

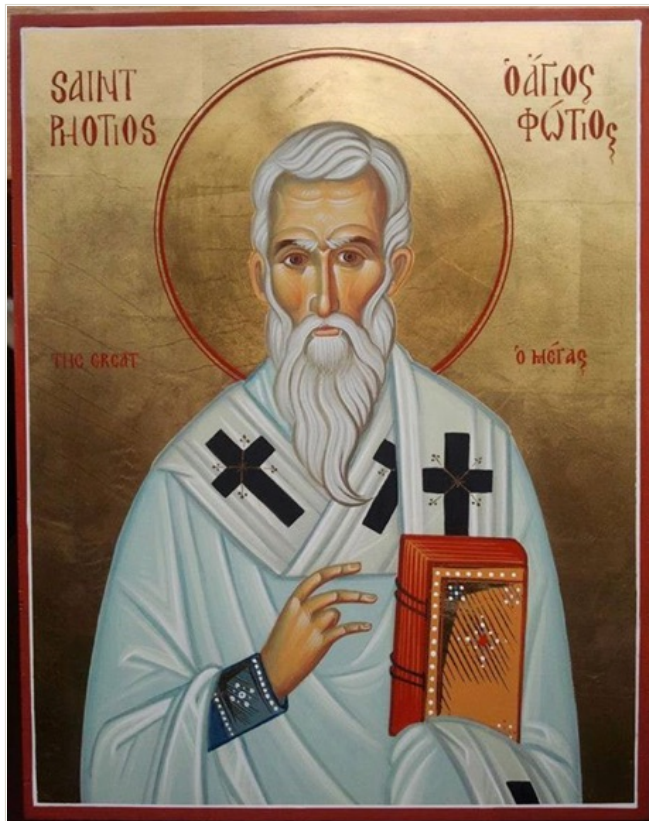
# Fr. James Thornton: More on St. Photios the Great

## Saint Photios the Great

By Father James Thornton

[Following is an excerpt from the book, ***Made Perfect in Faith*** (Vol. 1) by Father James Thornton (Etna,CA: The Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Thought, 2006)]

Virtually all of the Holy Church Fathers we have discussed thus far are venerated and admired throughout Christendom, even outside of the Orthodox Church. Today, however, we will speak of a truly great Holy Father, indeed a mighty figure of his own time, who, a lightning rod of controversy when he was alive, remains to this day the subject of contention between Orthodox and non-Orthodox



St. Photios the Great was born in the year 820 to a prominent family in the city of Constantinople. Not only were they prominent, and related by marriage to the imperial family, they were a most devout family. One of the immediate ancestors of St. Photios was St. Tarasios, the Patriarch of Constantinople who presided over the Seventh Oecumenical Synod. Moreover, the parents of St. Photios were Confessors of the Faith, having been courageous Iconodules during the reign of the ninth-century Iconoclast Emperors. So openly did they support the forbidden Holy Icons that they were exiled from the imperial capital and dispossessed of their property and holdings. With the Triumph of Orthodoxy under the Empress Irene, however, all decrees against the Iconodules were revoked, the families in exile brought home, and their property and positions restored, insofar as possible.

It is believed that St. Photios received his superb education from Leo the Philosopher, a former Archbishop of Thessaloniki who had been deposed and who thereafter devoted his life to education. So brilliant a scholar did the Saint become that even one of his enemies wrote of him that, "His intellectual superiority was of such a kind that he seemed almost to surpass his generation and compete with the ancient authorities."

Among the many scholarly works St. Photios authored during his life are the *Myriobiblion* or *Bibliotheca*, a collection of reviews or descriptions of 280 books in the Saint's library; the *Lexicon*, a dictionary that deals with subtle differences in the Greek of the pagan classics, the Greek of the Septuagint and New Testament, and the spoken tongue of St. Photios' own time; the *Amphilochia*, in which answers are given to hundreds of questions dealing with Holy Scripture, theology, and philosophy; commentaries on the Holy Scripture; the *Nomocanon*, a collection of the Holy Canons of the Eastern Church; collections of sermons; and, theological works, including the famed *Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit*.

