



## International Annunciation-St. Justin- Conferences

# „Nature vive:“ To graft the Logos of the God-man onto the tree of the world.

Nun Andrea

Annunciation-St. Justin Stavropegial Hermitage of the Serbian Patriarchate, Unterufhausen,  
Germany

Modernity has challenged Tradition with a legitimate quest for personal development and creative expression. But in removing God from the center of this quest, it missed the point of the effort and by and large the meaning of life. In this short paper I will try to present some thoughts on how we can both develop personally and interact creatively with the world around us, in a manner that will allow us not only to keep our faith in Christ but also to grow in it and to proclaim with our way of life the good news of the Gospel. For this I will rely mainly on the writings of St. Justin the new. Almost our contemporary, St. Justin is known both for his criticism of the western culture in which most of us try to carry our Cross and follow Christ, and for being an „evangelist“ theologian, an indefatigable preacher of the Incarnation and the Resurrection of the God-man.

Some 30 years ago I had the opportunity to visit a wonderful exhibition of late medieval manuscripts in Antwerpen. While Evangeliaries were quite naturally illustrated with Gospel scenes, the text in Psalters and even more so in Books of Hours was in most cases placed in a decorative frame - even while not being entirely deprived of symbolical connotations: it consisted mostly of small living fauna and fruit laden bushes or blossoming flowers with insects flying between them on the yellowish background of the once brighter pages.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> MS0067 Book of Hours, Roman Use, Latin ms., Flanders, last qtr. 15th c. Medieval manuscript collection of Mount Angel Abbey, Oregon. Used by kind permission



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„By the beginning of the thirteenth century there had been many changes and developments in society as a whole [...] A more general distribution of wealth at the higher end of the social scale and a gradual increase in the number of people with some claim to literacy led inevitably to a greater demand for books. At this period there begins to be evidence of secular scribes and illuminators [as opposed to monks] living and working among other craftsmen in the towns and eventually, like them, forming their own craftsmen's guilds. [...] The gradual change in market was reflected in a corresponding change in emphasis in the types of book commonly produced. Fine liturgical books for public worship were still of course made, but liturgical books for personal use [...] became more common. The Book of Hours was the greatest medieval and renaissance best-seller and examples survive in their thousands, in almost every library in the world.“ (Backhouse 1979, 9)

A couple of weeks later, while in The Netherlands, I spent some time in a small museum of classical painting. Standing in front of its still-life panels I suddenly became aware of a *déjà-vu* feeling.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> MS0065 Horae Beatae Mariae Virginis. Latin. France, ca. 1525. Medieval manuscript collection of Mount Angel Abbey, Oregon. Used by kind permission



„In the late Middle Ages, still-life elements, mostly flowers but also animals and sometimes inanimate objects, were painted with increasing realism in the borders of illuminated manuscripts, developing models and technical advances that were used by painters of larger images. There was considerable overlap between the artists making miniatures for manuscripts and those painting panels, especially in Early Netherlandish painting.“ (Wikipedia *Still life*)

This overlap, which lasted until the late 15th century, influenced not only the content of still life painting - by the way this is the name first given in the Dutch speaking countries - but also the meaning this content carried, at least in the paintings of the Flemish and later of the Dutch school. Still life panels became a trend and a great commercial success. Heavy laden with Christian symbolism at first, they were, by the sixteenth century, abounding with allegorical meanings pointing to the vanity of the present life: watches, hourglasses and half





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peeled lemons symbolized the irreversible march of time, withering flowers the ephemeral character of beauty,<sup>3</sup>



fruit in general the transient character of this life, while rotting fruit, often eaten by insects, spoke of decay.<sup>4</sup>



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<sup>3</sup> Van Aelst, Willem, *Vase with flowers*, 1663, The Hague, Mauritshuis. The precious watch with its crystal cover open symbolizes the ephemeral character of the beauty that the vase celebrates. (Grohé 2004, 57)

<sup>4</sup> Balthasar van de Ast, *Still life with fruits and flowers* (1621). Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. ([www.rijksmuseum.nl](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl))

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When living animals were depicted, they were usually reptiles, frogs or mice: symbols of human passions or, again, decay. Other animals were painted dead or more exactly killed and comprised mostly game: birds, hares and less often deer, the very creatures that used to „live“ in the decorative frames of prayer texts.<sup>5</sup>



