commentaries



International Annunciation-St. Justin-Conferences

by giving ascetic terms in Greek. The appeal to Greek terminology emphasizes the importance of the subject of purity of body and purity of soul. The beauty of the Christian, and indeed of every Christian soul, consists in “purity of life” (cf. 1 Pe 3:2-4). According to the inspired words of the Apostle John, anyone who has hope in God “purifies himself as He [God] is pure” (1 Jn 3:3).

A student of the New Testament must not approach the subject only theoretically. He cannot be a listener only but must also be a doer of the commandments of the God-man. According to Fr. Justin's thought, when the first-born Apostle admonishes young Timothy to “keep yourself pure” (σεαυτὸν ἀγνὸν τήρει, 1 Ti 5:22), he commands him to keep himself from sin by living in the Gospel virtues (Popović 2001. Interpretation of the First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians, 448). When the holy gospel virtues work in the heart, they cleanse a person from all uncleanness (cf. Php 4:8-9).

The word “virtue” is one of the most important words for both St. Theophan the Hermit and St. Justin of Čelije. In the commentaries on the First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians, St. Theophan uses the word 108 times, and St. Justin 95 times. Such virtues as faith, purity, modesty, diligence in labor and knowledge of the dogmas arise from active engagement (voluntary self-coercion), from the desire to live with Christ and in Christ. The first of the virtues is love. According to St. Theophan, “all the above-mentioned virtues and feats (добродетели и подвиги) arise from it [love] (see 1 Co 13) ... It is poured into hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Theophan the Recluse 2006b, 279-280). To receive love, one must offer voluntary labor in doing works of love, until finally the grace of the Spirit fills one's heart. If we follow Theophan and Justin, this is what Apostle Paul wanted to convey in his Epistles: we should not only demonstrate show-works of love, but also fill our hearts with divine love by “acquisition” of the Holy Spirit.

The difference in the commentaries of Saints Theophan and Justin lies in the fact that Theophan more often refers to the authority of church Fathers (John Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrus, Oecumenius of Trikka, Theophylact of Ohrid). Sometimes Theophan's interpretation of verses from the Epistles of Paul reduces to a collection of quotations from those Fathers. As to Chrysostom, he always uses the epithet «saint». For him, as for Fr. Justin, John Chrysostom was the most authoritative exegete of the Apostle Paul, and therefore “a saint.” Justin (Popović) prefers to retell the writings of the fathers of the Church in his own words, but this does not diminish the value of his commentaries. Theophan writes “in the letter of the holy fathers”, and Justin “in the spirit of the holy fathers”.

5. The Ascetic Aspect of the Exegesis of St. Justin

More than once, St. Justin points out that the so-called “scientific” anthropologies do not recognize the presence of the “image of God” in man. By doing so, they deny the development of the human being in God. If man is not the image of God, then he does not need the God-man (Popović 2004, 167). The Holy Gospel then becomes unrealizable, utopian, or has the character of a formal law. Jesus turns into a “cruel moralizer” who wants to reduce man to a robot-like existence. The modern world of “evolutions” has ceased to think about sin. Everything on earth becomes natural, even phenomena that are unnatural. This is why people are wary of speaking of the Lord as Savior from sin.

For Fr. Justin, the active realization is the pillar of the hermeneutical bridge: it is the only way to immerse oneself in the Tradition of the Church and the true criterion for the interpretation of Holy Scripture. This attitude toward hermeneutics follows from Fr. Justin's reverent attitude toward Sacred Scripture as the living Word of God, which, regardless of the historical distance between author and reader, speaks equally powerfully to each generation. Having made the choice in favor of the



International Annunciation-St. Justin-Conferences

authentic experience of the Gospel, a person of holy life must die to the world, putting on the “Gospel vestment” of the ascetic.

Of course, Archimandrite Justin was no stranger to the “academic style” associated with an appeal to critical apparatus. As Vladan Tatalović notes, the thoroughness with which the textbook on “Dogmatic Theology” was worked out speaks of an aptitude for scholarly work that would be the envy of every scholar (Tatalović 2010, 20). Therefore, it is likely that his adoption of the “ascetic” approach of the Church Fathers reflects a conscious decision, a decision that was inspired by the spirit of desert monasticism, in which Father Justin had lived from his early youth. The liturgical-ascetic approach to the interpretation of the Bible, in leaving aside information from isagoge, was used by Father Justin for pedagogical purposes, for the education of the future generation of priests who would be ready to go for exploits.