St. Photios' renown spread quickly throughout Constantinople. As Father Asterios Gerostergios writes in his biography of St. Photios, "Young Photios was the glory of his time, and his light could not be contained or hidden." While still a young man, he was appointed an officer of the imperial guard, a diplomat, and a senator. At only thirty-five years of age,

he was made imperial ambassador to the Arab Caliphate in Baghdad.

However, St. Photios' first love was not political life, but education and scholarly pursuits. Having become a great scholar, and desiring to assist in the education of others, he accepted an appointment by the empress as a professor of philosophy. It should not be thought that the Holy Father envisioned education merely in secular terms, though he excelled in all fields of knowledge. The Byzantine mind regarded wholesome secular learning as a series of lighthouses, which illumined the way for Christian believers along the path which led to knowledge of higher, spiritual realities. It was intended too that the acquisition of brilliance in various fields of secular knowledge on the part of a Christian believer would be used for the Glory of God, of His Church, and of the Christian Empire. Thus it was that abroad education in philosophy, rhetoric, the natural sciences, and so forth were blended with a thoroughgoing education in Orthodox Christian theology.

The political drama that led to the elevation of St. Photios to Oecumenical Patriarch is immensely complex, too complex for us to consider today. Suffice it to say that, with a change of government, his predecessor, St. Ignatios, was deposed, and St. Photios elevated in six days through the various ranks of the Priesthood. On Christmas day, 858, he was enthroned as Archbishop of Constantinople and Oecumenical Patriarch. This high office was thrust upon the Holy Father completely against his will. He understood only too well that, in having this office forced upon him, his life was to be unalterably changed and he, previously an inoffensive scholar and professor at peace with the whole world, would be plunged into a caldron of boiling discord, animosity, and argumentation.

Nevertheless, having lost his battle to avoid Episcopal consecration, the Saint bowed to the will of God and embraced his new duties energetically, setting aside that which he desired to do for the sake of his Church. St. Photios served twice as Oecumenical Patriarch, his first reign from 858 to 867. Another change in government caused his removal and the return of St. Ignatios to the patriarchal throne. It is characteristic of him that he made peace with St. Ignatios, visiting him often and assisting him with his counsel. Upon the death of St. Ignatios, St. Photios was asked to ascend

the episcopal throne once again, which he did. His second reign was from 877 to 886. Upon yet another change of government, the Saint was asked to retire as Patriarch. He abdicated and spent the remainder of his days in a monastery. St. Photios the Great reposed in the Lord February 6, 895.

Now, we have learned thus far that St. Photios was the renowned scholar of his age, that he was deeply pious, and that he served as Patriarch of Constantinople. How did he earn an appellation so rarely bestowed by the Church, "the Great"?

First, St. Photios is remembered as the Patriarch who sent Sts. Cyril and Methodios and other Greek missionaries on their famous mission to convert the Slavic peoples to Orthodoxy. Until then, the Christian Empire was often threatened by attacks from the pagan Slavs, and so the wise Saint determined to civilize them and win them as friends and brothers in Christ. Over the following centuries that seed, planted by St. Photios, was to bear fruit that would change the history of the world.

Second, St. Photios is perhaps best remembered for his conflict with the Papacy. Upon the election of St. Photios as Patriarch, the Roman Pope determined that a favorable moment had arrived to try to extend his dominance to the Eastern Church. However, St. Photios fearlessly defended the rights and independence of the Eastern Patriarchates against any encroachment of Papal power. For that, he has earned the undying enmity of the Papacy, which has ever after heaped calumny on him, despite the efforts of some Roman Catholic historians (most notably, Father Francis Dvornik) to correct the record.