That was exactly what struck me: the very same beings that were alive, blossoming, buzzing of life even up until the late fifteenth century, appeared dead, withering, rotting, or else eating up the leftovers of what used to be alive, about a century later. Only too often the background of those paintings is dark, almost black. It no doubt serves to underline the painter's skill in dealing with color and light, but it nevertheless comes in striking opposition to the light background of the manuscript pages even when time has given them a smoky

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<sup>5</sup> Frans Snyder (1579–1657), *Still life with small dead game, fruit and vegetables* (painted between 1616 and 1620), Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. ([www.rijksmuseum.nl](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl))



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yellow tint. No wonder that by the seventeenth or eighteenth century, the French entitled the genre „nature morte“: dead nature.<sup>6</sup>

A double movement seemed to unfold in front of my eyes, one that allowed death to replace life: on the one hand the so to say withdrawal of the sacred text, as prayer started slowly but steadily to lose ground in the lives of people. I say slowly, because printed prayer books replaced the old manuscript ones and they were of course available in greater numbers and to an incomparably larger public, but... It was the second movement that undermined prayer: the once decorative element took central place; natural life and material objects were offered the attention once reserved to the word of, to and about God. Converse with God was replaced by observation and enjoyment of the natural world.

The Word of God being removed from the center of human interest, ceasing to be the primordial reference of human life and human activity, a new center was now needed. It had indeed already emerged: man, who would slowly but steadily become the measure of all things. What used to be considered as divine revelation became progressively interesting more as an object of man's critical faculty than as God's plan for humankind, thus losing the character of revelation and becoming more a legal, historical and moral narrative - in later centuries even suspect of simply serving the purpose of its compilers. Sure enough, there was sufficient arbitrariness on the part of religious authorities. But removing the Word of God from the center of human life did not do much to eradicate it; it simply left it with a smaller range of activity.

Considering this cultural shift that was actually effectuated over several centuries, we seem faced with the dilemma of whether humanity should be opting for a God- or a man-centered world. It is at this question that the theology of St. Justin brings an answer that is both informed theologically and spiritually discerning. For the Serbian saint and theologian, the God-man is the measure of all things. Christ is the criterion against which we should consider every human undertaking and endeavor. In becoming human, He no longer corresponds to the distant God of theocratic world views; by remaining fully divine, He does not share in the sinfulness of fallen humanity. We will come back to the centrality of this idea in St. Justin's theology.

Historically, the passage from a God-centred to a man-centred culture was accompanied by a growing sense of vanity and futility and placed under the shadow of the inescapable fate.

This inescapable fate, death, St. Justin argues, would have been the only perspective of humankind, the non-perspective of an all-encompassing nothingness, had it not been for the resurrection of the God-man (Popović 2010, 36-46). The expression of the love of God for man

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<sup>6</sup> Frans Snyders (1579–1657), *Still life with small dead game, fruit and vegetables* (painted between 1616 and 1620), Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. ([www.rijksmuseum.nl](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl))





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reached this apex, when He took the most unexpected initiative: to become man and share our fate.

One can go through the teaching of most major religions or simply spiritual traditions, only to discover that, for the most, humanity just about everywhere on Earth valued charity, humility and purity of heart, the spiritual over the material, displayed respect for nature, adopted ascetic practices, honoured ancestors, and felt responsibility for the generations to come, and perhaps most of all held the firm belief that above all, at the center of creation and within each one of us, there is a Spirit that some call great and others call God... One can say that this forms or at least formed a sort of spiritual tree for the whole of humanity, what St. Paul alludes to when he says that God gave to the „nations“, the peoples who did not have the Law, the conscience, in order to help them navigate away from evil and towards the good. In terms of Orthodox anthropology, this is the presence of the image of God, according to which He created us, thus setting the seal of divinity on our nature.

It is this seal that „allowed“ God to pass almost unnoticed when He incarnated. The mystery was hidden from the eyes of angels and men, and obviously those of demons, while God walked among men as a perfectly normal man. Nevertheless, St. Justin reminds us of the words of St. John of Damascus: the only novelty under the sun is exactly the incarnation of the Son of God, His becoming Son of Man. (Popović 2022, 30-31) In doing so, God grafted, so to say, divinity onto the human nature.