6. Conclusions

Just like St. Gregory Palamas, Archimandrite Justin (Popović) compared the human soul to a lamp in which good deeds are the oil and love is the wick. In “love, as in light, rests the grace of the Holy Spirit”. If there are no good deeds, then the wick of the soul, which is love, ceases to burn. And this leads to the consequence that the light of God's favor and the grace of God fade away. Archimandrite Justin depicted this inseparable connection between love and the virtues through the image of a house: The walls represent the virtues, and its roof is love. Just as a house is useless without a roof, so the virtues are useless without love, and, conversely, the roof is of no use if there are no walls on which it rests. “Love grows on good deeds, and they are its origin and at the same time its support” (Yanshin 2006, 110).

At the same time, St. Justin distinguished love for people, for each person, as selfless service to the disadvantaged, along with unceasing prayer before God for the “whole Adam,” from “love for the world”, that is, from love for worldly vanity and pleasures (fame, wealth, luxury, carnal comforts). If love for man is derived from love for God, it ennobles a person, leads him from emotional attachment to spiritual growth in love. If love is derived from a selfish desire to possess and enjoy, then a person descends to “carnal love”, considering his other half as an object of satisfaction of his passion. The two beginnings of love are contained in the dual nature of man: the soul lusts for spiritual love, while the body seeks carnal comforts. That God is love is known from the New Testament (1 Jn 4:7). St. Justin's task was to show what the nature of Divine love is. It is coveted, it is attainable, but from the perspective of an Orthodox theologian, true love is impossible without ascetic effort and the “acquisition” of the Holy Spirit. The emphasis on morality and asceticism, in our opinion, is a characteristic feature of the exegesis of St. Justin of Ćelije and makes him akin to St. Theophan the Recluse.

References

Cyril of Alexandria. 2001. Works. Vol 2. Book 1. Palomnik. (The text is printed according to the edition: “The Works of our holy father Cyril of Alexandria” in: The Works of the Holy Fathers in Russian translation, published at the Moscow Theological Academy. 1901. Vol. 64. Holy Trinity Sergius Lavra) (in Russian).



International Annunciation-St. Justin-Conferences

- Jevtic, Athanasius. 2004. "The biography of Father Justin." In: Popovic, St. Justin. 2004. The Collected Works: biography, on the God-human path, the path of God-knowledge. Palomnik, pp. 8-54. (in Russian).
- John Chrysostom. 1901. The Works in Russian translation. Vol. 7. Book 1 (2). St. Petersburg Theological Academy. (in Russian).
- Nikiforov, M. V. 2012. "Justin." In: Orthodox Encyclopedia. Vol. 28. Orthodox Encyclopedia, pp. 596-603. (in Russian).
- Pikovskiy, I. 2018. "The method of interpretation of Psalm 118 by St. Theophan the Recluse." Skrizhali 15: 140-156. (in Russian).
- Popovic, St. Justin. 2021. Philosophical Cliffs. Nicaea. (in Russian).
- Popovic, St. Justin. 2004. The Collected Works: biography, on the God-human path, the path of God-knowledge. Palomnik. (in Russian).
- Popovic, St. Justin. 2001a. The Collected Works. Vol. 11-12 (30). Interpretation of the Holy Gospel by John. Interpreting the Epistles of St. John the Theologian. Manastir Ćelije. (in Serbian).
- Popovic, St. Justin. 2001b. The Collected Works. Vol. 13 (30). Interpretation of the First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians of the Holy Apostle Paul. Manastir Ćelije. (in Serbian).
- Popovic, St. Justin. 2000. The Collected Works. Vol. 10 (30). Interpretation of the Holy Gospel from Matthew. Manastir Ćelije. (in Serbian).
- Tatalovic, V. 2010. "Hermeneutical Principles of Archimandrite Dr. Justin Popović." Srpska Teologija u dvedetom veku: israzhivachki problemy i resul'tati 5:17-29. (in Serbian).
- Theophan the Recluse. 2013. The Complete Collection of Works. Vol. 13. Publishing Council of the Russian Orthodox Church. (in Russian).
- Theophan the Recluse. 2006a. Interpretation of the St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians. Pravilo very. (in Russian).
- Theophan the Recluse. 2006b. Interpretation of the St. Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians. Pravilo very. (in Russian).
- Theophylact of Ohrid. 2010. "Interpretation on the Holy Gospel." Vol. 1. Interpretations on the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Sibirskaya Bozvolzvonmitsa. (in Russian).