Third, St. Photios expounded in great depth on the teachings of the Church regarding the Holy Spirit, especially in his work *The Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit*. There he explains why the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father," as the Symbol of the Faith (the Creed) states it, and not, as the latter-day interpolation in the Creed by the Papal Church says, "proceeds from the Father and the Son." That addition, "and the Son," is expressed in the Latin tongue by the word "Filioque" and so this contentious issue is known to history as the Filioque controversy. Let us only note, since time today is short, that the issue at stake here is one of adherence to the True

Orthodox Christian Faith as expressed by the Oecumenical Synods, which knew no Filioque and forbade additions to the Symbol of the Faith, or the generation of an innovative, new kind of theology, at complete odds with the Oecumenical Synods, with all of the Holy Fathers of the Church, and with the whole of the history of the Church.

In the Orthodox Christian Faith we are taught that before time existed, in eternity, the Son was the Only-Begotten of the Father. We are taught also that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father." Thus, God the Father is the source, eternally, of the Son and the Holy Spirit. To imagine that the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally "from the Father and the Son" is to bring confusion to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity by introducing into it two sources, and to confuse also the procession of the Holy Spirit in eternity, on the one hand, with the action of the Holy Spirit in time and in the world, on the other. In time, in this world, the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father through the Son, Jesus Christ. Christ Himself makes this clear when He says, "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, *which proceedeth from the Father*, he shall testify of me" (St. John 15:26).

And so, as St. Athanasios is remembered for his battle against the heresy of Arianism and St. Cyril of Alexandria for his battle against Nestorianism, St. Photios is remembered for his unswerving opposition to the heresy of the Filioque.

To those who persisted, out of vain pride, in the Filioquist Heresy, St. Photios wrote: "You are not persuaded by Christ, or His disciples, or the Oecumenical Synods, or a rational method of reasoning, or by sacred and eloquent testimonies to humble your mind. You are buried. Rather you accuse the common Lord and the noble mind of St. Paul; but you accuse falsely. You fight against the Holy and Ecumenical Synods, ridicule the Fathers, dismiss any remedy, are dumb to rational thought, and completely overwhelm your salvation with dubious and passionate preconceptions! Our divine father David shouted the Psalm to you, 'Understand, ye brutish among the people: and ye fools, when will ye be wise?' (Psalm 94:8) Otherwise, our common enemy will cast great snares around you and your offspring, for he is like 'a roaring lion, walking about our