God, says St. Sophrony, repeated Himself when He created man, and indeed He does so with every human being coming into the world. But when man chose knowledge over life, that is, chose power over love, he lost the way of assuming the life of God. And so He, being All-love, assumed the life of man, in order to open the way for His creature to escape death and share in His life, live as His like. God-man thus becomes ‘the Way.’ It is onto the incarnate Logos of God that this grafting takes place, and this changes human nature forever. The very moment this grafting is completed is one of utter powerlessness: nailed on the Cross, the symbol and weapon of death, the Son of God, the Giver of Life, turns it into the tree of Life. Standing between the crosses of two sinful men - for all have sinned, St. Paul will explain - the Tree of Life cuts through the tree of knowledge of good and evil, providing humanity for the first time with a clear criterion to discern between the two.

Following the beloved disciple, St. Justin proclaims again that this criterion is no other than whether we accept the incarnation of the Son of God as the real and undeniable fact that united God and man unto eternity. This criterion divides those who see in this humiliated person dying on the Cross a mere man, as our culture invites us, even pushes us to do, from those who,



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along with the good thief, we see in Him the beginning of our salvation. This, ever since, has been the true perspective, opened for us by the God-man on the Cross (Popović 2010, 109).

„The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you“. It is with these words that the apostle of the Nations blesses the Corinthians as he closes his letter to them. Isn't there something striking in this blessing? Why is it that Christ is mentioned before the Father? And what is His grace? I think that our Lord is mentioned first because He is the one Person of the Divine Trinity that we first came into contact with. And this contact became so close that it led to our nature becoming forever also His nature. The grace this bestows upon us is what St. Justin calls *logosness*, which, for us, is the possibility of deification, through Christification, through becoming like Him by following His steps in this life.

As a philocalic theologian, St. Justin doesn't leave us without practical advice. Probably unlike many an academic theologian, St. Justin encourages us to read the lives of saints. Read how they led their lives, he says, for they show us how *logosness* is activated in our lives, how virtues are acquired in Christ and with Him and how life is lived „to the glory of God the Father“. In his „Introduction“ to *the Lives of Saints*, he writes:

*And what else are the Lives of the Saints but the only Orthodox pedagogical science. For in them in a countless number of evangelical ways, which are completely worked out by the experience of many centuries, it is shown how the perfect human personality, the completely ideal man, is built up and fashioned, and how with the help of the holy mysteries and the holy virtues in the Church of Christ he grows into ,a perfect man, according to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Eph 4.13). (Popović 2005, 47)*

Back to the apostolic blessing, how are we to understand the love of God, mentioned after the grace of our Lord? I think it is His making space at His right for human nature to be enthroned in the Person of His Son. We should not ignore that the love of the Father is also not displayed in omnipotence but in humility and in this He receives us to reign with Him in the forever God-Human hypostasis of His Logos. In order for us to assume this responsibility, again in humility He obeys to His Son, who became obedient unto death, and grants us, at His son's request, the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Although the incarnation of the Logos took place once and for all in the womb of the Most Holy Virgin, the possibility for each one of us to follow the Way, by activating the full potential of divinity being grafted onto our nature, can only take place in the womb of the





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Church. The Church, St. Justin will not cease to remind us, is before all else the Body of the resurrected God-man, moving in the world through the Holy Spirit. In a striking equation St. Justin proclaims: „The Word of God „became flesh“: He became man, the God-man, the Church“ (Popović 2022, 259). To forget this is to turn the Church into a welfare institution, a human centered organization, managing human affairs for the good of human beings who are nothing more than human and should be provided with material and psychological comfort on their way to their inescapable demise. That is not what the Church is, that is not what the Son of God shed His blood for, died for and for which He rose from the dead.

Let me explain: if the God-man died on the Cross and resurrected only to defeat death and the devil, nobody needed to know about it. He could have had accomplished everything, could have mentally informed His disciples in order for them not to fall into despair. He could have admonished them to persevere on the path of virtue and peace He had trodden and go forth to preach forgiveness, love, non-possession...Nothing else. On a cosmic level, God would have delivered human nature from the bonds of death through the sinless God-man's extreme humility, His sacrificial obedience to the Father would have saved men willing to observe a virtuous life, keeping to moral commandments, which are, as already mentioned, to be found in practically all spiritual cultures.