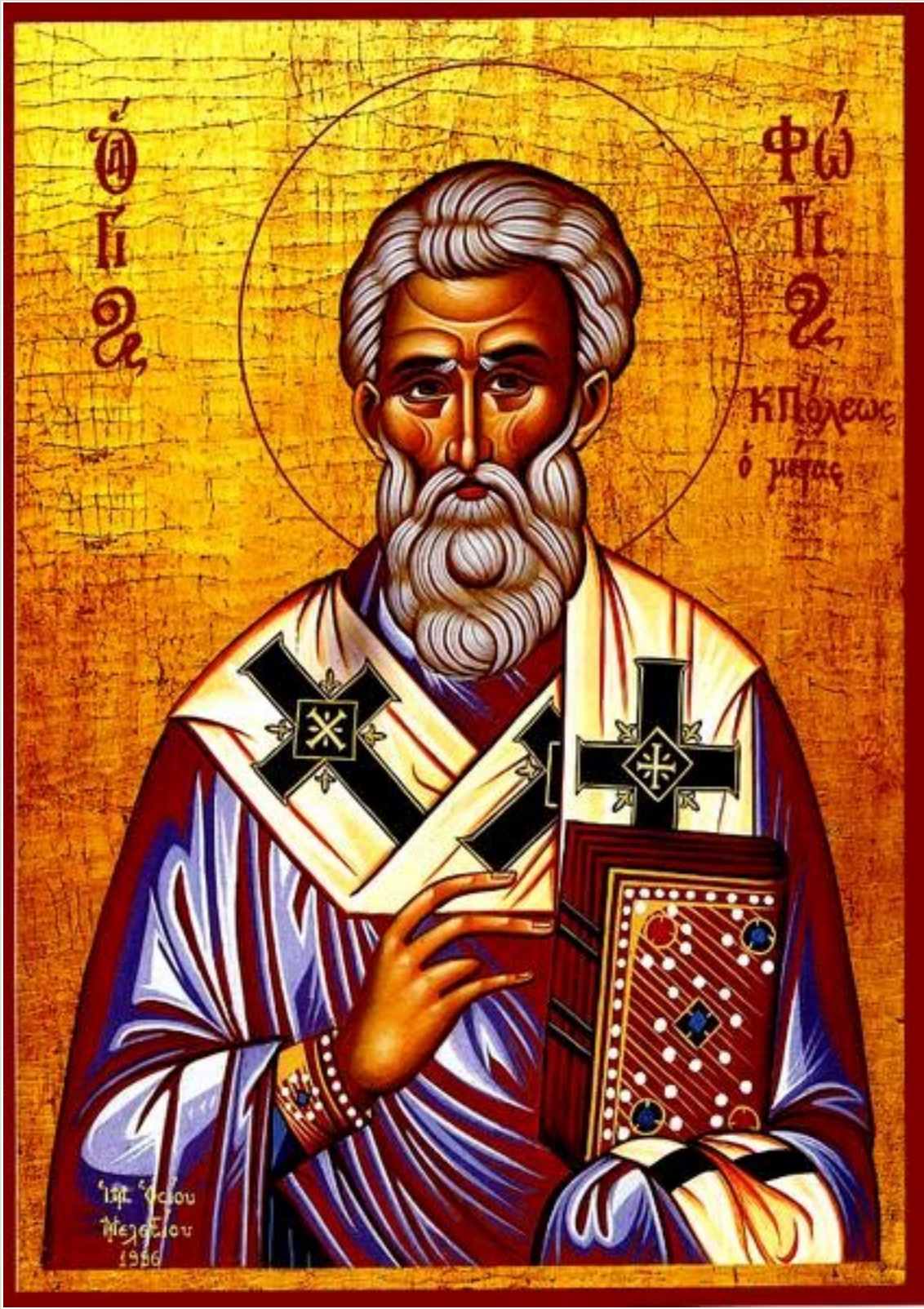
souls' (Isaiah 5:29). Flee to help, 'lest there be no one to deliver' (Psalm 7:2).

Truth defines and dictates its own particular way of life. Heretical systems, likewise, define their own particular ways of life, quite different, different in a thousand details, from the way dictated by truth: wholly different from that which, if followed, will lead to eternal life with Christ. That is why none of the Holy Fathers took heresies, or even the smallest errors in the Faith, lightly. That is why St. Photios is one of the Three Pillars of Orthodoxy. That is why St. Nicholai of Ochrid and Zicha calls St. Photios a "great light of the Church" and a "forceful protector of the Church" from "perverters of the Faith." And that is why, in St. Photios' Troparion (Apolytikon), he is glorified as "a radiant beacon of wisdom," "a defender of Orthodoxy revealed from on high," and an "adornment of Patriarchs" who "dost refute the innovations of boastful heresy."

St. Photios tells us, in the passage just quoted, that we must humble our minds by paying heed to "sacred and eloquent testimonies." Pride informs us that what we conjecture in our own minds is of supreme significance. Humility informs us that in such matters as spirituality and theology, the Holy Fathers are supreme, the Holy Fathers whose "sacred and eloquent testimonies" were set down despite physical danger or threats to life or livelihood or comfort or careers; the Holy Fathers who cared nothing for worldly success or adulation but only for upholding truth and combatting error. And so, it is our duty humbly to receive and accept their witness.

Some modernist-minded spokesmen for Orthodoxy believe that we may discount "sacred and eloquent testimonies" and instead try to achieve Christian unity through compromise and eventual union with non-Orthodox religions — hence the grotesquerie of the so-called Ecumenical Movement. In contrast, St. Photios affirms, for all time, that, in matters of the Faith, there can be no compromise that does not do violence to truth and to the way of life that springs from truth.





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