He didn't do it like that.

If, on the other hand, He had wished to convert humanity once and for all, to have everyone participate in the joy and the victory of the Resurrection by a triumphant *tour de force*, appearing to chief priests and Pharisees, to Pilate, to Herod and even to His disciples in the glory of the light that overflowed the life giving Tomb on that first Pas'cha, He could have done it. Not only would the devil have been defeated, not only would he have lost his force, but even the worm that lives on the root of faith, the root of trust in God, that is, already from our time in Eden, the worm of doubt, would have never threatened the vineyard of God again. We would have all been saved happily ever after...

He didn't do it like that either.

Let us consider who were the first people prepared to activate, so to speak, *logosness*, even before the coming of the Holy Spirit: the women who in an admittedly absurd act of love and obedience engaged in a completely impossible task, for they said: „Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb? And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back - it was very large.“<sup>7</sup> Responding to the Myrrhbearers' love and trust that surpassed even the

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<sup>7</sup> Mk 16,3.



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most well-meant human logic, the God-man assigns them an even greater task: to announce that the stone had been rolled, to proclaim the resurrection, to those who had not dared to go to the sepulcher.

Following the Myrrhbearers, the Apostles and the Church Fathers, St. Justin holds that this is the first and foremost task of the Church: to preach the Son of God incarnate and to proclaim His resurrection. And it is clear for all of us to see that next to the mystery of the God-manhood of the Lord, it is exactly the truth of His resurrection that our culture refutes. Inevitably, by removing the Good News from the picture, the only perspective left is that of the inescapable fate: of *nature morte*..

For us, members of the Church, this is where *logosness* comes in. As Orthodox Christians, who came out of the womb of the baptismal font and were granted the seal of the Holy Spirit, we have been given the grace and the responsibility that goes along with it: In order to activate the gift of the God-man and His resurrection, we must become gods by grace. When anointing the catechumen with oil before immersion, the priest says, as he anoints the mouth: „my mouth shall speak wisdom“. Which wisdom is he referring to? The wisdom of God that is foolishness to the world: that the omnipotent God became a weak man. As he anoints the legs he says: „to walk in your footsteps“. That means to walk in righteousness, having the Law of God, that is His Word, as a light to illumine our way, by studying that Word day and night, just like the blessed man of the first psalm. And as he anoints under the feet, the priest blesses the catechumen: „to step over serpents and scorpions and all the power of the enemy“.

These are the two ways in which we activate *logosness*: by conscious participation in the mysteries of the Church and by prayer. Through the Church mysteries we renew the grace of the Holy Spirit that we received in chrismation. Quoting St. Paul, St. Justin observes: „In essence, we Christians do not belong to ourselves<sup>8</sup>, but to God. And we come to belong to ourselves only in the Holy Spirit. For He, through the working of the holy mysteries and the holy virtues, restores us to our true self...“ (Popović 2022, 457). And what is prayer if not the yearning desire, the sense of duty and the courage to go to find the Lord - even when He remains deadly silent, even when the way to Him seems to be completely blocked, even when all external conditions appear completely adverse and one remembers the poet writing of „the voices saying that this was all folly...“ (Eliot 1963)

To proclaim the resurrection of the God-man is to graft the Logos onto the tree of a world that believes that the only perspective is the path of the inescapable fate. They call that realism; St. Justin called it nihilism, because he knew the true reality, the theanthropic reality,

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<sup>8</sup> See 1Cor. 6.19.



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that became available to all after the resurrection and is to be proclaimed to all in the **power** of the Holy Spirit, remaining in this world since Pentecost and until the Second Coming of the Lord.

We do not need to have an apostolic agenda. We simply need to abide in the God-man: to place the Word of God in the center of our lives, to pray to Him, to eat His flesh and drink His blood, both as an offering of His love and as a commandment of His deifying God-mankind. If we keep the Word in the middle of the picture, just like the Medieval Psalters still did, all around it will be filled with the light of a God-given knowledge, in which we will apprehend life in its true perspective, as eternal life in Christ. Then we will receive the grace and the responsibility to proclaim Him as the Resurrection and the Life, as God incarnate and risen God-man. The Lord will provide the agenda.

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